**JESUS REBUKES HYPOCRISY**

May 19, 2019

Matthew 23:1-39 / Key Verse: 23:37, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who killed 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 7 “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 pronounce these rebukes, because it would happen anyway. But Jesus pronounced such serious judgment on the religious leaders for the sake of the crowds and his disciples. So, let’s learn the danger of hypocrisy through Jesus’ rebukes.

1. **Jesus warned his disciples against hypocrisy (1-12)**

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 preached.’” The Pharisees sat in Moses’ seat, meaning they were stewards of God’s word, like Moses who gave the Ten Commandments and other instructions. The disciples were to carefully do everything they learned from God’s word regardless of who had taught them. However, Jesus wanted to be clear that the disciples were not to do what the religious leaders did, because they didn’t practice what they preached. They were hypocrites. Jesus rebuked them in order to teach his disciples and the crowds how *not* to live.

Jesus then gave an example of their hypocrisy. Last week, we learned that the point of the law is love for God and love for our neighbor. With their teaching about this love, the religious leaders should have put their teaching into practice by loving their people and serving them. But the religious leaders only burdened the 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 have helped the suffering people, but they only burdened them more, imposing endless rules and demands tirelessly. The religious leaders’ lack of love for their neighbors is ultimately rooted in/reflected in/parallels their unwillingness to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. Instead of living before God and finding fulfillment in His goodness and love, they lived for the praise of 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 market places and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.” Phylacteries were little boxes worn on their foreheads or arms that held Bible verses. 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 to hear words that would flatter them like, “Oh, I *love* your tassels!” They also loved being recognized as “important.” Jesus continues in verses 8-11. “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 another. It is a terrible sin. Of course, it doesn’t mean we don’t need mentors or Bible teachers. It means that we are to serve one another as brothers and sisters of one Father, our heavenly Father God and in one Teacher, our Messiah Jesus. Jesus says, “The greatest among you will be your servant.” In verse 12, Jesus continues, “For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” We all desire to be great. Let us pursue the kind of greatness that God upholds and delights in. Let us humbly serve others. As Jesus urges us, this is the only way to be truly great.

1. **Jesus pronounces seven “woes” on unrepentant religious leaders (13-36)**

In the Bible, 7 is a number that has often represented completion in God’s sight. There are 7 days of Creation and the sevenfold Spirit (Rev 1:4). Here, Jesus pronounces 7 “woes” on the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. Through these 7 woes, Jesus proclaims that hypocrisy ultimately 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 came proclaiming, “The kingdom of heaven is near. Repent and believe the good news.” But the religious leaders refused to listen and repent, and therefore did not enter the kingdom of heaven. Then they became a bad influence to others, shutting the door to the kingdom of heaven through their unrepentant hearts. Those who study and teach the Bible must first come to God’s word with a spirit of repentance. *For* ***repentance*** *is the best influence anyone can give to another person*. When one repents before God’s word sincerely and receives the Kingdom of Heaven, he or she inspires, encourages and ultimately leads others to also turn to God. Indeed, even when I look back on own my life, I realize a sincere testimony of repentance is one of the things that have most powerfully inspired me in my journey of faith. Some of my happiest moments in life included witnessing members of my family in God genuinely coming to or coming back to God in repentance. I pray that we may all be the best influence on each other by each living out a life of sincere repentance.

Now let’s look at verse 15, which says: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and see 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 that we have the kingdom of heaven in our hearts through Jesus, rather than putting up many impressive arguments. Only when we repent and have Jesus, we can bear the fruit of many beautiful changed lives though 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 temples, 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. 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 of the temple and the gifts on the altar. 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. 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 weakness. But we must be honest as the people of God and do our best to keep our promises.

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 matter in keeping the law-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 evil 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 not just as a fact-finding exercise but as the way to meet living God personally and to grow in knowing his heart through practical obedience and practice.

In verses 25-27, Jesus rebukes the teachers of the law and the Pharisees for only caring outward appearance and not their hearts. They washed outside of cups, but the inside (their hearts) were full of greed and self-indulgence. 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 decently to come to God. He is saying it means nothing without a clean heart. 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 decorates 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 said that they were different from their ancestors who had killed the prophets, but in actuality, they were doing the same thing in their determination to kill Jesus just as their ancestors had killed the prophets. Jesus declared the final judgment on them in verses 33-36. “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? 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. 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.” Until now, Jesus exposed 7 examples of the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. These show that the religious leaders were nothing but agents of the devil. They will certainly not escape being condemned to hell because of their unrepentant hearts. Throughout history, God had sent his servants faithfully for millennia to turn people to him, beginning from Abel until now. Still, they were not willing to repent and 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 it was Jesus’ final try to help them turn from their sins and be saved.

1. **Jesus’ Broken Heart for Jerusalem (37-39)**

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, 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. 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 nail and hung on the cross. 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, the son that conspired to kill him and overtake his throne, 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. Jesus also laments that his people rejected God’s purpose for them.

The nation Israel was formed and delivered out of the slavery to Egypt with God’s great hope and purpose. In Exodus 19:5 &6, God said, “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.” This was the greatest privilege and honor and blessing that any nation would ever enjoy in history. But throughout Israel’s history, they repeatedly refused God’s blessing. Now the religious leaders who were supposed to be a good example of obeying God’s hope and purpose were doing the same thing. Jesus’ heart was broken because of their stubbornness in refusing God’s blessing. In verses 38-39, Jesus prophecies Israel’s destruction due to their sins and promises his glorious second coming.

In conclusion, we learn hypocrisy inevitably brings destruction while repentance brings the kingdom of God. God sent his only Son Jesus to save us and bring us into his eternal kingdom. God’s hope is that everyone repents to be saved and be a source of blessing as a kingdom of priest and a holy nation. Repentance is the best influence that anyone can give to another person. It can lead others to come to God’s word sincerely, repent and receive the kingdom of heaven. May God help us to have the spirit of repentance and be a source of blessing to others! Amen.