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Tillamook, Oregon

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The Gospel of Matthew

The Good Shepherd Faces the Wolves

February 16, 2020

Sermon Text: Matthew 23

Scripture Reading: Micah 2

This morning we are going to see the Lord Jesus, our Good Shepherd, once again confronting the wolves who were ravaging His flock – that is, the scribes and Pharisees. The false shepherds. Wolves in wool.

I am going to read all of chapter 23 and as I do, keep in mind the scripture reading we just heard from Micah chapter 2. Because you can be certain that these enemies of the Lord realized that Jesus was using the very same language and thereby identifying them

with the wicked, oppressive false shepherds Micah exposed and denounced. That is to say, in pronouncing these seven woes upon the wolves, Jesus is telling everyone that they are of the very same evil category as those in Micah's day and that the Lord's wrath, not His blessing, was upon them.

Matthew 23:1-39 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, (2) "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, (3) so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. **For they preach, but do not practice.**

(4) They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

(5) They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, (6) and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the

synagogues (7) and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. (8) But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. (9) And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. (10) Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. (11) The greatest among you shall be your servant. (12) Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

(13) **“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!** For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.

NOTE: You see that the ESV here jumps from vs 13 to 15. There is a textual difference here. Some manuscripts have this (as seen in the KJV) –

Matthew 23:14 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.

A scribe from long ago probably added vs 14 here to Matthew's account because he was aware of this passage in Luke:

Luke 20:45-47 And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, (46) “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, (47) who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

So even though Matthew did not include vs 14, it is nevertheless Scripture. Jesus did say these words and the scribes and Pharisees were in fact guilty of this charge. Taking money from the poor, making long showy prayers to impress the crowds...all of it.

(15) **Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!** For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

(16) **“Woe to you, blind guides,** who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ (17) You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? (18) And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the

altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ (19) You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? (20) So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. (21) And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. (22) And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

(23) **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!** For you tithe the mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. (24) You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

(25) **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!** For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. (26) You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

(27) **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!** For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. (28) So you also

outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

(29) **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!** For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, (30) saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ (31) Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. (32) Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. (33) You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?

(34) Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, (35) so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

(36) Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. (37) **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood**

under her wings, and you were not willing! (38) See, your house is left to you desolate. (39) For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

If you want to be able to identify a false shepherd in our own day, all you need do is watch for these characteristics seen here which Jesus is exposing.

Alright then, there is the overview of this chapter. Last time we considered the first three verses – that matter of the scribes and Pharisees “sitting on Moses’ seat.” You will remember that Jesus was warning them, and us, that while we are to hear and heed *Scripture*, we are not to do/apply it by following the example of hypocrites. The hypocrites of that day would read aloud the Law of Moses, and even explain the text to the people, but when it came to the spirit of that Law and the proper application of it, as we are about to see in these “woes,” they were not to be imitated.

I can tell you and could give you example after example of men who stand in pulpits Sunday after Sunday expounding upon Scripture and yet who are evil and wicked themselves. I have had wives of such men write to me and tell me “I don’t understand it. My husband can actually preach good

biblically accurate sermons and yet he is so wicked and cruel to me and our family behind closed doors.” I have no doubt that the devil could do the same.

Alright then, we have taken our overview, the panoramic view of this chapter. That is the forest. Now we need to move in and look at the trees individually.

Matthew 23:4-12 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear...but they themselves are not willing. This is the classic oppressive double standard of evil. God’s word is truth, and the truth sets us *free*. Whenever you find that some teacher’s doctrine is not leading to that freedom but rather to a heavy weight and burden, you can be sure that you are not truly being given God’s Word.

Luke 4:18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

2 Corinthians 3:17 Now the Lord is

the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Laying heavy burdens on people is of course what the Pharisees and scribes did. They twisted the Law of God and created all kinds of man-made traditions which they equated with God's Word. Their rules for the Sabbath were a perfect example of this and very often, as you know, Jesus did battle with them on this very point.

Matthew 12:1-2 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. (2) But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath."

There are entire local churches today that look like thriving "Christian" bodies but which are in fact dens of Pharisees filled with this kind of legal oppression. You can taste it in the air. You can feel it. Every word, every behavior, every thought must be according to script or there will be trouble. There are rules laid down, some stated openly and others left un-verbalized yet borne by all, which are to be obeyed.

- Clothing
- Hairstyle

- Makeup
- Bible version
- Husband-wife roles
- Parent-child roles
- Education
- Activities on Sunday
- Acceptable careers
- Finances
- Entertainment

A heavy, heavy burden of rules governing every aspect of life and thought which are created by man and devoid of the mercy God has intended for us in His Word.

And yet...this is what Jesus meant about the scribes and Pharisees not being willing to bear these burdens themselves...the hypocrites who create and teach and enforce these things *do not do them themselves*. Oh it may look like they are but in fact they are not what they seem. They are hypocrites. They are not the apparent "godly holy" people they are disguised as.

And Jesus goes on to expose who they really are and what they are really motivated by:

(5) They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, (6) and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the

synagogues (7) and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. (8) But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. (9) And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. (10) Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. (11) The greatest among you shall be your servant. (12) Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

All. That is just a small word and yet consider what it means. *Everything* these kind do is motivated by the same thing: a craving for self-glory. Jesus speaks pure truth. This is not exaggeration. *Everything* they do. The clothes they wear. Where they sit at banquets. The titles they identify with. The entire system exists for their own praise. Jesus tells us that we are to completely reject such systems and them for the evil that they are. The church is to be characterized by humble people whose purpose is to glorify God, not self.

Study the history of the visible church, look at it even today, and you will find the scribes and Pharisees, their titles, their uniforms, their places of honor still with us. These things are very evident and visible in the Roman system, but they are here in Protestant and evangelical churches as well. They

are repugnant to God and they should be repugnant to us.

There are many, many motivations possible for someone going to seminary or for a person becoming a leader in a local church. *Very few of those motives are good!* Watch out. Be on guard. Don't allow people like these Pharisees to exalt themselves and suck you into their self-worshipping system.

Notice that Jesus rebukes this whole business of *titles*. Rabbi. Teacher. Instructor. He was rejecting all of this as another means of exalting the wicked. This is still another mark of evil creeping into the church. It is a spirit that infects and you can see it operating when these titles become still another means for men to boast and be glorified.

"It is my privilege today to introduce Dr. Smith to you as our speaker. The Reverend Doctor took his degree at _____ seminary where he graduated with high honors. He then pursued his doctorate at _____ and is the teacher in residence at _____ church."

It is not always wrong for someone to work hard in academics *but it must be for the right reason*. And we do not do people a favor when we exalt them like this. Here is the true biblical philosophy of Christian ministry:

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. (2) For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. (3) And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, (4) and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, (5) so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

And remember, Paul had plenty to boast about in regard to his past academic pursuits as a Pharisee.

Application Question: Is it wrong then to ever use a title in addressing someone? No. But it is always wrong if it is motivated by the desire *to be seen by others or to be honored by others for selfish boastful purposes.*

Here then is the first Woe-

Matthew 23:13 “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.

The Way into the kingdom of heaven is, Christ! This is the chief evil of false religion and its leaders. They reject Christ. They reject the gospel. Therefore they themselves are headed for hell and so is everyone whom they force their teachings upon.

Listen to J.C. Ryle here:

Standing *in the midst of the temple*, with a listening crowd around Him, He publicly denounces the main errors of the Scribes and Pharisees in unsparing terms. Eight times He uses the solemn expression, “woe unto you.” Seven times He calls them hypocrites. Twice He speaks of them as blind guides, twice as fools and blind, once as serpents and a generation of vipers. Let us mark that language well. It teaches a solemn lesson. It shows how utterly abominable the spirit of the scribes and Pharisees is in God’s sight, in whatever form it may be found. [Ryle’s Expository Thoughts on the Gospels]

And now Ryle comments on this first Woe:

The first woe in the list is directed against the systematic opposition of the Scribes and Pharisees to the progress of the gospel. They “shut up the kingdom of heaven.” They would

neither go in themselves, nor suffer others to go in. They rejected the warning voice of John the Baptist. They refused to acknowledge Jesus, when He appeared among them as the Messiah. They tried to keep back any inquirers. They would not believe the gospel themselves, and they did all in their power to prevent others from believing it. This was a great sin.

The clearest example of this same spirit and wickedness in church history and at our present day is *Rome*. The Pope has done all he can to extinguish the gospel. To keep the Word of God out of the hands of people. To establish fences and barriers between Christ and those who seek Him. To spread a false gospel. To kill anyone who was a true Christian. The Lord's hot wrath is upon them.

And then we have always had the "little popes" of Protestantism and evangelicalism. We must be vigilant and always on the watch for this spirit trying to infect our churches. *And a spirit always comes in the form of a person!*

1 John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

(15) **Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!** For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

Now the second woe. This is briefly stated and yet demands serious thought by us today. This woe concerns *the zealous missionary activity of the hypocrites*. Once again if we look at the history of the visible church, a large part of that history is the history of the expansion of the church throughout the world through missionary efforts.

Now, the Christian church *is to be a missionary church*. Matthew's Gospel is an account of the Kingdom of God expanding like leaven beginning in Jerusalem and Matthew ends his Gospel like this:

Matthew 28:19-20 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, (20) teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

...but the devil has his missionaries too!

Notice the *zeal* the scribes and Pharisees had in missions- *willing to travel across sea and land to make ONE disciple!* But what is the result? Their “gospel” enslaves him.

Evil is very energetic. It never sleeps. As Ryle puts it,

“they labored incessantly to make men join their party and adopt their opinions. They did this from no desire to benefit men’s souls in the least, or to bring them to God. They did it only to swell the ranks of their sect, and to increase the number of their adherents, and their own importance. Their religious zeal arose from sectarianism, and not from the love of God. This also was a great sin. (Expository Thoughts, Ryle)

Let me end by encouraging you to think on this point. We are surrounded today by “sects” who claim to be serving Christ but who are in fact doing exactly what the Pharisees did – *doing it only to swell their ranks and thereby increase their own power and importance.* You hear it in language such as:

- This year we want to found 50 new _____ (fill in the denominational name) churches
- Last month we baptized 25 people into the _____ church

This is the spirit of the Pharisees. It is not Christ. It is not the Spirit of the Lord. It is this:

...you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves

I have no doubt at all that when the Lord comes again, we are going to find out that a large part of what was called “Christian missions” was not of Christ at all.

These things should not discourage us. We should be encouraged by Christ’s words – His woes to the wicked – because they provide us with clarity as to what is true and what is not. This is the Good Shepherd doing battle for His people.