

Matthew 23:13-39

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[0 : 00] Remember last week, David said, well, at least the service I was in, David said, there's a lot of lightning and thunder in this chapter. And that is very much true for the portion that we're going to look at today.

Jesus began his public preaching ministry as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew in chapter 4, verse 17, where he says, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

And this pronouncement contains both an invitation and an indictment. The entire message of Matthew's Gospel is a two-edged sword.

And that sword, which edge you fall on, depends on your response to Jesus Christ, to the person of Jesus Christ.

You may either enter the kingdom of heaven by turning from your own way and going in the way of Christ and thus entering the kingdom. Or, if you reject Jesus as Lord, you'll be shut out of God's kingdom.

[1 : 11] And that's what our passage talks about today. Jesus' public preaching ministry is bookended by the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 5 and by this Sermon of Woes in chapter 23.

In chapter 5, at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, you have eight beatitudes or blessings of those who come into the kingdom by faith in Christ.

And in our chapter here, you have seven woes to those who reject Jesus. This is the first and last sermons of Jesus' public ministry.

So, this morning, as we come and look at the woes of this passage, I want you to think of them as sort of like anti-beatitudes.

Okay? So, if you reject Christ, this is, Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees, this is what you may expect.

[2 : 18] I've divided this morning's passage into two sections. And first, we will look at the woes themselves in verses 13 to 36.

And Jesus here is pronouncing against the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day, those who have just rejected him.

And then, at the end, we'll look at verses 37 to 39, where Jesus utters a lament over Jerusalem for those who have rejected their Messiah.

So, let's begin by looking at the woes in verses 30, sorry, verses 13 to 36. To understand these woes, you must think of them as part lament and part condemnation.

Jesus calls out the scribes and Pharisees on their pious play-acting, the external religious show that they put on for other people.

[3 : 20] Jesus is grieved over the spiritual condition of the religious leaders because they ought to be the teachers of Israel. They ought to be the ones pointing to the Messiah, pointing the nation to their king.

So, he issues a stiff condemnation of their behavior. And taken together, this lament and condemnation is a strong warning to repent and to change their ways, or they will be shut out of the kingdom of heaven.

Now, I don't know if you were looking really close, but you'll notice there's no verse 14 in this chapter. I don't want to comment on it too much. Perhaps it was an addition.

It is in some versions of the Bible, and it is in some later and not as reliable manuscripts. Perhaps someone later on thought, you know what, we've got to add another, an eighth woe in there, because then we'll have eight Beatitudes and eight woes.

I don't know why, but if you want to talk about it more, meet me at the back after. We don't have time to get into all the woes in detail, so I've grouped them together into four categories.

[4 : 34] The first two woes in verses 13 to 15 are about shutting the door to the kingdom of heaven by rejecting Jesus and by teaching others to also reject him.

If you reject the king, the kingdom is shut to you. Jesus has just described in the earlier part of chapter 23 that we looked at last week, the spiritual pride that motivates the religious leaders. All their religious observance is for the praise and recognition of people, rather than out of love for God and faith in his Messiah. This is opposite to the Sermon on the Mount's, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This prideful, self-centered, surface-level faith is the opposite of that purity in spirit. And because the religious leaders reject Jesus and zealously train others to reject him, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven will be shut to them.

So, that's the first set of woes, two woes. The next two woes in verses 16 to 24 are about the wrong use of scripture.

[5 : 51] And this results in religion that majors on minor points, at the expense of the true spirit and intent of God's word. If you look at verses 16 to 22, the religious leaders have come up with a way to justify breaking their word.

And their system of oaths gives less importance to God's holiness, and therefore the holiness of his temple and his altar, and gives more importance to their own rituals.

They emphasize the gold that they tithe at the temple, and the sacrifices that they put on the altar, rather than the temple, which is God's holy dwelling place, and the altar, which is the way that God has made an unholy sinful people to be able to commune with him.

What they're doing in reality is they're holding themselves in higher esteem than God. In verses 23 and 24, you see that the Pharisees tithe even out of their herb garden, but they neglect the actual animating spirit of God's law, which is justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

They're so worried about tithing the least little bit of their spices, and yet there's this glaring plank in their eye, a rejection of loving God and loving others wholeheartedly.

[7 : 24] So the religious leaders misuse scripture, and thereby they miss the true spirit of God's word. The third set of woes, the next two woes in verses 25 to 28, condemn the religious leaders for their hypocritical projection of outward external righteousness while neglecting true holiness of heart.

They project an outward external righteousness to be seen by others and to be praised by their fellow worshipers, and they neglect an actual true holiness of heart.

The scribes and Pharisees want to appear holy, so they keep the outward cleanliness laws. Rather than overflowing with generous charity and mercy on the inside, they're full of self-indulgence and greed, the passage tells us.

Now, in the time of Passover, which is what we're coming to in Matthew's gospel, and when Jesus preached this sermon, the Jews would put lime or other white substances over the graves and tombs of the dead, so that pilgrims coming to Jerusalem who might be, you know, traveling into the hours of dark, would not inadvertently step on the graves or come in contact with them and thereby make themselves unclean and unable to enter the temple for the Passover celebration.

So this is what Jesus is talking about when he says they whitewash tombs. Jesus says the religious leaders are like these tombs that they whitewash. They look really bright white on the outside, but on the inside they're full of rot, and they're full of uncleanness.

[9 : 28] The last woe, the fourth grouping of woes, sums up all the others. In verse 29 to 36, it is about claiming to be God's people, but rejecting God's Son.

Their king. Jesus pronounces woe to those who persecute both the Messiah and those who preach him, the prophets who came before and those whom Jesus will send after to preach his name.

Jesus' opponents, notice this, they claim that if they had lived in the time of the prophets, they would not have taken part in persecuting and killing the prophets.

They would not have done as their fathers. They would have listened to the message of the prophets. What does Jesus mean when he says that the scribes and Pharisees witness against themselves and they prove that they are sons of those who murdered the prophets?

In chapter 24 of Luke's gospel, we read that the entire law and prophets, the whole Old Testament, speak of Jesus and point towards Jesus.

[10 : 46] And in John 5, 39 and 40, Jesus says, to the scribes and Pharisees, you search the scriptures because you think in them you have salvation.

But it is they who bear witness about me, Jesus says. Yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. And I think these passages give us a hint at what Jesus is talking about here.

These religious leaders who oppose Jesus have actually missed the very point of the entire Old Testament scripture and the message of all the prophets. The message of all the prophets ultimately was, Jesus is coming.

Your Messiah is coming. Prepare. Repent. Receive him. So if the fathers stand guilty for killing those who ahead of time announced Jesus, how much more guilty are those who live to see him come in the flesh and walk among them and declare the kingdom's opening to them, and yet they reject him.

In the Sermon on the Mount, again, Jesus says he did not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. Literally, to fill them up. It's what they were meant to carry is him.

[12:05] But these religious leaders will reject the Messiah whom Jesus sends to preach. They will reject the Messiah, and they will reject those whom Jesus sends to preach his death and resurrection to them.

And by this, they fill up the measure of the sins of their fathers who persecuted the prophets. So this section ends with Jesus pronouncing woe to those who persecute, reject, and murder the Messiah, and his apostles and missionaries who will go out in his name.

And this, wrapping up the section of woes, parallels, again, with the Sermon on the Mount, which last blessing says, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Jesus is a double-edged sword.

[13:19] If you are persecuted for his name's sake, you are blessed. But should you persecute those who come in his name and reject them, then the kingdom is closed to you.

Time and again in this passage, Jesus calls the Pharisees and scribes blind.

And this is, their blindness is why they focus on minor points of the law and miss the whole entire point of the law, which is Jesus. They've rejected the very light who's come into the world, and therefore, their worship of God is dark.

Now, how do we sum up these woes against hypocrisy, against unbelief, against a sham faith in God that lacks the true heart of worship?

So these are scholars and theologians that Jesus is addressing here, which means it's possible to gain a lot of knowledge about the scriptures, but miss the message of repentance and true faith.

[14:34] It is possible to be a good Christian in external matters, but completely miss following the Messiah. And notice that when Jesus attacks hypocrisy, he isn't saying that externals don't matter.

Jesus doesn't pit outward religious observance against inner faith. He doesn't play these off against each other.

Hypocrisy is when the outward performance hides the lack of true inner faith. True Christianity is when the exterior practice is a manifestation of, and matches the true life of God in the soul.

very briefly, let's look at Jesus' lament over Jerusalem in verses 37 to 39. These verses also echo a portion of the Sermon on the Mount that comes right after the Beatitudes.

Like Jerusalem, Jesus witnessing people are a city on a hill which cannot be hidden, and that people can look to. The Sermon on the Mount calls people to shine their light as a witness for God, as an example of holiness to the nations, so that others will see their good works, their love for God, and glorify God.

[16:01] But in our passage, Jesus laments that Jerusalem has killed the prophets, and now it seeks to kill the one whom they foretold. Jesus shows tender love here.

He says many times he would have gathered Jerusalem under his wings like a hen gathers her chicks. But Jerusalem continually rejects Jesus, and thus they will be left desolate, like Ezekiel's vision, God's presence will abandon his temple.

And like Jeremiah's prophecies, the city of God that rejected its heavenly king will be overthrown and oppressed by worldly kings.

Jesus is the blessed one who comes in the name of the Lord, and he must either be received in love as the true king, or received in fear as a consuming judge later on.

But all hope is not gone. See in our passage here, verse 39, any who do turn to Jesus and recognize him as God's blessed son and king, he will open the gates of the kingdom.

[17 : 14] Any who cry out, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. So in conclusion, I just want to think through with you two implications of this passage for us.

First, I want us to be aware and on guard for the double danger of hearing a warning about hypocrisy. When we hear a passage like this that attacks hypocrisy, if you find yourself picturing the hypocrisy of others, you're probably at that moment being a hypocrite yourself.

One of the defining characteristics of hypocrisy is that we're sure it's someone else's issue. So we must gaze honestly and unflinchingly into the mirror of God's word and let Christ show us who we truly are.

We must not apply this critique to others, but let God apply it to our hearts first. And then finally, we must remember that hypocrisy is a disease that if it is left untreated, will kill true faith.

In Revelation 3, Jesus writes to the church in Sardis and he says that they have a reputation for being alive, but that actually they're dead.

[18 : 45] And he judges their works incomplete in God's sight because they are external works and they're not works done out of a true love for God. Jesus calls them to repent, to wake up and strengthen what remains.

It's not enough for us to have a beautiful liturgy or to have strong preaching when someone else preaches or to have well-attended programs in church or strong, solid teaching theology.

Those are good things, but they're not the main thing. And those are things that you can be good at without having a true love for God.

And so it can appear like the church in Sardis. You can have a reputation for being alive. But these things are only actually good if they're grounded in a deep love for God and a loving, faithful, ongoing reception of Jesus as King and Lord of all of life.

Without this, it doesn't matter what our reputation with people is. True religion will always and only be seen by our response of faith to Jesus.

[20 : 06] May we be those who say in spirit and truth together, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.