

JESUS REBUKES HYPOCRISY

Matthew 23:1-39

Key verse: 23:37

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”

In today’s passage Jesus pronounces seven “woes” on the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. We don’t use the word “woe” much today, but it means the coming of sorrow and judgment. It was the harshest rebuke Jesus ever uttered. The religious leaders did their best to attack and discredit Jesus. But they failed. When they rejected Jesus, the result was their own destruction. Jesus didn’t need to speak these rebukes, because it would happen anyway. But Jesus pronounced such serious judgment on the religious leaders for three reasons. Let’s learn what Jesus wants us to hear through his rebuke to the religious leaders.

I. Jesus warned his disciples against hypocrisy

Look at verses 1-3. **“Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ‘The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.’”** The Pharisees sat in Moses’ seat, meaning they were stewards of God’s word, like Moses who gave the Ten Commandments. The disciples had to *carefully* do everything they learned from God’s word, no matter who taught them. However, Jesus was clear the disciples were not to do what the religious leaders did, because they didn’t practice what they preached. They were hypocrites. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees to teach his disciples and the crowd how not to live.

Jesus then gave an example of their hypocrisy. Last week we learned the point of the law is love for God and love for our neighbor. So, they should teach and practice loving their people and serving them. But the religious leaders only heavily burdened their people. Verse 4 says, **“They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.”** They should help their suffering people, but they only burdened them more, making tireless, endless rules and demands. I sit next to a wonderful Jewish man at my work. Because he is orthodox, he has so many rules to follow, such as he cannot carry money on the Sabbath, and he cannot have meat and dairy together ever—so no cheeseburger or sausage pizza. He is a

JESUS REBUKES HYPOCRISY

faithful man but has so many burdens. The religious leaders also should love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. But they lived for praise from others. Verses 5-7 say, **“Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.”** Phylacteries were little boxes worn on their foreheads or arms that held Bible verses. Some were said to have contained the whole Bible in extremely small letters. Tassels were commanded by God to be worn on clothes to remind them of God’s word (Nu 15:37-41). But the religious leaders only wore these to be praised by others, saying, “Oh, I love your tassels.” They also loved to be recognized as men of importance. God really wants us to remember his word. I am thankful one missionary beautifully painted Bible verses on the walls of his house. I am also thankful that he did not parade people through his house to show what he had done. We are to love God’s word, not do things to be seen by others. Such people are hypocrites.

After exposing the religious leaders’ hypocrisy, Jesus called his disciples to be servants, not seek praise from one another. Verses 8-11 say, **“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant.”** People like to elevate themselves over one another. It is terrible sin. Disciples of Jesus must not elevate themselves and have titles like this. It doesn’t mean that we don’t need mentors or Bible teachers. It means each person is to grow in a personal love relationship with our Father God and call him “Father.” We are to learn from his word personally. We are all equal in Christ. Then, we are to serve one another. In our ministry, we have called each other of shepherd or Pastor and missionary. Shepherd really means one who cares and serves for the flock, so I really liked this title. Missionary really means one who gives their life for a mission field. But we need to get rid of titles if it leads to anything other than serving others in humility, with great love and patience, and even loss. Jesus said in verse 12, **“For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”** We all want to be great in God’s sight. So, let’s humbly serve others, and be great in Jesus’ sight.

JESUS REBUKES HYPOCRISY

II. Jesus pronounces seven “woes” on unrepentant religious leaders

As we know, seven is the number of completion in God’s sight. There are seven days of Creation and the seven-fold Spirit. Here, Jesus pronounces seven “woes” or judgments on the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. Jesus proclaims through these woes that hypocrisy leads to inevitable and complete destruction.

Look at verse 13, the first woe. **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.”** John the Baptist and Jesus both came proclaiming, **“The kingdom of heaven is near. Repent and believe the good news.”** But the religious leader refused to listen and repent, and therefore did not enter the kingdom of heaven. Then they were a bad influence to others, shutting the door to the kingdom of heaven through their lack of repentance. Those who study and teach the Bible must come to God’s word with spirit of repentance. Repentance is the best influence anyone can give to another person. It can lead others to come to God’s word sincerely, repent, and receive the kingdom of heaven.

Look at verse 15, **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.”** The teachers of the law and Pharisees worked hard to win a convert. But when they didn’t have the kingdom of heaven in their hearts, they could not lead anyone to become a child of God. They only created more monsters like themselves. We have to work hard to teach the Bible. But we must make sure we have the kingdom of heaven in our hearts through Jesus, more than many impressive arguments. Then we can bear the fruit of many beautiful changed lives through our Bible studies.

In verses 16-19 Jesus rebukes the religious leaders’ value system. **“Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.’ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.’ You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred?”** Israelites liked to make vows to God, probably because no one could trust their word. Yet the religious leaders would not view the vow as binding if they swore by the temple or the altar of God, but only if they swore by the gold and the gifts in

JESUS REBUKES HYPOCRISY

the temple. It meant they valued money more than God Almighty. They believed gold and gifts were more precious and meaningful than the Holy God. Their value system was completely inverted. Do you know why our founders decided to have a very simple church building? It is so we don't begin to value the building more than God. We can't value money or possessions more than God, even our 401k. We also learn that we must keep our word and not make vows just to impress others. Jesus said, **“All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”** (Mt 5:37) Sometimes we like to embellish our achievements or shortcomings so as not to expose our sins or weaknesses. But we must be honest as the people of God and do our best to keep our promises. Many times I broken my promises and didn't want to expose my sins, especially when I have to give reports. May God help me to be honest in everything. Jesus then rebukes them to have the fear of God in their hearts in verses 20-22. **“Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.”** May God help us to see Almighty God and cherish Him.

In the fourth “woe,” Jesus rebukes their lack of mercy, justice and faithfulness. Look at verses 23 & 24, **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”** Here Jesus commends their tithing. But he rebukes their neglect of the more important matters--justice, mercy and faithfulness. Jesus wanted them to have God's truth (justice) in their hearts and practice mercy toward their people. They should have God's heart and be faithful to God. But we saw again and again how they even used helpless people for their own plans. Jesus said they strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. They had teaspoon of righteousness and a mountain of wickedness. They should practice the main point of God's law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. How can we learn God's heart—his mercy, justice and faithfulness? We need to study the Bible faithfully and ask God to reveal his character to us, and to change us. Bible study is not a fact-finding exercise, but the way to meet God and to grow in his heart. Most of the time we are greatly encouraged by God's hope and love, and at the same time by the need to repent. May God help us to grow in his heart through sincere Bible studies.

JESUS REBUKES HYPOCRISY

In verses 25-27, Jesus rebukes the teachers of the law and the Pharisees for only caring about outward appearance and not their hearts. They washed the outside of cups, but the inside was full of rotten food. They were like whitewashed tombs, which looked beautiful on the outside, but on the inside were full of bones of the dead and everything unclean. Here Jesus is not condemning dressing up to come to God. He is saying it means nothing without a clean heart. David knew this and said, **“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”** (Ps 51:10) Whether we come in hipster clothes or a suit and tie, it means nothing without a clean heart. Before I came to Jesus I had a beard and a bit of an afro, and rode a motorcycle, because I thought girls liked those things. When I accepted Jesus, I wanted a change, so I gave all that up. It was an outward change and was relatively easy. But it doesn’t mean my heart is clean today. I need a new decision to seek God and ask for a pure heart today. Jesus especially rebukes greed and self-indulgence. Our culture advertises greed and self-indulgence everywhere. We are strange if we don’t practice it. But it is rotten in Jesus’ sight. I take care of myself so well, instead of seeking God and caring for others. May God help us to come to Jesus with sincere hearts and ask that he may create a pure heart within us.

Jesus’ final “woe” is in verses 29-32. They read, **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!”** This final woe showed the depth of their depravity. They declared that they were ancestors of those who killed the prophets and now were determined to kill Jesus as well. They should be life-giving shepherds, but they wanted to kill the Messiah out of jealousy. This is similar to us dreaming of the good old days. But many times we rebelled against God then too. We need to repent right now and serve Jesus as God has called us to do.

Jesus declared the final judgment on them in verse 33. **“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”** They were agents of the devil, who is compared to a serpent, and were going to be condemned to hell. They were going to kill Jesus. But it only sealed their own destruction. Jesus pronounced judgment on them in the strongest terms because it was the truth, and to help them turn from their sins and be saved.

JESUS REBUKES HYPOCRISY

They were incredibly wicked, yet Jesus wanted them to repent, so he would send Bible teachers to them. Look at verse 34, **“Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.”** Jesus would send great messengers of God to turn them back to him and receive Jesus as the Messiah. What amazing grace of Jesus! He would send Peter, Stephen and St. Paul who would perform great works of God and proclaim Jesus boldly. But he knew they would reject them. He knew their hearts were corrupt, corrupt beyond repair. Yet, Jesus tried to the end.

Look at verses 35-36. **“And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.”** Jesus is the culmination of God’s perfect salvation plan. God sent servants faithfully for millennia to turn people to him, beginning from Abel. But so many were killed, and these leaders would now kill the Messiah as well. Their judgement would be absolute.

III. Jesus’ Broken Heart for Jerusalem

In verse 37 we hear Jesus’ cry for the people of Israel. **“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”** After such a stinging rebuke to the religious leaders, Jesus was not joyful or feeling justified. Jesus was broken-hearted. Jesus remembered the long history of Jerusalem and God’s care for his people. God really wanted to love them. Finally, he sent his one and only Son to shed his blood for their sins. But they rejected him. It is said that Jesus had intense pain when his body was pierced with nails on the cross and a crown of thorns placed on his head. But his greatest pain was the rejection of his people, whom he loved. Jesus is like King David who cried out when his son Absalom was killed, **“O Absalom, my son, my son Absalom.”** This is Jesus’ heart for his people and all people of the world. Jesus cries out for us and for the people of the world, even those who reject him. This is the heart of Jesus.

Look at verse 37 again, **“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”** Jesus also laments that his people rejected God’s purpose for them. God

JESUS REBUKES HYPOCRISY

called Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation through Exodus 19:5 & 6, **“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”** God had a great plan to bless all peoples of the world through his people Israel. God wanted to shepherd all people through them. It meant they had to sacrifice and serve others. It was costly. They had to hold out God’s word and live according to God’s teachings faithfully. But they rejected God’s plan because it was not easy. When they didn’t live to bless others, they became self-centered and ritualistic. Again and again God sent his servants to restore them. But they refused. Jesus was broken-hearted because of all the people he wanted to bless through them.

Today our world needs shepherds to lead people to God. There are too many tragic events and too many hurting people. God has called his people to bless all peoples through them. Peter declares the calling of Christians in 1 Peter 2:9, **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”** Serving God as a royal priesthood and a holy nation is not easy. It is costly. But it is God’s will to bless all peoples. Otherwise, believers can become self-centered and ritualistic as well. Through this passage, I learned I need Jesus’ heart to care for his people and others. When I love Jesus, I learn his love for others, even his crying out for them. I am also a hypocrite because I don’t care for others as I should. I ask God’s mercy to help me love him and love others. May God give us Jesus’ heart.

Look at verses 38 & 39. **“Look, 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.’”** Here Jesus promises his glorious second coming. But more about that next week.

Jesus pronounced judgment on the religious leaders for three reasons: first, to warn his disciples how not to act; second, because it was the truth; and third, because of his broken-heart for them, that they may somehow repent and be saved. May God help us to put God’s word into practice and learn Jesus’ heart. May God help us know the reality of turning from him. May God bless America and the whole world through us.