

Seven Woes

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 October 2019

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] And verse 13 through 36. My heart is weighed down with pity for you, how greatly you will suffer. Were there tears in Jesus' eyes when speaking to his disciples about the Pharisees?

He said about them, woe to you Pharisees and scribes, hypocrites. We don't know. But one thing we do know is that these seven woes of this passage spell doom for the religious leaders of a nation who have refused to accept Jesus as Messiah.

And furthermore are literally hell-bent on destroying Jesus and everything about him. When people think of Jesus, they often conjure up an image of a Jesus who was meek and mild and who wouldn't hurt a fly.

Well, perhaps passages like Matthew 23 somewhat change our images of Jesus. A Jesus whose preaching was entirely as radical as that of John the Baptist.

And whose judgment's entirely as woe-filled as Jeremiah. He refuses to say peace, peace when there is no peace. Rather, more than any other biblical figure, Jesus speaks more of hell and darkness.

[1 : 18] He never does so with schadenfreude. Only tears in his eyes as he knows by personal experience how greatly the unrighteous will suffer.

I want you to bear in mind the context of Jesus' seven woe-sayings. From Matthew 18 onwards, there have been shadows of a future judgment of God being exacted upon the religious establishment of Israel.

Jesus has cleared the temple. The fig tree has withered. And in the three parables, he told there is destruction for the unrighteous. Matthew 22 demonstrates the clear resistance of the religious authorities to Jesus.

He's called to them. And he's invited them to believe in him as God's Messiah. David's son and Lord. But they consistently refuse. Their minds are set on bloody murder.

And the place of Jesus' execution. Well, from Matthew 23 through 25, Jesus engages in his last great discourse. It is filled with parables and proclamations and prophecies fixed on that great and final day when he shall return in judgment.

[2 : 38] And Matthew records this because it gives us hope and confidence that all we may suffer here and now on account of the gospel of Jesus Christ is as nothing compared to the joy we shall experience on that last day.

This passage is teaching us that it's far better to have all our woes now and our wells later than to have all our wells now but to have our woes later.

Well, in these verses, Jesus condemns the scribes and the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. His sevenfold use of woe reflects the Bible's use of the number seven to describe completeness.

Jesus says to them, in effect, your judgment is sealed. Your condemnation is complete. A couple of weeks ago, I used the illustration of how in the woods behind my family home in the highlands, once a year, the foresters will come and walk around the forest.

And they'll paint red circles on the broadest and strongest and tallest of the trees. Soon after, men will come with chainsaws and when they see a red circle, they'll cut that tree down.

[4 : 05] So whenever I go for a walk in that forest, I pity the trees with the red circles painted on them. For though they are tall and broad and strong, they are doomed.

In these verses, the heavenly Christ is painting red circles round the Pharisees on account of their hypocrisy. This is rather a long passage, so I want to divide it into two.

First of all, hypocrisy is, from verses 13 through 32, where we'll discuss together how the hypocrisy of the Pharisees warranted such judgment. And then hypocrisy leads to, in verses 33 through 36, where we'll consider the judgment which lies ahead for them.

And before you ask the question, yes, this does have everything in the world to do with us here in Glasgow in 2019. Because the day of Christ's return is 2,019 years closer now than it was for the scribes and the Pharisees.

Doesn't this make our need to spread the good news of Jesus all the more urgent? And does it not give us the confidence that all we may suffer here on account of the gospel of Jesus Christ is as nothing compared to the joy we shall experience on that last day?

[5 : 30] First of all, hypocrisy is, hypocrisy is, from verse 13 through 30, 32 rather. You'll know that in the ancient world, the word hypocrite was used to describe an actor.

In Jesus' day, rather than having makeup, actors wore various masks to portray their characters. The hypocrite wears a mask. He is different on the outside than on the inside.

The scribes and Pharisees on the outside were deeply religious and zealous for God. But in their attitude to Jesus, they exposed their hearts.

And on the inside, we discover there's no devotion to God at all. In verse 13 through 32, Jesus delivers his seven woes, each of which begins, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites.

Together, these seven woes paint a red circle around them. We can understand these woes in a two-to-one structure. Their hypocrisy consisting in the first instance about being sincere in all the wrong things, verses 13 through 15.

[6 : 42] Then in reading the scripture in all the wrong ways, in verses 16 through 24. Then in being righteous in all the wrong places, in verses 25 through 28.

And then being stubborn at all the wrong times, in verses 29 through 32. First of all, the hypocrisy is being sincere in all the wrong things.

Being sincere in all the wrong things, verses 13 through 15. When I was growing up, you often heard the expression, I don't really care what someone believes, just as long as they are sincere in their belief.

Now, you don't hear this so much these days, because in light of religiously motivated terrorism, the fallacy of that statement is obvious. Well, the scribes and the Pharisees were fanatically sincere.

Born out of religious legalism, they did everything they could to prevent people from responding favorably to Jesus and his gospel. They deceived people into thinking that their salvation depended upon them and upon their works of righteousness.

[7 : 52] They did everything they could to contradict Jesus' invitation to salvation on the basis not of works but of faith. They literally closed the kingdom of heaven before men.

And not content with their own stubborn refusal to accept Jesus as Messiah, they spread their legalism over the whole world and they loved nothing more than when a Gentile became obedient to their twisted image of God.

Given that the word evangelism literally means to proclaim the good news, their version of evangelism was to proclaim the bad news.

Not content with themselves having a red circle painted around them, they deceived others into thinking it would be a good idea for them to have a red circle painted around them also. Aren't the words of verse 15 shocking?

They are, they're meant to be. You travel over land and sea to win a single convert and when he becomes one you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are. The deceived convert, he's become a son of hell.

[9 : 00] The zeal of the religious convert, how greatly the world has suffered from religiously motivated terrorism performed by converts who are more sons of hell than their masters.

The devil is very sincere in what he thinks and more zealous than we can even begin to imagine and yet he will always remain in hell.

Walk around Glasgow today and whether you've got people of no religion or people of another religion, in your minds hear Jesus' woe in your ears.

Atheist, theist or polytheist, everyone holds sincerely to what they believe even if it should make them a son of hell. What then should our response be to misplaced sincerity?

Well, in view of the woe of Jesus, should we not recognize the priority and urgency of evangelism? The proclamation that it's not by works a person is saved, not by their ethnicity a person is saved, but by simple faith in Jesus Christ.

[10 : 16] Hypocrisy is being sincere in all the wrong ways, about all the wrong things rather. Secondly, in verses 16 through 24, hypocrisy is about reading scripture in all the wrong ways, in all the wrong ways.

Second two woes concern the way in which the Pharisees have twisted the word of God to say what they wanted to. Listen, the greatest hypocrites on the face of our planet aren't those without a Bible, but those who've got a Bible, they simply twist it.

It's not that the scribes and Pharisees didn't understand what the Bible was saying, it's that they were stubborn, refusing to accept what the Bible was saying. And so they make up rules about oaths and vows and altars and gold.

But as you can see from Jesus' logic here, all their rules were devised so that they could get round true devotion to God. In other words, legalists are experts not in obedience, but in disobedience.

Follow the logic of Jesus when he condemns the Pharisees for placing a greater weight on the gold of the temple and the gifts people offer than on the God whose temple it is.

[11 : 33] The reason the Jerusalem temple was so special wasn't because of the bricks and mortar, but because it was God's house. This is what legalism will do. It will always destroy your devotion to God because the primary interest of the legalist is not in obedience, but in finding ways to disobey.

Furthermore, the legalism of the Pharisees will always find a way to strain at gnats but swallow camels. They major on the minors and minor on the majors. Back in Matthew 12, they condemn Jesus for healing a man on the Sabbath.

This man had a shriveled hand, but rather than rejoice in the love Jesus had shown him on the Sabbath, they condemned him because he had broken in their twisted views the Sabbath.

Be, Guy, careful of Christians who major on the minors because inevitably they minor on the majors. loving God and loving others plays second fiddle to legalism.

They will split churches, they'll divide families for no more than a nut. The truth is that for all their supposed orthodoxy, they have not understood the scriptures for if they had, their central concern would be the glory and grace of Christ in the gospel and not their obedience to man-made laws.

- [13 : 05] The third definition of hypocrisy is in verses 25 through 28. It is being righteous in all the wrong places. Being righteous in all the wrong places. The third two woes correspond to the way in which the Pharisees and the scribes do everything they can to appear righteous on the outside while all the time being dirty on the inside.

Or they knew all about ceremonial washings. Out of their 639 rabbinic laws, there were laws about how they washed their hands and their feet and their bodies. You know, on the outside, the Pharisees were the cleanest people of Israel, but on the inside, they were still dirty.

Matthew 6, Jesus drew attention to how the Pharisees do all their righteous acts to be seen by men. It's all on the outside. It reminds us, does it not, of Isaiah's condemnation of Israel in 700 BC, Isaiah 29, 13.

What Isaiah says of them, these people come near me with their mouth, but their hearts are far from me. It also reminds us, does it not, of David's confession of sin in Psalm 51, verse 6.

Surely you desire truth in the inner parts. Shouldn't the Pharisees have realized that it's on the inside they need to be clean?

- [14 : 30] There are few things more distasteful to a religious Jew than a dead body. That's what they wear on the inside, Jesus says. You're full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.

They made every effort to appear to others to be alive to God, but inside they're dead. They're unclean. Their appearance bore no relation to who they wear on the inside.

And the lesson for us is obvious, is it not? To go back to David, it's on the inside of you that God desires truth. Or as we say in our Glasgow City Free Church slogan, it's what's on the inside that counts.

Legalists love to look righteous in the eyes of other people. But what do they look like to God? That's the question.

The last mark of the legalist in verses 29 through 32, the last definition of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is dot, dot, dot, being stubborn in all the wrong times.

- [15 : 38] Verses 29 through 32, being stubborn in all the wrong times. These religious leaders, they were proud of their heritage. They hearkened back to the days of Moses and David and Samuel and Isaiah.

In this final woe, Jesus condemns the scribes and the Pharisees for their perennial stubbornness. They're always looking back to the days of the prophets.

But it was their forefathers who murdered the prophets. It was their forefathers who on account of their stubborn unbelief sawed Jeremiah in two. and they made life a misery for Moses.

Their intention toward Jesus, I'm sure you can see, is no different. They're already plotting ways to destroy him. That's why Jesus says to them in verse 32, go ahead then and complete what your ancestors started.

Like father, like son, they're no different from their forefathers. The stubborn, dogged unbelief of the Old Testament people of God. Their forefathers have the red circle painted round them and now the Pharisees and their scribes have it also.

- [16 : 54] How greatly you will suffer. My heart is weighed down with pity for you. Jesus did not deliver these seven woes with a self-righteous smug smile on his face.

He did so with pain in his heart. Because he sees the red circle painted round the Pharisees and the scribes and he knows they're destined for destruction.

And again we ask, well what is our response to this? Well in the first instance, it's to go back to something we said earlier. This passage is teaching us it is better to have all our woes now and our well later than to have all our well now but to have all our woes later.

And then secondly, this passage is motivating us to the urgent task of evangelism. The proclamation of the good news that it's by faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone a person is saved.

Not by their good works. And then thirdly, does it not give us confidence that all we may suffer here on account of the gospel of Christ is nothing compared to the joy we shall experience on that last day?

[18 : 19] The red we want painted on us isn't the red paint of a forester's chainsaw. It is the scarlet blood of Jesus Christ shed for us on the cross.

Hypocrisy is. But then secondly and briefly, in verses 33 through 36, hypocrisy leads to. In our postmodern age, we don't like to speak of such things.

But based on passages like Matthew 23, we want to ask the same question John Blanchard asked in the title of his book, Whatever Happened to Hell?

As Jesus looks at the scribes and the Pharisees, no doubt with tears in his eyes, he says to them, Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites, how greatly you will suffer.

My heart is weighed down with pity for you. In verse 33, Jesus, following on from the words of John the Baptist in Matthew 3, 7, names these Pharisees and scribes for what they are, your snakes, your offspring of vipers.

[19 : 39] There was a ravine somewhat to the south of Jerusalem called the Valley of Hinnom. There the bodies of executed criminals were dumped, as were the carcasses of animals, as was Jerusalem's trash.

It was the city dump, and fires burned there continually, consuming all the rubbish of bones and bodies and trash.

This valley, the Valley of Hinnom, called in Jesus' day, Gehenna, became a picture of hell.

As Jesus says in Matthew 5, 22, the Gehenna of the eternal fires of hell. And Jesus asks the Pharisees in verse 33, literally, how will you escape being condemned to Gehenna, to the Valley of Hinnom, with its fire burning continually, and darkness and smoke.

And it's not as if God is standing idly by and smugly leaving the Pharisees to their destruction. Rather, Jesus says to them, I'm going to send you prophets and wise men and teachers.

[21 : 01] How will these Pharisees escape the judgment of Gehenna? They will listen to them, they will believe. They'll listen to Peter when on the day of Pentecost, he proclaims in the temple, repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

They'll believe when invited to experience the forgiveness of their Messiah and the wonder of his grace. The period between Jesus' resurrection and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 will be one of intense evangelism on the part of the early Christians.

Never before in the history of Israel shall the word of the gospel be spread so widely to the Jewish people. That word proclaiming that it's by grace we are saved in Christ through faith and not by the works of the law.

God. But hypocrisy in the first instance leads to lost opportunities. It leads to lost opportunities for rather than repent the Pharisees because they are so passionate about their appearance before men and the traditions of their fathers reject Jesus.

No matter how many times the gospel is proclaimed in their hearing they will not listen and they will not respond. They can't allow themselves to. Lest they admit that for all their religious seriousness they've been wrong all the time.

[22 : 22] That they've been sincere about all the wrong things. That they've read scripture all the wrong ways. They've been righteous in all the wrong places and they've been stubborn at all the wrong times. The God who will not stand by and takes no pleasure in the judgment of the Pharisees sends them prophets, wise men, teachers, but rather than grasp them, they push them away.

And I wonder sometimes to what extent that's true of us. I hope we don't go to the same extreme the Pharisees did of killing and crucifying those who have proclaimed the gospel to us, of flogging them, of pursuing them from town to town.

Perhaps we're not quite as extreme as Saul of Tarsus for whom most if not all of these actions would have been true. I would certainly hope in Glasgow City we weren't that extreme or I'm running for the hills.

And yet it is no less true that having heard the gospel, if we choose to reject it, it shall be of no less violence in the eyes of God because he sees our hearts.

the tragedy is that not merely does hypocrisy lead to lost opportunities, it ultimately leads to accumulated guilt and culpability before God.

[23 : 48] To reject the gospel today will paint a red circle around you more surely than any forester can with his brush. the Pharisees of Jesus' day because they rejected him stood in the line and inherited the guilt of all those who had shed righteous blood before them.

The righteous blood of prophets and wise men and teachers, all of them, stretching all the way back to Abel in Genesis chapter 4 who was killed by Cain. Remember why? To Zechariah who according to Jesus in verse 35 you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

Jesus says to them, upon you, verse 35, will come all the righteous blood. Upon you, that red circle of judgment is painted with the blood of the martyrs, these godly and righteous men and women, these people who according to verse 31 are the sons of those who murdered the prophets.

Their fathers sowed to the wind, now their children will reap the whirlwind. To be sure, these Pharisees will fill up the measure of their forefathers when in just 48 hours or so from these words being spoken by our Lord, they take him and crucify him on a hill outside Jerusalem.

That's why we say second, hypocrisy leads to accumulated guilt before God. The blood of all those whose gospel invitations have been rejected. The blood of the crucified Christ himself is on the hands of the hypocrite.

[25 : 20] You will know the story of Lady Macbeth and how in her dreams she sleepwalks and she can't rid herself of the blood of her husband and she cries out, out damn spot, as she washes her hands in vain.

Shall the Gehenna of hell be a place of incessant, eternal, continual washing of the hands, the red of the blood shed by the hypocrite and everlasting stain.

Indeed, that's what it shall be. The eternal regret that having been repeatedly offered salvation through faith in Christ, the hypocrite consciously rejected it.

That having been offered heaven, the hypocrite willingly chose hell. I cannot sugarcoat what Jesus says here.

The Jesus who speaks more of hell than any other figure in the Bible, I cannot sugarcoat this without becoming a teacher of a falsehood. The hypocrite willingly chooses hell because he will not, here and now, allow himself to acknowledge his need of Christ and his grace.

[26 : 43] I cannot sugarcoat it. I dare not for what Jesus teaches here in Matthew 23 is more important than life and death. It most certainly will be for these Pharisees for whom Jesus says, I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.

And we'll find out more about what this means next week when we look at verses 37 through 39. But Jesus' point is that everyone who hears these words, everyone, all of us here today will be affected by their importance for fail, for fear rather, or for foul.

Jesus' seven woes, a litany of pity and suffering. The diametric opposite of Jesus' beatitudes in Matthew 5.

blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness.

Here's the gospel blessing for those who are covered not with the red of the forester's spray can, but with the scarlet blood of Jesus Christ.

[28 : 04] There's no hell for the blessed. They've passed from death to life because by faith in the Son of God who loved them and gave himself for them, God has showered his grace on them.

How greatly you will suffer. My heart is weighed down with pity for you. People of God, gladly, gladly have your woes now that you may enjoy your well hereafter.

Gladly endure the sufferings of life now that you may enjoy the blessings of heaven hereafter. Is the red circle painted around you today like it was the great Pharisee of Pharisees, Saul of Tarsus?

And do the same as he did. Trust in Jesus Christ and be changed. Have confidence in Jesus Christ and then fueled by the joy of salvation.

Go with great urgency and tell every creature under heaven that there's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin. There's a door that's open that you may go in.

[29 : 12] At Calvary's cross is where you begin when you come as a sinner to Jesus. Let's pray. Lord surely we don't think it's a doctor who hates us, who gives us a serious diagnosis and then tells us about the treatment pattern.

Surely we don't think it's a Jesus who hates us, who warns us of the dangers of hypocrisy, but then invites us to come and know him as Savior, King and Lord.

We thank you that his grace is the medicine, that faith is the means by which we cling to him. And so we ask that not one of us here today, all of us who by nature have the red circle painted around us, would leave this place with that red circle painted around us.

Rather, oh Lord, wash us in the blood of your Son, Jesus Christ. Fill us with your blessing in him. In his name we pray. Amen.