

Woe to the Pharisees

MATTHEW 23:13-36

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Just a few days ago, one of our visitors was just asking, “What does the Bible teach concerning the signs that the end is near?” This morning, with this question in mind (and in light of current events), I would like for us to begin looking at a number of related questions that have come in from various members and visitors over the past several months, and the questions are tied to several passages in Matthew 24-25. However, as I started getting deeper and deeper into the research, I realized that to truly understand Matthew 24-25, we really need to understand what happens in Matthew 23. This morning, then, I would like for us to look together at Matthew 23 as we lay some groundwork for our lessons over the next two weeks. Matthew 23 is found on p. 1542, and it is a chapter that is crucial to properly understanding so much of what happens in Matthew 24.

Some of you may not remember this, but we actually studied the first 12 verses of Matthew 23 almost exactly a year ago, and in that opening paragraph, Jesus speaks to the crowds and also to his disciples, and he lays in to the scribes and the Pharisees. The scribes were those who had dedicated their lives to copying the Law of Moses by hand. As you can imagine, they very quickly became experts in the Law. Over time, they were seen as the authority on all religious matters. The Pharisees were another group of leading Jews dating back to the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The name “Pharisee” literally means “separated.” And so, they started well. They started with good intentions. They wanted to be separate from the world. They wanted to devote themselves to following God’s law. But over time, they got off track. And that is what the Lord addresses in the opening verses of Matthew 23. He condemns the Pharisees for being hypocrites. Notice verse 3, “**...therefore all they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them.**” The Lord then goes on to condemn the broadening of phylacteries, the lengthening of the tassels on the robes, the use of religious titles, and that was the subject of our study a year ago. Someone had asked about the use of the term “reverend” in the religious world today. So we went back and studied Matthew 23:1-12. If you remember, we learned that the word “reverend” is a term meaning “fearful” or “awesome,” and in the Bible it is only found in one verse in one very old translation, and then it only refers to God. In the Lord’s church, therefore, we do not use such titles, the preacher does not wear any special robes, the preacher is not set apart in any way; instead, we simply refer to each other as Christians, as brothers and sisters in the Lord. And Jesus was making the point (in verses 11-12) that we are not to go looking for a place of honor in the church; instead, we are to serve – this is what we studied a year ago.

This morning, though, as we move toward these questions concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world and the signs of the times (and all that), we move down a little further in Matthew 23, to the section starting in Matthew 23:13. Starting in Matthew 23:13, Jesus pronounces a series of **“woes”** on the Pharisees. The word **“woe”** is a strong, yet very sad, condemnation. **“Woe”** is a strong condemnation, but it is a condemnation motivated by extreme sorrow. This morning, then, I want us to look very carefully at the Lord’s condemnation of the scribes and the Pharisees. And as we study, I hope we can try to look at this passage with open hearts. This isn’t a study where we just jump on board and start pounding the Pharisees right along with Jesus. Instead, let us try to keep an eye out for ourselves here. Let us learn from their mistakes. As we prepare for our own judgment, let us examine our own hearts this morning. If you will, please look with me at Matthew 23:13-36,

¹³ “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. ¹⁴ [Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.]

¹⁵ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

¹⁶ “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’ ¹⁷ You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? ¹⁸ And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.’ ¹⁹ You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? ²⁰ Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. ²¹ And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. ²² And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.

²³ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

²⁵ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.

²⁷ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

²⁹ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰ and say, ‘If we had been living in the days of our

fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'
³¹ *So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.* ³²
Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. ³³ *You serpents, you brood of vipers,*
how will you escape the sentence of hell?

³⁴ *"Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city,* ³⁵ *so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.* ³⁶ *Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.*

As we keep our thoughts focused on this passage, I want us to do kind of an overview of some of the problems that Jesus had with the Pharisees, and then I want to conclude by getting us in a position to continue next Sunday morning, if the Lord wills.

- I. **First of all, though, let us notice this rather lengthy list of issues, starting with the accusation (in verses 13-14) that the scribes and Pharisees were ACTIVELY WORKING TO KEEP PEOPLE OUT OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD.**

"Woe to you...because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in." As we think about this accusation for just a little bit, we find, first of all, that this is a serious charge. We also know, though, that the Pharisees did not literally control the entrance to God's kingdom. In other words, God did not give this particular group the *"keys to the kingdom."* God did not make the Pharisees the gatekeepers. How, then, were the Pharisees shutting off access to the kingdom of heaven? Well, we do have some inspired insight on this question. In fact, we have two passages. Do you remember the time when Jesus healed the man who was born blind (in John 9)? The religious leaders could clearly see that Jesus had given this man his sight; it was clearly a miracle, but they wanted to suppress the evidence. So, they called in the man's parents and did some interrogation. They wanted to nail Jesus for healing this man, for doing "work" on the Sabbath. Well, mom and dad refuse to give a straight answer, and I want us to notice WHY in John 9:22. According to John, *"His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue."* And so the religious leaders, therefore, were cranking up the pressure, "If you confess Jesus as being the Messiah, we will cut you off from your spiritual family." Again, they did not have the power to actually control the gate into God's kingdom, but they were able to use their influence to turn people away.

A few chapters later, we also read about some of the leaders themselves who also wanted to believe in Jesus, but they also were scared of what might happen. Over in John 12:42-43, John said, *"Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God."* So again, the Pharisees, the ones who should have been turning people to God, were instead turning people away. They were a turn-off to those who might have been interested otherwise.

So here we have this passage about the Pharisees. Oh, those hypocrites! Right? But before we are too critical, those of us here in this building also need to look in the mirror of God's word (James 1:23-24). As we go through our text for today, we need to be asking ourselves: Is there anything we personally are doing that

might be keeping somebody from entering the kingdom of heaven? Is there anything about our own personal behavior that might cause an outsider to say, "If that is what church people are like, I will have none of it!" Are we personally doing anything that might be turn off to those on the outside? We need to keep our hearts open this morning, we need to let the word of God spring up and grow in our hearts, and if we need to repent, if we need to confess, if we need to apologize, let us get to it! But first of all, the Pharisees (through their hypocrisy) were turning people away from God's kingdom.

- II. **There is a second issue Jesus had with the Pharisees in this passage, and that is: AS THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES WENT OUT TO TEACH AND PREACH, THEY WOULD TRAVEL THE WORLD TO DO IT (AND THAT IS GOOD); HOWEVER, WHEN THEY MADE A CONVERT, THE CONVERT WAS CONVERTED TO THEM INSTEAD OF TO GOD!**

I wasn't exactly sure how to summarize that on the wall up here, but for those of you reading or listening online, I have put in the PowerPoint, "Misplaced Evangelistic Zeal: A Personal Scorecard." And the idea here is: The Pharisees were not really converting people to God; instead, they were merely converting people to their own very warped way of thinking. I think of the problem in Corinth. The various preachers did not intend this, but as we find in 1 Corinthians 1, different members of the congregation were saying to each other, "*I am of Paul, I am of Peter, I am of Apollos,*" and so on. They were converted, not to Christ, but to a preacher. Again, those preachers did not intend this with their preaching. The problem in Corinth was with the members. But imagine if a preacher DID want to make converts for his own personal gain. This is what the Pharisees were doing. They were traveling from one end of the earth to the other, they were putting in all kinds of effort, but they were converting people to a system of Judaism that was never originally intended by God.

Let's apply this to our situation today. The modern-day Pharisees are those who convert people to any system other than simple, New Testament Christianity. The modern-day Pharisees are those who convert people to any creed other than the Bible. The modern-day Pharisees are those who go looking for converts just so they can put another notch in their belts. This morning, then, let us be sure that our motives are pure, and let us be sure that when we preach and teach, we are preaching and teaching nothing more and nothing less than the word of God.

- III. **There is a third problem Jesus had with the scribes and Pharisees, and that is: The Pharisees were RATIONALIZING THEIR OWN DISOBEDIENCE TO THE WORD OF GOD.**

They were making excuses. They were creating loopholes – loopholes that God never intended. In one of his articles, Wayne Jackson refers to the Pharisees as "evasive manipulators of the law," and that is exactly what they were doing. When it came to God's law, the Pharisees were weasels. We think of what happened in Mark 7 as the Pharisees refused to take care of their elderly parents by putting their huge cash reserves in a special account. They said, "Oh, this over here is God's money. This over here has been set aside. I cannot use this account to take care of mom and dad." And so they created a loophole, they manipulated God's law for their own personal gain, and by doing so they actually violated God's original intent. And this made the Lord Jesus absolutely furious, "*Neglecting the commandment of God,*" Jesus said, "*you hold to the tradition of men.*" The Lord went on to say, "*You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.*" They were "*invalidating the word of God by [their] tradition.*" They were not keeping the Law; instead, they were figuring out ways of getting around it. And that is what we see here in Matthew 23 with the swearing by the temple as opposed to swearing by the gold of the temple, or the swearing by the altar as opposed to swearing by the sacrifice on the altar. The Lord's point here is: Don't be crossing your fingers as

you make a promise! As Jesus said back in Matthew 5:27, ***“But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil.”***

As we apply this to ourselves, let us rededicate ourselves to following the word of God. Let us not rationalize or try to create some kind of loophole that God never intended, but let us just do the best we can to do what the word of God tells us to do.

IV. There is another very closely related aspect of the Pharisees’ behavior the Lord condemns here, and that is: The Pharisees had mastered the art of SELECTIVE OBEDIENCE.

Of course, we now know it as “disobedience,” but they had mastered the art of obeying certain parts of the Law all while ignoring other parts of it. Sometimes people will be very quick to accuse somebody of being a Pharisee. And often, what they mean by that label is that somebody is being too uptight with the word of God, that somebody is being “too obedient,” or too focused on the Law of God. I remember the first time I was called a Pharisee. I very respectfully objected to the use of women in spiritual leadership roles at a youth camp where we used to work. Women were being used to lead prayers, and lead devotionals, and lead the singing. I expressed my concern in a private letter before camp began, and in response the director at the time accused me of being a legalist and a Pharisee. I pointed out that the dictionary defines a “legalist” as someone who pays attention to the law. He objected, upset that I had used the dictionary to define the word. The problem, though, is that the word “legalist” is never found in the Bible! Think about this: Is it possible to pay too much attention to God’s Law? Is it possible to be “too obedient” to the word of God? No, it is not. How obedient was Jesus? He was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8). So, before we call somebody a legalist, let us realize that we are not dealing with a Biblical term. It is impossible to follow the word of God too closely. As to calling somebody a Pharisee, many people today will use it as a term of derision, accusing somebody of being too concerned with the “details” of God’s word. And I am assuming that the reference goes back to Matthew 23.

Let us look again, though, at verses 23-24. Was Jesus mad that these men had set aside 10% of their produce for God? Was Jesus telling them that they should not worry about giving as God had instructed in the Law of Moses? I want us to notice the problem. The problem was not that they were following God’s Law too closely; instead, the problem was that they were being selective in their obedience!

And the picture Jesus paints for us here is hilarious! They were straining gnats and swallowing camels! Was Jesus saying that we should go ahead and swallow gnats? No! Who wants to swallow a gnat?! The point here is: You have missed the camel! It’s the same with the Lord’s picture in Matthew 7 of those who try to take the tiny speck out of a brother’s eye while ignoring the beam sticking out of their own eye. He wasn’t telling us to ignore specks. Getting a piece of sawdust in your eye hurts! Don’t ignore the specks! But in the process, do not miss the 2x4’s! Do not miss the big stuff! And that seems to be the message here as well: A warning concerning selective obedience.

On the table up here, I have put a little branch of mint from our garden. This is chocolate mint. I would invite you to taste it after the service (as long as you have a place to spit it out). But imagine spending your whole day counting out mint leaves. Mint is basically a weed. It grows everywhere. You have to pull it up by the armload just to keep it from taking over your garden. But imagine counting out leaves: Nine for me and one for God, nine for me and one for God, all day long – all while being an absolute jerk in your personal life, all while forgetting the heavy stuff like justice, mercy, and faithfulness, those things that were read to us from our scripture reading this morning (from Micah 6:6-8)! The Lord is not telling the Pharisees that they should

not be giving, but he is telling them that they have missed the much bigger picture. They were straining gnats and swallowing camels.

They had latched on to something that was relatively easy, and they were ignoring the parts of God's Law that were truly challenging. We think of so many passages in the Old Testament where God had to come down pretty hard on those who offered sacrifices all while basically hating God in their hearts. We think about our Scripture reading from Micah 6:6-8. What the Lord really wants is for us to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with Him. This is a lesson that King Saul (and so many others) had to learn the hard way: God is not impressed by selective obedience.

The Pharisees, though, were so good at straining gnats. We think of a rather simple rule like not working on the Sabbath Day. They took that one statement and became experts at it. In fact, they eventually enumerated 1521 ways in which a person could desecrate the Sabbath. If you had to spit, for example, you had to spit on a rock, because if you spit on dirt, that makes mud, and you could use mud as mortar between bricks; therefore, it was a sin to spit on dirt on Saturday. That kind of attitude has continued even today. On a mission trip to Montreal, I stopped in to visit the rest of the group at a hotel in a Jewish part of town, owned by Orthodox Jews, and in the elevator there was a keyhole labeled "SABBATH," it was right there next to the keyhole for the firefighters to use in case of a fire. I was curious, so I asked about it, and they explained that it is a sin on the Sabbath Day to do something that causes something else to happen that might be work. Well, opening a door and turning on a light is apparently "work," and when you push a button to call the elevator to your floor, you pushing that button causes a door to open. So, they have a workaround. Just before sundown on Friday night, management comes in with a key, they switch the elevator to "SABBATH MODE," and for the next 24 hours the elevator will constantly go from floor to floor, opening and closing all night and all day. That way, guests can use the elevator without pushing a button.

We discovered something similar a few months ago when we had to go shopping for a new stove for our kitchen. In doing the research, I found that some models also had a "SABBATH MODE." So again, I asked about it, and the answer was similar. It is apparently considered "work" to start a fire on the Sabbath. Turning on a stove, although not technically starting a fire, does cause a fire to be started. So, the old way of getting around that was that if you needed to cook on Saturday, you would turn on the stove on Friday night and just leave it on through whatever time you needed it on Saturday. Several years ago, though, modern stoves started including a safety feature where the stove automatically shuts off after a few hours. This was a huge problem for those who turned their stoves on 18 hours early on Friday night. So, various manufacturers now include a safety override, a "SABBATH MODE" for those who insist on turning on their stoves before the Sabbath.

It seems that perhaps this is what Jesus was talking about. At the time these words were first spoken, there was nothing wrong with keeping the Sabbath; in fact, God wanted them to keep the Sabbath. The problem was that they were so focused on keeping the Sabbath that they missed seeing Jesus for the Son of God that he was!

The lesson for us today is that all of God's word is important. If God tells us about it in the New Testament, it is there for a reason. Years ago, some people made a big deal out of some things being "salvation issues" and other things not being "salvation issues." I like what brother Schmudlach said at the time, "If it's in the Bible, it is a salvation issue!" That seems to be what Jesus is saying here. We are not to practice selective obedience, but we are to obey God. We are to obey all of God's commandments from the heart.

V. **As we go back to our text (in verse 25-28), we see another problem as Jesus illustrates the Pharisees' HYPOCRISY.**

We have two pictures, starting with a cup that has been cleaned on the outside but not on the inside. Maybe we could imagine going out for a nice dinner at a fancy restaurant here in town. You know what would ruin that meal for me? Chunks floating in my water! Or, with today's lesson, maybe I should say gnats floating in my water! But, that is one thing that makes a lot of us sick – dirty dishes. We hate it when we take a dish out of the cabinet and there is something nasty stuck on the inside of the dish. We had a horrible dishwasher for years (we have a good one now), but before, whenever the kids got the dishes out for dinner, we would always ask, "Chunk check?" We always had to check. It always amazes me how I can eat a dead cow but then be completely disgusted to find a big old hair stuck on the plate. But that is the picture Jesus paints for us here – a beautiful dish, carefully cleaned and polished on the outside, but absolutely disgusting on the inside. That is hypocrisy: Looking good but filthy in the heart.

The second picture is of a whitewashed tomb – carefully painted and decorated, but on the inside, full of dead men's bones. A hypocrite is someone who wears a mask, like an actor on the stage. Looking good, but faking it. Hypocrisy has always been a problem for God's people – from the very beginning. The first act of church discipline, in fact, was in response to hypocrisy – Ananias and Sapphira trying to look good with their giving, all while holding a good chunk of it back (they were lying), trying to make themselves look better than they really were. God killed them right there on the spot.

I would say, though, that not all Christians who appear to be hypocrites actually are. There is a difference between struggling with sin and being a hypocrite. I can struggle with something and still show up on Sunday. Right? The problem comes when we pay more attention to the outside than the inside. How much time did we spend getting ourselves ready for worship this morning? Most of us showered and did some brushing and combing...but did we put forth the same effort making sure our hearts were ready? Did we spend some time making sure we are clean on the inside?

VI. **There is one final "WOE" in these verses (we see it in verses 29-36), and the final condemnation here comes on the scribes and Pharisees for their constant (and sometimes even violent) OPPOSITION TO THE TRUTH.**

Over and over again, God would send prophets, and over and over again, those prophets were strongly opposed by the religious leaders, often to the point of death. They decorate the tombs of the prophets, refusing to acknowledge that they are the sons of those who murdered those same prophets. Notice (in verse 34) that this opposition will continue into the future. As God continues to send prophets, wise men, and scribes, the Pharisees will kill, crucify, and scourge, chasing them down from city to city. In verse 35, the Lord refers to the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah who they murdered between the temple and the altar – from the beginning of Genesis to the end of the books of history in 2 Chronicles (from A to Z), that same spirit of opposition continued to be quite alive in the Pharisees. They were carrying on that tradition.

Conclusion:

And with that, we come to the end of the woes on the Pharisees. As we close, I would point out that in those closing verses, Jesus spoke of some kind of punishment that was coming. In verse 32, ***"Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers."*** The idea is: There is a cup of God's vengeance, and with just a few more drops, the cup was about to overflow. And then, in verse 36, ***"Truly I say to you, all these things will come***

upon this generation.” That right there sets us up for next week. We will be looking next week at the horrible and violent catastrophe that God had planned for the city of Jerusalem.

For this morning, though, we have a message from God, something that we need to deal with. If we are the ones acting like Pharisees, if we are the hypocrites, we have the opportunity right now to change. I would point out that not all Pharisees were bad, and if they were bad, some were able to change. We think about the apostle Paul, a devout Pharisee before he obeyed the gospel. We can only assume that Paul had some of these qualities that we’ve been looking at this morning, but thanks to the amazing grace of God, Paul heard the gospel and obeyed it – turning away from sin and being immersed in water for the forgiveness of his sins.

If you are here with us this morning and you are thinking about doing what Paul did, if you are thinking about making a change, we would encourage you to follow Paul’s example. Maybe you’ve been turned off in the past by something you have seen in somebody claiming to be a Christian. I can assure you: We are not perfect people here at the Four Lakes congregation. We are works in progress, and we would invite you to join us in this journey. If you have any questions, please let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com