

# Jesus condemns religious hypocrites

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'm reading from Matthew chapter 23, verse 13 to 39. This kicks off right from last week.

! Jesus is addressing the scribes and Pharisees. 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. 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.

You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? For 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.

You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it, and by everything on it.

[ 1 : 31 ] And whoever swears by the temple, swears by it, and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God, and by him who sits upon it.

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. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. 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. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside may also be clean.

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.

[ 2 : 41 ] So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!

For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, 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.

Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents!

You brood of vipers! How are you to escape being sentenced to hell? 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, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous, Abel, to the blood of Zachariah, son of Barakiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. 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 hen-gatherers, her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.

[ 4 : 11 ] So your house is left to you desolate, for I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Well, good morning, everyone. Will you pray with me as we come to God's word? Lord, all of us, whether we are searching for you for the first time or we've known Christ for many years, all of us need to go deeper in what we've just sung.

that nothing but the blood of Jesus can wash away my sin and make me whole again. So I pray that in your stern word to us this morning that you would convince our hearts that the blood of Christ is all we need.

In Jesus' name, amen. Well, there are some who claim to be spiritual leaders of Christianity that this passage, it makes me shudder if I imagine myself standing before God on judgment day. I do not want to be them. People who preach the health and prosperity gospel, taking the blood of Christ and making money from it.

[ 5 : 45 ] I do not want to be them. I do not want to be them. On the last day. Those claiming to represent God as priest or pastor and doing awful things in private, taking advantage of the sheep.

Oh, I do not want to be them. And then there's many, many more spiritual leaders claiming to be Christian leaders.

I don't want to be them either. They just teach that God is pleased with our religious activity. That's all he wants, our religious activity. And they're giving people false assurance.

In generations past, a judge in the UK would put on a black cap to pronounce the death sentence over a criminal. The case has, it's been examined.

The jury is unanimous. And putting on that cap is just, the fate is sealed. It's time to be sentenced. This passage is Jesus, the judge of all the earth, putting on that black cap.

[ 7 : 07 ] God's patience, it seems, he seems almost endlessly patient. He's incredible, he's so much more patient than you or I.

Like, he gives chance after chance after chance after chance. But now it's time for the black cap. Seven woes.

Now that seven might be symbolic for completeness. These woes are calling down divine condemnation on the religious.

It's not spiteful, he's not just losing his temper, this is judicial, this is, this is a judge. He's talking to scribes and Pharisees.

Verse 13, he's talking to scribes and Pharisees, Pharisees who claim to know God and claim to be leading others to God. And there's two descriptions that he, they're very prominent in this section.

[ 8 : 07 ] They're blind, spiritually blind, blind guides, blind fools, blind men, blind Pharisees. And hypocrite, they're like an actor putting on a mask and performing.

All their religion is a performance for people to, well done. That's what hypocrite, it's just a performance when the inside is unchanged.

all appearance, no substance. So Jesus was wearing the black cap especially for false spiritual leaders but if that woe falls on anyone who follows them, they've only got a following because our hearts are prone to think like them.

I think we should see in this passage that this is God's judgment not just on the Pharisees back then but on all human-centered performance-driven mask-wearing religion.

This is God's judgment on all of it. Well a commentator said there's a chiasm to these seven woes. [ 9 : 34 ] Now as soon as someone knows what a chiasm is they see it here, there and everywhere in scripture even if there isn't. But this one's grown on me. I think they might be onto something.

So a chiasm is just a mirror image of ideas where once you get to the centre idea that's at the heart of it. That's the thrust of the message.

So I think verse 23 and 24 the central woe is the root problem. Why they're blind?

Why they're hypocrites? And all the other woes are symptoms. They flow out from this root problem. It's not uncommon to see married couples focus all their attention on the externals to make a thriving family.

Let's have a nice house. Let's have good incomes coming in. Let's have holidays. Let's get the kids the best clothes and the best toys and the best schooling.

[ 10 : 42 ] Let's get seven devices so that we can all watch different things and be a harmonious fragmented family in the home. All while the internal, the unmeasurable things are neglected.

What really produces a thriving family soaking in the word and the love of God and the mutual trust and the gratefulness and the sacrificial love.

I'm sure we could add things here but we're drawn to those visible, measurable, tangible things as if that's the real thing.

Or as a country, we can measure our prosperity by our annual GDP but where's the trust? Where's the trust between neighbours? What really produces a healthy country?

I was looking in my wardrobe recently and I saw all these shirts I bought when I first was appointed a pastor here. I don't want to wear them anymore.

[11:48] They're a bit embarrassing. I was focused on just looking like a pastor. Who gives a rip? I'm sorry about that but fallen mankind is just, we're so prone to look for the external, the measurable and we just ignore the crucial, the important and often unseen.

You can't measure it. And that's especially the case when it comes with our relationship with God. So verse 23 and 24 I think is just that.

The Pharisees totally missed the point of the Old Testament. They knew their Old Testament back to front and yet Jesus is charging them with totally missing the point. Totally missing the thrust, the heart of what God says.

God gave laws about tithing, giving 10% and they are so holy they tithe their garden herbs. They can measure that.

They can obey that rule. But what God's law emphasised, what the prophets called Israel back to again and again, what he says he wants the most is justice and mercy, faithfulness.

[13:19] They focus on the rules they can see and just skim over the heart of what God calls us to. God's love.

A gnat and a camel, they're both unclean animals in Mosaic law. So they're so careful not to defile themselves with a gnat and then they swallow a camel.

They miss the heart of what God wants from us. It's like in COVID days, coming in the door, you just 12 times you sanitise your hands and then you sneeze in someone's face and you think you're being careful.

It's just missing the point. Matthew's gospel records Hosea 6.6 two times, I desire mercy, not sacrifice, God said.

Ritual isn't inherently wrong. He commanded some rituals, but it means nothing if you ignore God's call to show mercy to your fellow brother and sister.

[14:34] We're going to share the Lord's Supper, not today but next week. It is an expression of our reconciling power of the gospel to God and one another. It will mean nothing if we are harbouring bitterness in our heart and hostility toward our brothers and sisters here in this room.

that ritual would be worse than nothing. It would be offensive. It's missing the heart. We could come to church and pat ourselves on the back that we're good, godly people and then go into our workplace and not pay our workers or we fudge the laws to make ourself and our company look good and we have no concern for the poor.

It's just missing the heart. God says he cares about our inner person, our character.

The Pharisees' view of God and of religion is they cared about the external, the measurable. People can applaud that when God cares about the inner person, the character.

Very hard to measure that, but vitally important, justice and mercy and faithfulness. He doesn't want virtue signalling. He wants real character transformation.

[16:08] So from this fundamental misunderstanding of God and what he wants, focusing on the external rules and rituals, it's not surprising then that they misapply God's laws and that's what we see either side in verse 16 to 22.

Now this is a bit step removed from us. I don't think we're familiar with oaths, but their rules are bizarre. If anyone swears by the temple, it's nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.

oaths. Now just stepping back big picture here, they are deciding, they've got all these technicalities, all these rules of what obedience counts.

This counts, this doesn't count. But they're missing the heart of the matter. Any oath is appealing to God.

their fixation on rules, this counts, this doesn't count, is actually encouraging people to forget God.

[17:19] Any oath is appealing to God. These arbitrary rules can make you miss the bigger point.

Now, something that came to my mind is, it's not the only thing, maybe it's not even the most important thing, but I don't hear many people using swear words at church, to be honest.

Like, it doesn't happen much. Maybe you stub your toe and it accidentally happens. I don't hear many heated arguments over morning. Sometimes it happens, but I don't hear many.

Now, is Sunday morning more sacred than the drive home or Saturday evening? We've got this strange distinction in our minds that this is sacred space and that fixation on rules of what we can and can't do at church, it makes us forget the bigger picture of God.

God, he wants all our words to be honouring him and building up. Fixation on little man-made distinctions can miss the point entirely.

[ 18 : 52 ] Then we've got verses 25 to 26. You clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. God's law put cleanliness at the forefront of their minds.

Every meal had to be clean animals, how you prepared the meal. The fabric you wore had to be clean and not mixed fabric.

What you wore, when you're sick, there's so many laws around cleanliness, sick or menstrual cycle or attending a funeral or approaching the temple and washing and every aspect of life, clean and unclean, was in a Jewish person's forefront of their thinking.

You would have to be incredibly daft to miss that God wants cleanliness inside as well.

Morally, inside they remain unchanged.

[ 20 : 05 ] They're still full of greed and self-indulgence. What came to my mind was we could be a good Christian and obey every government law with money.

We could be squeaky clean legally and inside greed and self-indulgence could just be totally unchanged.

clean the inside and the outside it'll take care of itself. That's the easy bit.

Clean the inside. In both of these woes with the oaths and with the cleanliness they're limiting obedience to just the external measurable things.

it can make you feel like a godly person missing the obedience of the inner person God calls for.

Would it be a good thing if we grew in numbers in this church?

[ 21 : 28 ] There's lots of ways of answering that question but it depends. it depends what we're teaching people. We could grow numbers and be corrupting them if we're teaching the wrong thing.

The Pharisees discipleship did more harm than good. They corrupted other people and I think that's the point of verse 15.

They make converts to their form of Pharisee religion and you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

Their false religion corrupted other people. I don't think Jesus is exaggerating. A child of hell means someone who belongs to they're on their way to hell.

Their teaching corrupted their understanding of who God is and what he wants. It gave people false assurance while turning people away from Jesus.

[ 22 : 45 ] Numbers alone are not a good measure of whether we're healthy or not. They're not. God is God is God is God.

This same corruption is pictured in verse 27 to 28. I think this picture is you're meant to feel it. You are like whitewashed tombs which outwardly appear beautiful but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanliness.

On the way to Passover apparently the custom was to whitewash paint the tombs so that people didn't accidentally get unclean before they came for Passover.

It would prevent them from participating in worship. They couldn't partake of the Passover so they would clean the tombs and Jesus is saying the tombs are not the only thing defiling people.

You, you are defiling people by your teaching. You're cutting people off from God. Last year a Perth woman opened a bag of rice from Woolworths and discovered a grey patch at the bottom thinking it was mould.

[ 23 : 59 ] It wasn't mould. It was a dead mouse. She said there was blood and a stale wet smell coming from the contents.

disgust. That disgust is how God feels towards empty religion. It defiles anything, anyone who buys into it.

cuts people off from God. They're fundamentally missing the point of what God says in his word and their fixation on external rules.

They made these, they show, disobedience counts and neglected the more important obedience God calls for and it corrupted people. Anyone who buys into it, it corrupts.

And so the final woes on either side at bookends, you reject those God sends to save you.

[ 25 : 21 ] It's your sense of goodness, not your sense of badness that's sending you to hell. It's your sense of goodness. goodness. You've got no room in your soul to need a saviour.

You don't need it. So verse 13, you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces for you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.

They're turning people away from Jesus as our only hope of salvation. verse 29, they build monuments for the prophets.

They're thinking they're morally and spiritually superior to past generations who killed the prophets, yet they're plotting to kill Jesus. God is so patient.

He gives chance after chance and messenger after messenger. They're rejecting his son. And then he gives more chances. Jesus says, I'm going to send you more.

[ 26 : 32 ] That's incredible. I can't believe God sends more messengers. I'm going to send you more of my people to share this message of hope and salvation to you and you're going to kill them.

mention mentioning the blood of Abel and Zachariah.

Abel, you remember in Genesis, he's the first victim of someone who just wants external religion to feel good about themselves and murdered Abel.

Zachariah is probably from 2 Chronicles 24. That was the last book in the Hebrew collection, the canon of scripture.

I think it's like saying from Genesis to Revelation, all the blood of those God has sent to say, come to me and have salvation in me and you've killed them.

[ 27 : 31 ] All that is landing on you. Time is up. He's been incredibly patient all of history. But it's now time for that black hat.

So verse 37 to 39, the judge of all the earth is putting on his black hat. Your house, the temple, Jerusalem, Israel, all these external things you put your trust in, it's going to be left to you desolate.

You will not see me again. not until the resurrection but until his second coming. When everyone will acknowledge who I am. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

In chapter 24 verse 1, the Lord left his temple. No more opportunity. That's it. God's condemnation on all, all human centred, external performance, people praise, religion.

This is God's condemnation on it all. God's love. But see, see also the heart. See the heart of God.

[ 29 : 03 ] Jesus is full of emotion here. Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, God's love.

How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings? Jesus. But you were not willing.

I love the Jesus of the Gospels. This world focuses on the appearance and externals and, but God, God doesn't settle for that and I love that about Jesus, about God.

He wants character. He wants, imagine if our country was just filled with justice and mercy and faithfulness. He wants substance.

And I love the kind of relationship God wants. He's not saying to the Pharisees, well, you tried hard but it wasn't good enough. He's saying, tuck under my wings.

[ 30 : 17 ] That's what I'm asking. Tuck under my wings. Let me protect you.

Let me nurture you. You're so busy trying to prove yourself in the eyes of people and prove yourself to your own conscience. Just be a helpless chick and come, come under my wings.

God's God's The irony is that if you feel morally and spiritually bankrupt, there is no woe for you.

There's no woe for you. You've just got his wings. I know you may not feel it, but you need to tell yourself, preach to yourself, all you've got is his wings to protect you and nurture you.

It's those who are proud, who don't want to be a helpless chick. They're the ones in real danger. the one weeping in his judgment is just a few days from the cross when he's going to take all the condemnation, all the woes of our hypocrisy, our religious hypocrisy upon himself.

[ 31 : 51 ] He's going to let these Pharisees say he saved others, he cannot save himself. He is the king of Israel, let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him.

He trusts in God, let God deliver him now if he desires him, for he said I am the son of God. There's God's woes, that he took the woes on himself and stayed there while those guys said that.

he stayed there for you and me. Clothes don't make us clean, cleansing in his blood, there's the cleansing we need.

There's the shelter under his wings from the wrath of God. He took it all himself. Just come helpless, nothing to offer him, just come as a helpless chick.

That's the relationship God wants with us. You don't want those dreadful words spoken to you when you face him in judgment because you're proud of your religious activity.

[ 33 : 16 ] see, he's going to have tears in his eyes and just says, you were not willing. You were not willing.

You were not willing. Amen.