

Christ Reformation Church

Tillamook, Oregon

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The Gospel of Matthew

Woe, Woe, Woe to the Wolves

February 16, 2020

Sermon Text: Matthew 23

Scripture Reading: 1 John 3

1 John 3:12 We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous.

We have five remaining woes to look at in this series of 7 which Christ pronounced against the Scribes and Pharisees. They are all vitally important for us to know and recognize today. They are the common characteristics of false shepherds, of wolves in wool. Remember:

Sheep never disguise themselves as

wolves, but wolves wear wool disguises all the time. Good never puts on a mask of evil, but evil disguises itself as good all the time.

And that is what you have here. Consider this matter of a “woe” pronounced by God against the wicked.

Isaiah 3:9 For the look on their faces bears witness against them; they proclaim their sin like Sodom; they do not hide it. Woe to them! For they have brought evil on themselves.

“Woe” is used many times in the Bible and its most common usage is as a title for ultimate, severe, final divine judgment upon the wicked. These Scribes and Pharisees knew what “woe” was as Jesus pronounced it upon them.

Jeremiah 4:13 Behold, he comes up like clouds; his chariots like the whirlwind; his horses are swifter than eagles— woe to us, for we are ruined!

It is important then as we hear these woes from Jesus that we grasp just what a powerful meaning they have for the wicked. Listen to the next five once more this morning: [Incidentally, it is no accident that there are 7 woes total. It is a complete and full pronouncement of judgment from the Lord] -

Matthew 23:16-36 **“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.

Woe #3 – False Swearing

Recently as you have heard me say I have been reading about political corruption. One of the books I have is called “Clinton Cash” and it is written by an incredible researcher and investigator, Peter Schweizer. If you read Schweizer’s books, and there are more of them, you are left wondering – *why in the world aren’t these people in prison?* The level of corruption is amazing. Not just the Clintons, but with others as well. They remind me of this verses:

Psalms 36:3-4 The words of his mouth are trouble and deceit; he has ceased to act wisely and do good. (4) He plots trouble while on his bed; he sets himself in a way that is not good; he does not reject evil.

Proverbs 4:16 For they cannot sleep

unless they have done wrong; they are robbed of sleep unless they have made someone stumble.

Micah 2:1-2 Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in the power of their hand. (2) They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance.

Now, why aren’t they in prison? Because, at least in part, they are just like the Scribes and Pharisees described in this third woe:

“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.’

They make up laws that provide them with loop holes, escape clauses, so that much of their evil is not technically a crime. They serve as law-makers in government and they make laws that permit them to grow rich through bribery, but they get away with it

because according to their laws it they aren't guilty of a crime.

THAT is what Jesus is pronouncing WOE upon the Scribes and Pharisees for here. They had made up laws, or had so perverted the interpretation of God's Law, so that if they didn't want to be held to a contract they would take an oath *in the name of the Temple*. "I swear by this holy Temple....". BUT if someone said "I swear by the golden lampstand in this Temple....", then that contract was binding. And that had other such ridiculous escape clauses as well – swearing by the altar was not binding, swearing by the sacrifice on the altar was binding.

Jesus condemned them for all of it. He revealed the insanity and evil of their rules –

(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.

That is to say, He showed them that they were swearing *in God's holy name and by His holy throne* in all their oaths. He is Lord of heaven and earth and all things in them.

Apply this to our day – *a bribe is a bribe whether it is deposited in a*

politician's own bank account or whether it is laundered through some LLC set up in the name of one of their children, or through some "charitable trust" front organization. (Our laws desperately need to be changed to make such transactions criminal).

But do you see? Jesus is telling the Scribes and Pharisees that God's wrath and condemnation were upon them for all of this "get out of jail free card" business which was designed to justify their crimes. You can bet that they were growing rich by leveraging their "church" positions, selling their influence to benefit other wicked people who "donated" to their coffers. Well guess what?

"You cannot launder dirty money enough times so that the Lord will not be able to see it and track it. God follows the money. Every cent of it. He knows. And WOE to all who commit these evil deeds."

Woe #4 – Gnat Straining

(23) **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!** For you tithe 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!

A camel weighs more than a gnat. That should be quite obvious, but when it came to the practices of the Scribes and Pharisees (remember, Jesus is standing IN the temple in their presence in front of many other people pronouncing divine woe on these “pictures of holiness)...when it came to the practices of the scribes and Pharisees, they focused on peripheral gnats while ignoring and willfully rejecting *the real point of God’s Word*.

Micah 6:7-8 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (8) He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Hosea 6:5-6 Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light. (6) For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Proverbs 21:3 To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.

This truth is hardly obscure in the Scriptures. The Scribes and Pharisees knew these texts – but they chose to ignore them. And they would have known full well as Jesus pronounced the woes on them and used this phrase “justice and mercy and faithfulness,” exactly what he was saying. He was telling them that God considered them to be every bit as evil and wicked as those evil Israelites before them who the Lord brought down divine wrath and woe upon.

How shall we apply this? The weightier matters of God’s Word are the heart of God’s Word. The essence of His will. The big picture. The main point of being a Christian.

John 13:34-35 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. (35) By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

The two greatest commandments:

- Love God
- Love your brother

I can confidently tell you that for all the talk of “love” in the typical church slogans you see on websites and church signs:

Loving God and Loving one Another

...the fact is that in most cases these are just words. Instead, a superficial religion has been constructed from all kinds of trivia, details, and man-made traditions that are simply branded with Christ's name but are not of Him at all.

The Pharisees and Scribes focused on the trivia. They were even meticulous about it. They even tithed their salt and pepper! Maybe they threw it over their shoulder and said "to the Lord" or some such nonsense. Fail to do that and you would be hammered by them. But lack justice, mercy, or faithfulness? No problem.

You all know by now that I could fill a book with first hand examples of how local churches, so-called Christian counselors, church members, pastors and other "Christians" have dealt mercilessly and unfaithfully with oppressed people. And I hope that you know by now that in fact such cruel dealings *are the typical norm*. They are not rare. They are typical! It goes like this:

You can oppress and cruelly abuse your spouse, but as long as you don't separate or divorce, all is well. This is the religion of the Pharisees. It is all about minutia and outward show. God hates it.

We see it in the next two woes as well:

Woes #5 and #6 – Whitewashing Sin

(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.**

Do you understand from Jesus' words here that evil, particularly religious evil, most often appears:

- Clean
- White
- Beautiful
- Righteous

It is one thing to believe that you believe Christ's words here, but it is quite another to truly believe what He is saying. We have a new book about

ready to be published based on this Scripture:

Matthew 10:16-17 “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. (17) Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues,

To be wise as a serpent about evil means to wise up to what the devil is and how he operates. It is not to participate in that evil ourselves (innocent as doves) but to, in a sense, know what the devil knows about evil. To be able to recognize evil in disguise is in fact the mark of real spiritual maturity:

Hebrews 5:14 But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

If you want to protect others, such as your children, from evil, then it is essential that you teach them about evil. What it looks like. How it operates. Ignorance is the mark of childhood, and it is dangerous to remain a child.

So here is a lesson in evil. Let me say it again:

Evil, most often appears:

- Clean
- White
- Beautiful
- Righteous

Do you believe that? I mean, I am asking you to be ruthlessly honest with yourself here. *Do you believe that?* Most people, including most professing Christians, *do not believe it. They choose not to believe it. They choose willful blindness.* And we see this blindness all the time, right?

Think of the many cases reported to us where some serial killer is caught. Or some church leader is found out to have been committing all kinds of wicked crimes. *What is the typical response of people who “knew” them?*

- Oh, I can’t believe that
- It cannot be
- That is not the man I know

No doubt that was the response of many of the people in the crowd there in the temple when Jesus was exposing the Scribes and Pharisees. But WE must not be guilty of this willful blindness! We have no excuse for it. We have to stop making excuses for evil simply because we don’t want to hear about it, because it is unpleasant to us, because it rocks our fantasy

world. Listen, *you live in a fallen world whose god is the devil. 2 Cor 4:3-4. It is willful blindness to insist that “most people are good and I choose to look for the best in everyone.”* That is unbelief. It is a rejection of Jesus’ Word.

How evil is this world? How bad is it? Well...

Matthew 27:21-23 The governor again said to them, “Which of the two do you want me to release for you?” And they said, “Barabbas.” (22) Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” They all said, “Let him be crucified!” (23) And he said, “Why? What evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”