

DESTRUCTIVE AND DAMNING DELUSION MATTHEW 23:13-36

Just before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead He encountered a grief-stricken Mary, Lazarus' sister and Jesus' good friend. Mary fell at Jesus' feet and said to Him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:32), and then she burst into tears. When Jesus saw her and those around her weeping, John tells us that He was "deeply moved in His spirit and greatly troubled" (11:33), and then we are told that Jesus Himself wept (11:35).

I submit to you that Jesus was deeply moved and troubled, not because Lazarus had died or because Mary was so sad. No doubt He had compassion on her and those who were grieving with her. But Jesus knew that He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, and that their grief would turn to joy in a matter of minutes.

No, there was something else going on in Jesus' mind and heart that made Him so emotional. The word translated "deeply moved" actually means "really angry." Jesus' primary emotion in this incident was not compassion or sorrow, but anger—intense anger. Not anger directed toward Mary or her friends, but anger directed toward sin and its devastating consequences, the most destructive of which is death.

Jesus, who knows what mankind and the world would have been like had Adam and Eve not sinned, *hates* sin. That is an understatement. Sin has corrupted and contaminated everything in this earth realm. It is like an aggressive cancer that metastasizes to everything in its path. Even good things, like friendship and marriage and intimacy. Even *sacred* things, like God's temple and God's laws.

And this is extremely upsetting to Jesus. Because when sin has its way, it turns these things into just the opposite of who He is, what He loves, and what He intended these things to be and do. Which explains why Jesus was so frustrated with the scribes and Pharisees of His day, and why He so vehemently denounced their shenanigans.

As you know, the scribes and Pharisees were the so called "Bible scholars" in the first century. They were considered religious authorities and were greatly admired and respected by most of the Jews. But unbeknownst to them, and undetected by most people who observed them, the cancerous tentacles of sin had infiltrated their attitudes, motives, interpretations, perspectives, and practices so that their "religion" had become saturated with pride, pretense, and presumption, all of which are detestable to God. And in what turns out to be the most scathing discourse in Jesus' entire ministry, He calls them out for it.

We are going to look at these seven scathing statements this morning, commonly referred to as "The Seven Woes". But I want to encourage us, just as Pastor Michael did last week, not to look at these statements with a condemning spirit toward the scribes and Pharisees, but with a measure of introspection, aware that some of these very same traits and propensities exist in us as well.

Look at **verse 13**. ***13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in."***

When Jesus says, "woe to you..." though He *is* denouncing the attitudes, motives, and practices of the scribes and Pharisees, He is not gloating over their fate. "Woe" is a term of both regret and compassion. These religious leaders had succumbed to the temptations to which all of us are vulnerable. Yes, they were responsible for succumbing, but it was a tragedy with terrible consequences. Not only would it result in their own demise, but the

demise of their disciples.

Jesus calls them hypocrites, literally, “actors,” people who play a role or a part that portrays an image that is different than what they really are. Hypocrite describes people who do not practice what they preach, or who portray themselves as experts on matters of which they are ignorant. In this particular case, the scribes and Pharisees portrayed themselves as experts on God’s anticipated kingdom. They boldly and confidently articulated their views on what the leader of that kingdom would be like, how that kingdom would be inaugurated and administrated, and, perhaps most especially, what was required to enter it. But their assumptions and opinions were completely false and misleading. Jesus says that instead of escorting people through the door of the kingdom, they were actually shutting that door in people’s faces, preventing them from getting in at all. What is more, they were not entering it themselves.

Their hypocrisy was evidenced by the fact that if they had been honest and humble in their study of the Bible, they would have recognized Jesus as the fulfillment of Bible prophecies and would have embraced Him as the divinely appointed Leader of the kingdom. Instead, they ignored the facts and devised their own interpretations that twisted the meanings of Messiah, the kingdom, and the entrance requirements for getting into the kingdom.

That was an eternally fatal flaw, not only for themselves, but for those they convinced to follow them, as Jesus makes clear in **verse 15**. ***15 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.***

In this statement Jesus describes the great lengths the scribes and Pharisees were willing to go to make a single convert to their brand of Judaism. Their diligence and painstaking efforts made it appear as though they were acting out of selfless love and sincere concern for the spiritual well-being of others. But in reality, it was just the opposite. Their motive for making converts was to elevate or secure their own status in the Jewish community. They also wanted to make their own disciples who thought and acted just like them. But in so doing, they were converting people to a “false” religion, preventing their converts from understanding the truth that could save them, and, thus, contributing to the population of hell rather than heaven with these converts.

Consider this for a moment. I can think of nothing worse than being responsible for the eternal damnation of another person. Yet that is what Jesus says the scribes and Pharisees are responsible for doing with their converts.

But that is not all they are guilty of. Look at **verses 16-22**. ***16 “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.’ 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? 18 And 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.’ 19 You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. 22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.***

People swore or took an oath in order to affirm the truth about a matter by calling on God as a witness to judge if it is untrue. Swearing was not commanded in the Law of Moses, but it was permitted to substantiate an important affirmation or promise (i.e. Lev. 19:12; Num. 30:2). And although God did not require people to make oaths, He approved of them if they

were properly given.

However, over time this matter of swearing or oath-taking devolved into something that God never intended it to be. Jewish rabbis developed a highly structured hierarchy of oaths that allowed for varying degrees of truth. The result was that lying through word manipulation became an elaborate game, and by the first century, this game was played so often and by so many people that skillful lying became an admired trait. And the implications were enormous. People learned not to trust each other or take each other's words at face value.

Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees blind guides and fools for playing this silly game. First, because it was devised by non-sensical theological reasoning. Second, truth is truth. Words that are not intended to be completely true are actually lies disguised as truth, and such lies are detestable to God. Anyone who plays word games like this thinking that God endorses it does not really know God, who is absolutely true, who never lies, and who demands complete truthfulness from His people at all times.

Jesus goes on. **Verses 23-24.** ²³ *“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.* ²⁴ *You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!*

Jesus is addressing the subject of tithing and the way the scribes and Pharisees practiced it. Moses commanded that a tenth should be given to the Lord (Lev. 27:30–33; Num. 18:21), which presumably meant a tenth of one's income. But the Pharisees interpreted this to mean a tenth of everything, including the tiny herbs they grew in their gardens. So, they paid to the Lord a tenth of small garden plants like *mint and dill and cumin*.

Though this kind of tithing was probably going farther than Moses intended, there was nothing wrong in doing it. The trouble was that in their preoccupation with these matters of incidental importance, the scribes and Pharisees neglected much more important matters, like exercising *justice, mercy, and faithfulness*. In other words, they were majoring on the minors; they were preoccupied with doing the *right* things down to the smallest detail, but they were not doing the *best* things. And by not doing the *best* things those *right* things were meaningless.

With intentional humor, Jesus illustrates this by accusing them of straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. In Aramaic (the language that Jesus was speaking) the word for “gnat” is *galma* and the word for “camel” is *gamla*. Gnats are a swarming bug that the Law forbade Israelites to eat (Lev. 11:41). Jesus is picturing these Pharisees carefully and meticulously straining their bowl of soup just in case a gnat had fallen into it, so they would not accidentally eat it and become unclean. Yet Jesus says these same Pharisees gulped down a camel, the largest of the beasts normally found in Palestine (and, incidentally, also ceremonially unclean, Lev. 11:4).

In other words, they were careful and conscientious about small, relatively inconsequential things, but were careless and thoughtless about the big things—things that God truly cared about.

Look at **verses 25-26.** ²⁵ *“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.* ²⁶ *You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.*

The *cup* was the ordinary utensil for drinking, and the *dish* was that on which food was served. Scribes and Pharisees meticulously cleaned the outside of these utensils but gave

no thought to what was on the inside. But Jesus said that on the inside of these utensils was *greed and self-indulgence*. The word translated “greed” in my version is more accurately translated, “plunder,” which refers to ill-gotten gain. Apparently, the scribes and Pharisees took from others that to which they were not entitled or made excessive profits at the expense of other people.

So, what they put in their cups and plates was contaminated by the way its contents were acquired. What made the food and drink unclean was not its chemical composition, but the manner in which it was obtained. If food and drink is obtained by exploiting others, then ingesting that food and drink makes you truly unclean in God’s sight, not whether the food and drink is kosher.

Look now at **verses 27–28**. *²⁷ “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. ²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*

One of the many ways a Jew could become ceremonial unclean, and therefore, unable to participate in community life, was by coming into contact with a grave. Moses explicitly stated that anyone who touched a grave was unclean for seven days (Num. 19:16). The graves of most people in ancient Palestine were not located in cemeteries, but in random places that were unmarked and not easily identifiable. This became a problem, especially for pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for a festival. Being unfamiliar with their surroundings, they could inadvertently come into contact with an unmarked grave, and that contact would make them unclean and prevent them from participating in the festival. As a remedy for such pilgrims (and others) tombs were whitewashed one month before Passover so they would be conspicuous to anyone passing by.

The whitewash on these tombs made them appear impressive, even beautiful. But the fact remained that inside such tombs were rotting bones. And in that sense, they are a perfect illustration of the scribes and Pharisees. On the surface they appeared to be impressive, even beautiful, but underneath that righteous looking veneer there was moral rot and decay, which was detestable to God.

The seventh and final woe begins in **verses 29-30**. *²⁹ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰ 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.’*

The scribes and Pharisees tried to compensate for what their ancestors had failed to do by honoring past prophets that had been mistreated or martyred. They built elaborate tombs and monuments and asserted that if they had been alive at the time, they would have treated them with the honor and respect they deserved. They would have been supporters, not enemies.

But Jesus says, “Not so.” **Verses 31-36**. *³¹ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. ³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? ³⁴ 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, ³⁵ so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. ³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.”*

The scribes and Pharisees sincerely thought that had they been alive at the time when

the prophets were killed, they would have had no part in those evil deeds. “The trouble was that they had not realized the radical nature of the obedience to God that the prophets had demanded, nor were they aware of their own superficial spirituality that would have never submitted to those radical demands or tolerated those prophets. Now that the prophets were safely out of the way and they could no longer hear the thunderbolts those great men hurled at conventional religiosity, they could safely applaud all that the prophets had said, quite oblivious of the fact that their lives gave daily evidence that the very things the prophets denounced lived on in them. Their hypocrisy consisted in the fact that while they gave outward evidence of devotion to the prophets, they took the strongest action against those who stood in the tradition of the prophets, Jesus and His followers” (Morris, PNTC).

The actions of the Pharisees at the tombs of the prophets does not show them to be better men than those who killed those great men of God. Rather, it aligns them with those who put those prophets into their tombs: the prophet killers and the monument builders belong together. Their actions show that they are the true sons of the murderers of God’s messengers (Morris).

These Pharisees, who had no difficulty in understanding that those who mistreated and martyred the prophets in earlier days were destined for hell, are invited to reflect on their own position. If those who opposed the prophets were so clearly *sentenced to hell*, then how are contemporary followers of the persecutors and executioners of the prophets to escape the same sentence? (Morris)

Well, how are you feeling after discussing these seven woes this morning? I’m pretty sure this has not been one of your favorite sermons, for there has been nothing pleasant or even hopeful in the words we’ve studied. This is a strong message of judgment—judgment against those who were perceived to be the spiritual elite in the day. So, I’m pretty sure that there were a few wide eyes and gaping mouths in Jesus’ audience that day. This was just as shocking if not more than when Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20).

So, what are we to take from this passage in terms of application?

The first thing that stands out to me is just how much *Jesus hates self-righteousness because it is so destructive*. Self-righteousness is the offspring of pride, pretentiousness, and presumption, and it, in turn, gives birth to hypocrisy, religiosity, and spiritual showmanship, all of which are detestable to Jesus. And part of the reason He hates self-righteousness so much is that it is so slippery and insidious. Those who possess it often don’t know they have it, and those who observe it in other people often don’t see it for what it is. So, self-righteousness is a sin that can be minimized. But self-righteousness is just as damning as murder; indeed, I have no doubt hell will be populated with more self-righteous people than murderers—some of whom were completely unaware that they possessed it.

We have to be so careful, especially those of us who have grown up in the church, for the default mode of most people who have grown up in a religious environment is self-righteousness. And it is especially hard to detect in ourselves.

Which brings me to the second point of application. The only way to be delivered from the scourge of self-righteousness is to get a new heart and a new nature from Jesus. We need to be born again—we need to be made new creatures in Christ. We cannot modify or reform our self-righteousness to make it more acceptable to God, though we often try. It has to be scoured and flushed from our beings. Only then will we have the capacity to be truly righteous.

If you have never come face to face with your own self-righteousness, sincerely ask God to show it to you. If it is there, He will, for it is surely something that He is eager to remove from each one of us.

Then finally, we must keep our hearts sensitive to the guilt and danger of self-righteousness. Even after we have been given a new nature and a new heart, we are still vulnerable to succumbing to self-righteousness. It is so insidious, it can be so cleverly disguised, that often we don't see it for what it is, and we embrace it thinking that it is genuine godliness when in fact it is just the opposite.

As you know, the church is most often described by outsiders as full of what? Hypocrites. Is that a fair assessment? Certainly! Hypocrisy, religiosity, and spiritual showmanship are rampant in the church today, and every one of us can become a victim of its destructive work.

Destructive and Damning Delusion **Matthew 23:13-36**

Main Idea: Pretentious, presumptuous, and prideful religiosity arouses the wrath of God and will be judged severely by Him.

Introduction: The pervasiveness and destructiveness of sin

Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees

For preventing entrance into the kingdom (13)

For populating hell with their converts (15)

For their non-sensical theological reasoning (16-22)

For majoring on the minors (23-24)

For their pretentiousness and hypocrisy (25-28)

For their prideful presumption (29-36)

Application:

Sin "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree"

The necessity of a new heart and nature

The need for daily death to self