

The Seven-Fold Judgment of Israel's King

In the days of the Reformation, a controversy broke out in Germany shortly after Luther went into hiding in Wartburg (May 4, 1521). Three priests had decided to marry, which meant they would have to deny their vows of celibacy they had taken before God. This set off sparks of controversy and debate throughout the whole church causing even Luther to come out of hiding for a short time, risking his own life. While others in Wittenberg, including both Karlstadt and Melanchthon, readily agreed with the priests' decision to retract their vows of celibacy, their arguments for doing so were not sufficiently biblical for Luther to concur. So toward the end of that year, Luther penned a new work entitled *The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows* (October 1521) in which he wrote pastorally to those who were leaving the monastery, or thinking about leaving, but because of a sensitive conscience were struggling with their decision. Luther argued that those who were ready to revoke their vows should do so with a clear conscience before God because the vows of the monastery, at least as they were currently practiced, were opposed to the Gospel and contrary to the Word of God. With a sarcastic tone, Luther suggested that the real intent of the monks' vows should go like this:

Look, O God, I vow to thee that I no longer want to be a Christian, I revoke the vow made in my baptism, and will no longer depend on Christ or live in him. All these things are useless and outdated. I vow to thee, however, a new and much better vow, better than Christ and other than Christ, that is, **to live by my own works** of chastity, obedience, poverty, and by this entire rule. For **by these works** I shall be justified and saved, and will help myself and others toward righteousness and salvation.

While it is controversial today in New Testament studies to suggest that the Judaism of the Second Temple Period was anything like the “works-righteousness” which Luther opposed during the Reformation, the seven woes of Jesus, here in Luke's Gospel, might cause us to be more cautious to throwing out that suggestion altogether. Clearly, Jesus sees the Pharisees and scribes as standing in the way of thousands of Jews from rightly hearing the Word of God, who is now standing in their midst.

It is because they have become an obstacle to God's children that Jesus now pronounces **seven WOES** upon the religious leadership from Jerusalem. This is not the first time we have encountered this word in Luke's Gospel (cf. Lk. 6:24, 25, 26; 10:13) and though at first it appears to be out of place in a work known as “good news,” as we will see it is absolutely essential if the story of Jesus Christ is going to be “good news”! The word “woe” is much more than an expression of grief, regret, or misfortune. When used in the Bible as an oracle, or an authoritative pronouncement, it is the way a prophet marks the seriousness of the impending doom, condemnation, and/or wrath of Almighty God. For instance, when God's final judgment is about to fall upon sinful mankind, the Apostle John writes, “Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, because of the remaining blasts of the three

angels who are about to sound!" (Rev. 8:13). A **threefold oracle of woe** is a terrible sound for anyone to hear as they are about to receive the judgment of God! There might not be anything as terrifying for the ears of man to bear except a **seven-fold oracle of woe**, which is now pronounced by Jesus upon the leadership of Israel's last days (cf. Matt. 21:43).

The context of our passage this morning is very important. Jesus has just rebuked this present generation of Jews as "wicked and evil" because they are acting exactly like their fathers in the wilderness who perished because rather than trusting God's Word they repeatedly put God to the test (cf. Lk. 11:29 → v. 16; Heb. 3-4; Ps. 78:18; Ex. 17:7; Deut. 6:16). And now that the greater revelation of God has appeared in His Son, Jesus (Heb. 1:1-4), there will be greater condemnation for this present generation of Jews because of how they have failed to respond appropriately to God's greater revelation (see Lk. 11:31-32). Jesus tells a beautiful parable about this very rebellion in the hearts of those who heard Jesus in Luke 20:9-18 (READ). Now that Jesus has come into our world, the question hanging before every man is **what are you going to do with Jesus!** To cast yourself at His feet for mercy is the ONLY way of life. To reject Him as God's exclusive way of salvation is to be willing to stand before God Almighty in your sin and give an account of your life before Him. Which way will you choose this day? The way of life or the way of death? The way of blessing or the way of cursing?

Now, here is the key for understanding all that Jesus **is about to say** in these **seven woes of judgment** upon the scribes and Pharisees – they thought among themselves that they would surely – most certainly – **not** be numbered among "this wicked, evil generation" (v. 29)! It is not that they thought of sin and evil lightly – it is just that they didn't think of themselves as sinners. They were not like those who were sick and in need of a physician (cf. Matt. 9:12). They would have gladly agreed **with Jesus** that this generation of Jews was wicked and evil; they just wouldn't have thought of themselves as being numbered with them (cf. Lk. 18:11f.). They saw themselves as clean (vv. 39-41), as faithful to God in all things (v. 42) so that by their example (v. 43), they were leading God's people to the way of life (v. 44). By their careful obedience in every detail of the law (v. 46) they were showing Israel the way to God - "the key of all knowledge" by which they might know God (v. 52). What the scribes and Pharisees were too blind to see is that all that they were doing in their rejection of Jesus, as God's fulfilled promise to Israel, was standing in the way of LIFE HIMSELF and therefore taking away from God's children the TRUE WAY to know God (v. 52). Rather than giving Israel life – they were like hidden graves of death by which all of Israel had become unclean by following in their path (v. 44). What will shock **not** only the religious leaders standing before Jesus, but even the common man in the crowd, will be Jesus' specific rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees themselves.

Try and put yourself back into the shoes of the crowd in Jesus' day. The scribes and Pharisees were seen as the religious elite – the cream of the crop. They were the image – the standard - of what every faithful Israelite aspired to achieve – to be able to rise to their level of spirituality before God would have been an incredible blessing!. In fact, Jesus Himself would have been most likely judged by those in the crowd as to whether or not He would have measured up to their own level of faithfulness to God. What shocked the crowd over and over again was how often Jesus' Words and Actions were so

far superior to that of the scribes and Pharisees! They had never heard or seen anyone like Jesus before (Matt 7:28-29; 9:33; 13:54; 22:33; Mark 1:22; 2:12; 6:2; 11:18; Luke 4:32; John 7:46)!

No one in Jesus' day would have thought seriously of lumping their religious leaders in with "this wicked, evil generation." There were clearly two levels of Jews in Jesus' day: there were the ordinary, common everyday Jews and then there were the better Jews – the religiously faithful Jews who stood out above the rest. But what happens to these man-made divisions among us when man is confronted by pure righteousness and holiness made flesh and dwelling among us? Jesus challenges the very best that Israel has to offer – saying even to them – they need to repent and trust in God's greatest revelation found in Jesus Christ!

In the **First and Second Woes (vv. 39-41 & v. 42)** Jesus confronts the Pharisees' warped concern for outward conformity to the Laws of Moses (purity regulations [Lev. 11:33; 15:12] & tithing [Lev. 27:30]) while neglecting the far superior inward purity of a renewed heart before God. But let's be careful to evaluate exactly what Jesus' interest is here. It is not that the Pharisees took God's Law seriously, even treating it meticulously, even though they sometimes made expanding the Law an art form. Jesus makes this clear in v. 42 when He says "these things **you should have done** without neglecting the others." Elsewhere Jesus will warn all of Israel, "For I say to you that unless your righteousness **surpasses** *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). Jesus is not going to rebuke someone for being faithful to His Father's commandments.

Rather, Jesus' denunciation of the Pharisees is something far more central to the heart of man – what's going on inside us. Jesus knows that we can go through the motions of rituals and regulations, trying to be "good" people, while all the while our hearts are far from God and what truly pleases Him. It's what Yahweh said to Israel through the prophet Isaiah:

¹³ "Because this people draw near **with their words** And honor Me **with their lip service**, But they remove their hearts far from Me, And their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned *by rote* (Isa. 29:13; cf. Matt. 15:8; Mark 7:6).

You can also hear God's heart-felt concern through the prophet Amos:

⁶ With what shall I come to the LORD *And* bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, With yearling calves? ⁷ Does the LORD take delight in thousands of rams, In ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn *for* my rebellious acts, 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, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?** (Micah 6:6-8).

Do you see what pleases God? It is not your doing of laws outwardly while missing the inward transformation of the heart! That is just as much disobedience before God as is disobeying His commandments in the first place. Do you think your parents enjoyed watching you curse their name all the way outside while you took the trash out after they had asked you for the third time? Did they

delight in their child while watching you kick the dog on the way to finally cleaning your room after weeks of begging you to clean it? The Pharisees were masters at fulfilling the outward conformity to the Law's demands while missing true love for God, which would have then been reflected in their love for their neighbor.

Jesus describes two of the ways the Pharisees completely missed the boat here: (1) the way the Pharisee reacted to Jesus' refusal to follow the Pharisees' addition to God's Word (v. 38) and (2) how the example set by the Pharisees stood as an obstacle to Israel's hearing of the Word of God (v. 44). Let me explain. While I do not think the Pharisees ceremonial washing before a meal was biblically mandated, the tithing of the seed of the ground was – that is why Jesus makes the statement He does in v. 42 but not in v. 41. But the Pharisees “fencing of the Law” is not Jesus' main concern here. He does bring their practice back into line with Scripture by referring to the cleansing of cups and platters (v. 39). The point Jesus is making here is how the Pharisees overwhelmingly concern themselves with meticulously following every detail of the Law while missing the whole point for why the Law was given, which is to love God and love neighbor. They missed the whole intent of it all!

Note what Jesus is saying here. While they focused on ceremonial washings and tithing they forgot to love each other – that which is within as charity (v. 41); justice [love of neighbor] and love of God (v. 42). But look carefully at **the third and fourth woes (vv. 43-44)** – they love the chief seats and respectful greetings in public places but instead they are hidden tombs over which the people walk without knowing it. What does Jesus mean? The Pharisees most likely did not start out loving to be seen in public. Most likely the Pharisees started with the full intention of doing good. They wanted to be seen in public as examples for the rest of Israel to follow so as to live faithfully before God. They wanted to be good shepherds who led not only in Word only but also in deed. They thought that by following their example, Israel would know how to take God's Word seriously. But like everything else in life, the heart soon lost its way and the Pharisees just started to go through the motions of functional obedience.

And here is the real danger – by losing their love for God and neighbor and by simply going through the motions of rules and regulations they were leading God's people away from God. In fact, they were so far from God by the time He shows up they wanted to kill Him. It's quite ironic that while they were so careful to be ceremonially clean before God they themselves had become like hidden death which made the whole nation unclean before God (v. 44).

Now surely you can hear the objection rising among the scribes and Pharisees to Jesus' rebuke (v. 45). It is the same objection Luther heard from Rome when he raised his concerns about how the monks were actually leading God's people away from the Gospel. It is also the same concern Jesus stands before you today. Remember that as we read the Gospels, we are to put ourselves in the story. Where are you among the characters today? I know we all want to be standing behind Jesus saying, “Go get them Jesus! We are rooting for you!” But you know where you are in the story, don't you. All you have to do to be a good Pharisee this morning is to think that there are really two kinds of Christians in the room. There are those ordinary, common, everyday Christians and then there is you. There are those who don't take the Christian faith as seriously as you do. Perhaps they don't read as many verses a day as you do or attend as many Bible studies as you attend. Or maybe their car is missing

the right bumper sticker or their radio is not tuned to the right station. You have set up in your own heart two levels of Christians and you just happen to be among the better ones.

I remember one of our elders one time was teaching a lesson and he described all of us as a pen-full of hogs, snorting and pushing-in among ourselves, arguing over who is more pretty than the other. How foolish we are! Do you not understand what you look like to Jesus? What do you think you look like when compared to perfect holiness and righteousness incarnate? Sometimes I wonder if some of you think you have outstripped Jesus in being more holy than the Son of God!

You see that is the cry of the scribes in **v. 45**. Rather than be humbled by Jesus' accusations they are more concerned with being insulted. But the true heart of a broken sinner is that he mourns over what he has done when he is exposed. He doesn't throw up his defenses and try to excuse himself.

That's why Jesus turns to the scribes with the final three woes. First, they weigh down God's people with burdens far too heavy to bear without lifting a finger to help them or without bearing the burdens themselves (**Fifth Woe, v. 46**). Peter cried out in **Acts 15** to those who wanted to impose the Laws of Moses upon the Gentiles, "

Acts 15:10-11 ¹⁰ "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

How vastly different are Jesus' words of life to those who have been burdened by the Law:

Matthew 11:28-30 ²⁸ "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. ³⁰ "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

And how Jesus now calls us to love one another by bearing each others burdens:

Galatians 6:1-2 Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.

Rather than being examples for Israel, the scribes and Pharisees stood as barriers between God and His people. Here, in their very midst, God appeared to offer them life. The scribes and Pharisees could have spent their whole life preparing Israel to meet God by tenderly loving and caring for God's people and showing them how to love God (**cf. v. 42**), giving that which was within as charity (**cf. v. 41**), showing them Yahweh – pointing to Him – rather than themselves so that they gave life to His people rather than death. Notice how different Paul sees our ministry now that Christ has come:

2 Corinthians 2:14-17 ¹⁴ ¶ But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. ¹⁵ For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; ¹⁶ to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? ¹⁷ For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.

This then leads to the final two woes separated by Jesus' pronouncement of the last days of Judaism as a way of life. First, Jesus explains connection between this present generation of Jews and their fathers (**vv. 47-48**). This generation is connected by the fact that their fathers killed the prophets while those before Jesus build their tombs. They killed the prophets and those standing before Jesus buried them. What does Jesus mean? If someone was planning to murder someone there would be two primary concerns if they wished to get away with it: first, how best to kill the person and second, how best to dispose of the body. That is what Jesus is talking about. The former generation of Jews knew how to kill God's prophets and this generation knows how to dispose of the bodies of God's prophets. In other words, the two are connected by their collusion of murdering God's gracious revelation!

Jesus makes a further connection between this present generation, along with their fathers, AND with all those in the history of redemption who have tried to "snuff-out" God's revelation (**vv. 49-51**). According to the Hebrew Bible, which begins with Genesis, which mentions the first martyr, Abel (**Gen. 4:8**) and ends with Chronicles, which mentions the last martyr, Zechariah (**2 Chron. 24:21**) there have always been those who like this present wicked generation standing before Jesus have tried to impede the revelation of God's truth to man! But this present wicked and evil generation standing before Jesus is especially heinous to God because they are not simply standing in the way of what the author of Hebrews calls "God speaking long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways" but they have become a barricade before God's ultimate speech as He is now speaking to us **in His Son** (**cf. Heb. 1:1-2**). And because they have now become such a hindrance to God's greater revelation, God Himself will hold against this present generation of Jews the guilt of all the blood that has ever been shed against the *vox dei*, those who have been God's voice of mercy and pardon (**Lk. 11:50-51**)!

There are not many things in Scripture which carry with them such a terrifying warning than what Jesus pronounces upon those who stand between Him and the sinner. Have you ever heard a parent say that they are not going to make their child go to church until they are older and can decide for themselves? Have you ever seen a spouse discourage their loved one from listening to a preacher because they might get offended by what they hear? Have you ever presented yourself to an unbeliever as being more spiritual, a better Christian than you really are, just to be noticed? How are you impeding someone else in your life from hearing the Word of God? How are you standing in the way of another from seeing Jesus?

That's why Jesus pronounced the final woe upon the scribes who "have taken away" - Jesus - "the key of knowledge" from God's people (**v. 52**). Not only have they missed LIFE Himself but they have turned many others away from God!

Beloved, do you see why Jesus had to come for you? Do you see how far away you are from pleasing Him in yourself and therefore how much you need His mercy and grace in your time of need? Then how much more do you think your neighbor needs for you to show them Jesus - to love them as He has loved you (**John 13:34-35**). **Amen! -SDG-**