

The Lord Pronounced Woes Against the Self-Righteous & Lamented over Jerusalem

Matthew 23:13-39

Matthew 23:13-39 - *"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. ¹⁴ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. ¹⁵ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. ¹⁶ "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.' ¹⁷ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? ¹⁸ And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.' ¹⁹ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? ²⁰ Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. ²¹ He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. ²² And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it. ²³ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. ²⁴ Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! ²⁵ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. ²⁶ Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. ²⁷ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. ²⁹ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰ and say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.' ³¹ "Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt. ³³ Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? ³⁴ Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, ³⁵ that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. ³⁶ Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. ³⁷ "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! ³⁸ See! Your house is left to you desolate; ³⁹ for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!"*

Background Notes

The Lord denounced the Pharisees for their evil practices behind their religious front in verses 1-12. In verses 13-36 He continued His denunciation of the Jewish religious leaders by pronouncing judgments against them. After the Lord

pronounced the woes, He called these self-righteous men “serpents” and “a brood of vipers”! How could they expect to escape the condemnation of hell (v33)? Those scribes and Pharisees are in a lost eternity today.

The Lord predicted that this generation of unbelieving religious leaders would persecute the early Jewish Christian leaders (v34). Not only would they arrange to have the Lord killed, but they would arrange to have His followers killed as well. The religious leaders arranged to have Stephen stoned to death (Acts 7). In verse 35 the Lord said that this unbelieving generation would reap the accumulated guilt of killing righteous people throughout Old Testament history – all the way back to the murder of Abel in Genesis 4 and on to the murder of Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24. And, of course, as verse 36 indicates, it was the unbelieving generation of Christ’s day that was conquered by Rome in 70AD. They were killed, enslaved, or scattered around the world.

Doctrinal Points

1. The Lord is required to pronounce woe on sinful people.

Some people think that God can just turn a blind-eye to sin, or ignore or forget about sin. No, God is holy and He has created a moral universe. He **must** judge sin. God is willing to forgive sinners when they turn to Him and repent because the Lord Jesus died for the penalty of sin, but God cannot deny His own moral character and just ignore sin. The Lord is required to pronounce woe, or judgment, on sinful people. Let’s look at these eight woes or judgments in this chapter:

- a. *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in” (v13).* This is true of self-righteous people today. They not only refuse to receive the gospel themselves, but they do what they can to keep the good news away from everyone else - in the workplace, or on the school campus, or in the media.
- b. *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation” (v14).* It’s usually the disadvantaged who suffer the most under selfish, self-righteous leaders. It was true then, and it is true today.
- c. *“You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are” (v15).* The Lord left no doubt about the ultimate destiny of those zealots, and this is true today of the religious cults. Their misguided zeal will not save them or their followers from hell.
- d. *“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.’ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.’ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it” (v16-22).* The Lord denounced the double standards of the religious leaders. They said that if you swore by the Temple you didn’t have to be as truthful as when

you swore by the gold of the Temple! Or if you swore by the altar, you didn't have to be as truthful or obligated as when you swore by the sacrifice on the altar. "How foolish and blind!" said the Lord. There are no double standards or levels of truth with God! Some people have "levels" for truth. If they say, "So help me, God," that's one level. If they cross their fingers when they make a statement that's another level of truth. God see all lies and hypocrisy as sin.

e. *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"* (v23-24), The scribes and Pharisees were meticulous about giving a tenth of all their crops to the Lord, even down to the most insignificant herbs - but they neglected the more important matters of the Law like loving your neighbor as yourself, promoting justice, and honoring father and mother!

The Lord said that this hypocrisy was like keeping a little gnat out of your drink by straining the beverage, but at the same time, swallowing a camel - the largest unclean animal in Israel! What a great figurative expression He used here! There are people like that today - including some Christians - who are very ritualistic and legalistic about going to church every Sunday and giving their weekly pledge, but they'll take their neighbor to court over some small matter, and they'll refuse to turn the other cheek if someone takes advantage of them. These people need to read this Scripture!

f. *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also"* (v25-26). How would others view your character if they could see your private life? The Lord **does** see your private life!

g. *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness"* (v27-28). The Jews of that day would whitewash the tombs, but no matter how nice the tombs looked on the outside, there was death on the inside. The Lord said that this is what the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees was like. They looked good on the outside, but inside they were full of death and decay. The Lord still hates the sin of hypocrisy!

h. *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets'"* (v29-30). The scribes and Pharisees claimed that they honored the Old Testament prophets because they adorned their tombs. They said that they certainly would have listened to the Old Testament prophets, and would not have killed them. But the Lord said that these hypocrites had not changed since the days of the forefathers. In fact, they were plotting to kill **Him**, and He was giving the same message as the prophets had preached.

So the scribes and Pharisees hadn't changed from the days of their forefathers. They had the same hearts of unbelief. Do you know that Judaism today adorns the tombs of the patriarchs and prophets, but the hearts of many of the people are still far from the heeding the message of the prophets? The same is true in Christendom. All these woes apply to hypocrites within the Church today. The Lord is required to pronounce judgment on sinful people.

2. The Lord is reluctant to pronounce woe on sinful people.

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! ³⁸ See! Your house is left to you desolate...” (v37-38).

The Lord didn't want to pronounce judgment on Israel. In fact, He wanted to care for them and protect them as a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings - but Israel was unwilling to receive her Messiah. The nation rejected Him and crucified Him; therefore, the Lord had to pronounce “woe on Israel.” In verse 38 He said, *“See! Your house is left to you desolate.”* His prophecy, of course, came true. Just a few short years after the Lord's death and resurrection, Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by the Roman armies, the people killed or dispersed, and the nation set aside.

The Lord doesn't enjoy pronouncing “woe” or judgment upon people, either then or today. He would much rather have sinful people come to Him and receive His salvation, His care and His protection. The Lord longs to have every sinner come to Him and rest under His wonderful, protective wings, but He will not manipulate any person's will. And He must judge sin and unbelief. The Lord is reluctant to pronounce “woe” on sinful people.

Practical Application

Don't get the idea that there is a second chance after death.

“For I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’” (v39). There is no idea here that those who reject Christ will get a second chance in the future. No. Hebrews 9:27 says, *“And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment...”* This verse makes it clear that there's no “second chance” for anyone after death.

Matthew 23:39 is looking on to the time of our Lord's return. Romans 11 and other biblical prophecies tell us that many of the Jewish people will have a change of heart in the future. That future small “remnant” of believing Jewish people is the “you” of verse 39. They will look on the Messiah whom they once pierced (Zechariah 12:10), and they will say, *“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We have blessed you from the house of the LORD.”* So practice good hermeneutics (that is, good biblical interpretation)! Don't get the idea that there's a second chance after death.