

Learning From The Scribes And Pharisees

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[0 : 00] I have dreaded coming to this place in Matthew where what he has to say is so very negative and so very critical. But as I have prepared these talks, I found them not really as bad as I thought they were going to be, and I hope you won't find them too bad either.

This is Refreshment Sunday, and it is the purpose of God by his Holy Spirit that we should be refreshed and renewed. And I trust that as we look at this scripture, vindictive though it may seem at first to be, you will nevertheless recognize the good purposes of God in all of our lives. Now, I'm in the situation where I want just to say this to you. I don't really know one good wine from another, and I consider it to be somewhat funny, though I know I shouldn't, when the waiter comes around at one of the better restaurants and pours a small portion of wine into the glass of the host. And the host holds it up to examine the color, smells it to get the sort of aroma of it, tastes it to see that there is no impediment in it, and that he can tell certainly what vineyard it's from, what age it is, and all those things about it.

Well, all those things are way beyond me. But in this chapter that we're looking at this morning, Jesus suggests that the Pharisees' religion is rather like that.

[1 : 38] That is, that they are very careful that their wine is clear and pure and has just a delightful body and aroma and taste to it, and they strain it very carefully so that no gnat is found in it.

Now, a gnat, I'm told, is a particular kind of insect that breeds in fermenting wine, and so they have to be very careful to strain it to make sure they get them all out.

But Jesus says to the Pharisees about their religion, you are people who would strain it a hundred times over to get every gnat out of it, and then you would swallow a camel, which, as you can see, is really quite a ridiculous concept if you think about it.

You, I mean, trying to swallow a camel, that is. Well, that's how Jesus describes them in their religion. Very particular about little things, and yet totally ignorant about the really important things, so that they strain at a gnat but swallow a camel.

Now, it's in this 23rd chapter of Matthew's gospel that Christ pronounces seven woes on the Pharisees.

[3 : 02] And these seven woes I can't go into in any detail, but if you'd like to follow, you'll see that they're all there. In verse 13, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you're hypocrites!

Why? Because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men, you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would to go in.

So, woe to you! Then he goes on and says in the very next verse, or in verse 15, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!

You traverse 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.

And in verse 16, Woe to you, blind guides! If anyone swears by the temple, it's nothing. But if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he's bound by the oath.

[4 : 05] And then he goes on in verse 23, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You tithe, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law.

And again you'll see in verses 25 and 27 and 29, Woe, woe, woe, woe! And the time's over. They have their, sort of the wine of their religion has gone sour.

And as you know, religion, like everything else, goes bad. Or else gets better. And so what happens in a congregation of people is our faith, our religious practices, turn sour, or else they have to be constantly renewed and constantly refreshed and made new.

And it's the purpose of our life together, of prayer and of study and of Bible reading, of following the church year, that we should be constantly renewed in our faith and not get our religion on the skid

as these, as these Pharisees did with theirs.

Now, if you are a very careful reader of the text, you'll see that there's a footnote to verse 8. And that footnote adds another woe, which would be the eighth woe.

[5 : 32] And if you've got a pew Bible, you'll see it in the italics at the bottom of the page. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers.

Therefore, you will receive the greater condemnation. So that's an eighth one. The reason it's not above in the text as it would be in the authorized version is because it doesn't have the same manuscript support that the other seven woes do.

And so it was left out because somebody thought it might have been added as a private dig towards the church in the first century to try and give a certain amount of authority to condemning another of their practices that they'd been involved in, devouring widows' houses and making long prayers.

But I mention that so that you will be aware that this text was written not before the church started, but when the church had started. And he was warning them against the religion of the Pharisees, which he knew could very easily take root in the Christian church.

And so he wanted to be sure that in this first-generation church they didn't become, as he described the Pharisees, blind guides and hypocrites.

[7 : 03] They don't know where they're going, but they take it upon themselves to lead others. And then the whole of their religion is hypocritical, which means that it is their play-acting at it.

Well, I've summarized the seven woes in this way. And you may object to this, but I'll ask you to argue with the text and not with me.

You can argue with me after you finish studying the text, but initially I would contend that this is what the text says. I might also remind you that two weeks from today we're having Question and Answer Sunday.

And that's your chance to put questions to myself or to Pat about the church and about the reteaching of Scripture which you think we are overlooking.

So that would be your one real way you could get back. These then are the seven woes. He says the first reason that your religion has gone bad, he says, is this.

[8 : 09] It's because you won't go into the kingdom yourself, but then you make sure that nobody else can get in either. Can you imagine that happening?

It's like kids playing with one football and the football belongs to me. And because the football belongs to me and I have to go in because my mother called me, I take the football in with me so that nobody else can play either because if I'm not going to play, then none of you are going to play. Have you ever seen anything like that happen? Well, that happens in religion too. That we sort of get a throat hold on our church and say, well, I certainly am not going to take Christian discipleship seriously and I'm going to stand in the way of anybody else who wants to.

And that was the first mistake that Christ accused them of making. Then he says, the demands you make on your converts make them not the children of God, but the children of hell.

You lay all sorts of duties and responsibilities on them. So instead of them becoming happy witnesses to the kingdom of God, they become religious psychopants like you and they just corrupt the whole thing so that they become not the children of God's family, but the children of hell.

[9 : 36] And so your converts become, as one commentator put it, religious perverts, from converts to perverts.

And that's a hard word, but I want you to know that I'm quoting it. The third thing, that you have substituted in your religion things for God.

And that was the whole business about swearing. You say you swear by the temple and that means nothing, but if you swear by the altar, that means something. And what happens is that instead of living their lives in the face of God and in the presence of God and practicing the presence of God, the things of religion become important to them.

So that it gradually, their whole religion comes around certain material things and not around the practice of the presence of God. The fourth thing that they do, you make a great fuss of tithing pickle preparations but forget love, justice, and mercy.

And you know how you can grow dill in your garden and they grew dill in their gardens and they said, one tenth belongs to the Lord and the rest I'm going to put in my own pickle jar.

[10:53] And so they did with the things they grew in their garden. Very careful and abstemious about that, Jesus said. But then when it came to love, justice, and mercy, you overlook all that entirely.

And so it happens in religion that we become, we major on minors, as they say, on things that aren't important and the great things, love, justice, and mercy, we overlook.

The next thing it says is that you make a great fuss about ceremonial cleanliness and he uses the way they treat their dishes, that this one must be treated and must be kept very clean.

But then you don't worry about what goes inside it. And so the ceremonial of your religion becomes important, but the content of your religion doesn't any longer seem important to you.

And then he says you make a great external show. And this is an interesting problem in scripture because Luke talks about tombstones that aren't painted so that when people are among them they don't realize that they're among the dead.

[12:12] Matthew talks about freshly plastered tombs that all look so lovely as they sparkle in the morning sun. He thinks, isn't this a lovely thing to see how the sun catches these newly whitened tombs?

But you ignore the fact that they really are death and corruption. And that's what they really mark in spite of their external glistening. The reality of what they are you overlook.

And his seventh woe is because the people you murder you then build tombs for. In life, when they come to you as a prophet of God, as a messenger of God, you destroy them.

You murmur against them. You accuse them falsely. You bring them to the place where they are mobbed in the streets and stoned to death. And then after they're good and dead, you say, my, what a great thing it is that they brought to us the message of God.

And you build a shrine to them. Well, that happens, doesn't it? I was interested to see that the new prime minister of Zimbabwe spent ten years in prison.

[13:31] And I think that's very wise that he only spent that time in prison. But the resentment of having been rejected by a people over whom he now rules could create problems, couldn't it?

Well, these people didn't risk those problems. They put to death those that were sent to them. And then after they were dead, they raised shrines to them.

And so often, that's what happens. Well, having read those seven woes, this is my desire for our congregation, then it would be first a place where you would find a profound welcome to the kingdom of God.

Now, I admit to you, we haven't much to offer. There's just us and our church and our church debts and the dishes to wash and the floors to clean and the rummage sales to run and various things like that.

And you may find them somewhat burdensome, but basically, we want you to know that in Christ's name, you are welcome to believe in and to trust in Christ and to become a member of his kingdom.

[14:44] And may we all extend that welcome to one another and to every stranger who comes anywhere near our church, that they are welcome into the kingdom.

And then, when you are converted to the faith of Christ, may we not lay on you all the little rules and niceties of polite ecclesiastical manners, but may we teach you to be a disciple of Jesus himself so that he instructs you and he directs you and you live your life in obedience to him as Lord and that we don't lay a burden of regulations on you.

Some churches, I know, say, if you want to belong here, you've got to stop smoking, drinking, dancing, and going to the movies or do other things. Please sign at the bottom.

Well, now, those things may be desirable that you shouldn't do that, but I think that what we really want is that you find out from him who is your Lord how you should lead your life and what your lifestyle should be.

Then, the third thing that I think that we should speak for in our church is practice the presence of Christ. You know that book which is supposed to be second only to the New Testament, the practice of the presence of Christ.

[16:12] And don't substitute religious things for the presence of Christ in your heart and in your life. That you're living your life in relationship to him and that things don't move in and substitute themselves so that it becomes the old church or the old prayer book or this or that or the other thing.

But that you're living your life in relationship to the Lord of the church, to Christ himself. That you don't become so delighted with the gifts that you forget the giver.

That you don't become so enamored of the creation that you forget the creator. That you don't become so self-concerned with your own salvation that you lose sight of the Savior.

The fourth thing is that tithing and pledging is very important. But it's relatively insignificant. And I think one of the dangers of our church is we need so much money to keep this place going that we put a great deal of emphasis on tithing and pledging.

And we may get to the place that the Pharisees got to where they were so obsessed with tithing and pledging that as I say their pickle pot had every tent removed and given to the Lord.

[17 : 40] church. And they were specialists on that. But the major theme of love and justice and mercy they neglected altogether. And that's what our faith is about.

And the other important as it may be is relatively insignificant in comparison. And then I think I long that our church should not use ceremonial cleanliness for real absolution.

In other words we clean and polish things so as to make them appear well and forget that the real transaction which is at the basis of our faith is that we are cleansed and absolved from all our sins through Jesus Christ.

The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sins. And that's so much at the heart of our faith.

That if we would substitute for that a kind of ceremonial braff polishing for the cleaning of our hearts and lives by the cleansing of the blood of Christ we're in a bad way.

The sixth thing is let's not emphasize appearances. And I tell you that but I feel it's something I need to hear more than any of things.

[19 : 05] Because I am a high profile person in this parish and I get to be very much aware of what you expect of me as the rector.

And so I try very much to try and be all that you want me to be as the rector. And very soon I find myself parading around like an idiot trying to be all that you want me to be.

And I can't be. I've got to deal with the God who as we said at the beginning of the service is the almighty Lord under whom my heart is open, under whom my secrets are known and my desires and from whom none of my secrets are hidden.

I have to be open before him. And parading around meeting other people's expectations is not my job over my calling. And so your temptation to make me and my temptation to do what you're tempted to make me do could destroy both of us.

And so I don't want our church to be one of external appearances, but of real relationships. And then the last woe, which I would like to point out to you, is that we would receive people in Christ.

[20 : 29] I think our world is much more ready to condemn people than it needs to be. For all the fact that we have a very loose approach to morals and to behavior and to honesty, once we catch somebody, we suddenly become very indignant and very ready to condemn.

And I suppose that one of the problems for our generation, as for every other generation, is that the most important people in our generation, we won't listen to.

After they're dead, maybe we will, but we won't listen to them when they speak to us face to face.

And that's, I think, because we refuse to recognize or are threatened by the message that they bring to us.

And I think it's very important for us to receive one another and to hear what we have to say. And not really to hope or precipitate the early demise of somebody so that you can then say, well, I'm very grateful for what he told me.

Sorry he's gone. And we should do something to memorialize him. Christ says, I think, in this, we should be ready to hear those who condemn us.

[21 : 51] One of the great things about belonging to the church, one of the things that I really delight in, is that there is no mind so cynical, or no criticism so sharp, but what it is already found in the scriptures.

The criticism of the church is not left to outside the church. It comes right in our scripture. And that's why these seven woes are important for us to hear in the midst of lens.

That we can recognize how easily our whole religion can go bad and become distorted. And how we can seek the grace of God that it might do just the opposite.

And how will this happen? Well, this will only happen as we turn in repentance and faith to our God and Father through the person of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Christ. And that God renews and refreshes us by his Holy Spirit so that we welcome one another. We encourage one another to be the disciples of Christ.

[23 : 06] We practice the presence of Christ. The great things of our faith, love and justice and mercy become important to us. we find the real absolution and cleansing which Christ gives.

We don't emphasize external appearances that we receive one another in Christ. And that God might bring such renewal to us and such refreshment to us through faith, believing in Jesus Christ and receiving the renewal and refreshment which he alone can bring.

May God grant us strong desire for this in all our hearts through this season of time for prayer.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[24 : 57] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.