

As we open our Bibles to Matthew 23 this morning - once again, we pick up where we left off last Sunday. And, once again, we still find ourselves on the Wednesday of the last week of Jesus’ life on earth. And, once again, Jesus is still on the grounds of the Temple, and once again, he is standing before the religious leaders of his day. But what is different from last week, is that Jesus is no longer being questioned by those religious leaders. In fact, last week, after answering the Pharisee’s question regarding what is the greatest commandment, we read in Matthew 22:41-46 that Jesus goes on the offensive and questioned them regarding who is the Messiah. And after that question we read that *“no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.”* And what is also different in our text for this Sunday is that Jesus is also no longer asking the religious leaders questions because he is angry - really, really angry at those whom had been questioning him. And so, as we begin our study of Matthew 23, verse 1 states, *“Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples . . .”* and Jesus continues on the offensive, but now he turns his attention to speak to everyone. This is Jesus’ last public sermon and it would feed the anger of those who ultimately put him to death.

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Matthew 23:1-12*

In these words we read that our Lord’s begins scathing denunciation of a false religion that paraded under the guise of truth. Some of the common of the day no doubt were shocked at Jesus’ words, for most considered the Pharisees to be righteous. Some have asked the question as to why Jesus’ last public message was not a final call to repent and seek salvation, or some final guidance about how to live for God, or a sermon of hope in the resurrection rather than a harsh rebuke. The reason is simply that there has been and always will be those who claim to represent God and show the way to Him, but they twist the truth for their own advantage to get people to follow them rather than God. Without a description and warning and of what these false religious leaders will be like, people will easily be led astray into following a lie while thinking they have found the truth of God, when they really haven’t.

In Acts 20:28-30 the Apostle Paul followed Jesus’ example when he warned the Ephesian Elders who had come to Miletus to meet him, *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”* We all must heed these warnings. Mark and Luke give summary statements about Jesus’ warnings here. Matthew is more detailed with Matthew 23:1-7 describing five characteristics of these false teachers. These same characteristics exist in false teachers today. The characteristics of false religious teachers/leaders are:

Self-Appointed Authority: *“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat”* (Matthew 23:2). False teachers/leaders claim positions and authority for themselves. Being in the *“seat”* of something refers to having a position of authority. We still use the concept today in such words as *“chairman,”* or the *“chair.”* These men neither inherited Moses’ position of authority nor were they set there by God. They also were not given the responsibility or position by any source of authority other than themselves. They seated themselves there. There are many today that claim for themselves positions and authority not given to them by the Scriptures. It is a common mark of cults and aberrant Christianity. Someone or a small group declares that only they understand the true way to God.

False teachers and prophets have been around since ancient times. God warns about them in Deuteronomy 18 and also differentiates them from true prophets by requiring 100% accuracy in prophecies. God allowed them then and He allows them now as a test of our faithfulness to Him, but they exist because people want them. Paul states in 2 Timothy 4:3-4 that, *“the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”* False teachers/leaders claim authority for themselves and many are glad to give it to them.

In true Christianity, authority arises from the Word of God, not an individual or group. As an Elder in this church, my authority comes from the Bible, as it does for all of our Elders. As a pastor, my calling here is from God through the authority of the church as given in the Bible. It is the wisdom God has given me by the Holy Spirit to guide us by the Scriptures and help us to apply its principles in our lives that gives me any authority. Run away from those who claim positions and authority based in anything other than God’s Word. 1 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us: *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”* Hebrews 13:17 says: *“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”* The first mark of a false religious teacher or leader is that they claim position and authority for themselves from themselves.

Hypocritical Demands: *“So do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice”* (Matthew 23:3). Jesus tells us here that we obey those in positions of authority as long as what they tell us is consistent with God’s will. The scribes and Pharisees were responsible to teach the people God’s law. Therefore, the people were to do and observe all that they said that was in keeping with the Scriptures. Jesus had already pointed out many areas where they were wrong. In the Sermon on the Mount alone, Jesus corrected them on the issues of murder, lust, adultery, divorce, swearing, praying, worship, giving of alms and fasting (Matthew 5-6). But there were also areas in which they were faithful to what God commanded, and even in many of the areas in which Jesus corrected them, it was issues of their hypocrisy and not the commands themselves.

The problem with the scribes and Pharisees, even in the areas in which they did teach well, was their hypocrisy. They often did not practice what they preached. They demanded people follow all sorts of rules and do all sorts of things that they themselves would not do. They preached holiness but lived lives of sensuality themselves. The word *‘hypocrite’* comes from the Greek word for Greek actors who placed a mask over their face as they played their part. From that usage the word developed a meaning of someone who pretended to be something they were not, and specifically, someone better than they really were. Outwardly appearing in public to be of high virtue, but inwardly and in private proving to be immoral. This was an accurate description of most of the scribes and Pharisees. False teachers and leaders are self-exalting people who do not apply to themselves the limits they place on others.

Loveless and Uncaring: *“They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger”* (Matthew 23:4). False teachers/leaders are loveless and uncaring to those who fail to fulfill the requirements, that false teachers/leaders will not do themselves. When the people failed to keep any of their requirements, these leaders berated them which only added the burden of guilt to the weariness and frustration. The most horrible burden was that they taught man could only please God by his own good works. If the good stuff out weighed the bad, they would make it to heaven, if not, then too bad. They did not point people to God’s mercy and grace given to the humble who had faith in God. The gospel is a two-pronged message of bad news and good news. First, the bad news. We are really bad. We are really sinful by nature and practice. We are totally incapable of saving ourselves. Second, the really good news. God is willing to forgive us when we place our trust in person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ – who died on a cross in our place for our sins so we might live forever! He converts us from lost sinner to saved saint and then begins the process of transforming us. There is always hope in Jesus!. False teachers and leaders are self-exalting hypocrites with extreme expectations - who criticize or berate those who fail their expectations.

Pretentious Displays of Spirituality: *“They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long”* (Matthew 23:5). The next trait of false teachers/leaders is the pretentious displays of their supposed spirituality. A *“phylactery”* is the little box that contains certain verses from Exodus and Deuteronomy which are strapped either the forehead or left arm or both – which is based on the command in Deuteronomy 6:18, that the law of God was to be bound as a sign on their hand and should be as a frontal on their forehead. This had always been taken symbolically of God’s law being the controlling factor in what they did, represented by the hand, and what they thought, represented by the forehead. Over the centuries what had been a reminder of and a focus on God became increasingly an outward show of man centered religion-ness. The Pharisees would make their phylacteries larger than normal in an attempt to show how godly they were. They are still around today as a fringe around Jewish prayer shawls. The Pharisees would make theirs bigger and larger than anyone else as a supposed sign of their greater piety. It was supposed to call attention to God and His commandments, but both the phylacteries and the tassels were being used to call attention to men.

There are plenty of false teachers/leaders – and many people - like this today. They make sure that what good things they do are seen by others. If they give something, they want everyone to know it. If God uses them, they want to boast about it. Not God, but what they did for God. The difference is seen in those who are humbly blessed that God is pleased to let them serve, and those who constantly brags about what they have done for God. It is an issue of humility and the focus of attention. False teachers and leaders are those who make sure their good deeds and care for others is in the full display.

Proud and Arrogant: *“and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others”* (Matthew 23:6-7). Here Jesus tells us false teachers/leaders are those who presumptuously see themselves as entitled to have positions or places that allow them to have status and prestige before others. This is again an issue of humility and focus. Who is important, you or God? For false spiritual teachers/leaders, it is themselves no matter how well they try to cover that up with spiritual language. The proud and arrogant are those who cloak their pursuit of a high reputation in the unpretentious grammar of the good of others and the glory of God.

*“But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted”* (Matthew 23:8-12).

Here Jesus gives instructions to true spiritual teachers and leaders. To summarize this, humility is the mark of true spirituality and pride a mark of the opposite. Humble people center on God and do not want to diminish His glory in any way, including being called a title that is actually more reflective of God than themselves. Proud people center on themselves and want all the glory they can get. A Rabbi is a teacher because the word Rabbi means teacher. But God is the believer’s only true teacher. The idea of being called “father” in verse 9 is not in the biological sense, but the sense of spiritual father. The scribes and Pharisees liked to think of themselves as having a superior spiritual position and being the source of spiritual life for their followers. Only God can be the source of our spiritual life. Jesus concluded in verses 11 and 12 by reminding them of the same lesson on humility he taught in Matthew 20:6 when they were in Jericho. They could either be proud and gain glory from men in the present and then be humbled by God later, or they could humble themselves now and let God exalt them in the future. *“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted!”*

It’s at this point that Jesus turns to the scribes and Pharisees and the disciples and the crowd – and he rebukes the false religious teachers/ leaders and warns them of the judgment that is against them, and yet even, he speaks of is a provision for repentance. Jesus himself expressed these denunciations as *“woes”* an expression of warning and judgment made with the emotion of grief, distress and affliction. And Jesus framed these condemnations of *“woes”* to contrast them with the Beatitudes found in Matthew 5:1–12. In the Sermon on the Mount our Lord and King Jesus described the true of the Kingdom of God righteousness; here our Lord and King describe the false righteousness of man.

In Matthew 5:3 Jesus said: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* And in Matthew 23:13 he then declared: *“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.”* Here Jesus tells us while those who are poor in spirit will enter the kingdom, those who are proud in spirit are keeping themselves out and even keeping others out. The Greek verb indicates people trying to get in who cannot. It is bad enough to keep yourself out of the kingdom, but worse when you stand in the way of others. Religious charlatans who teach and preach and spread a counterfeit gospel will ultimately pay the price for shutting the doors to the Kingdom of God on those seeking the door.

In Matthew 5:4, Jesus said: *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”* And in Matthew 23:14, he declared: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.”* Now most of you will notice that you don't have a verse 14 in your Bible because this verse is not found in many of the early manuscripts. But there is a verse 14 in New American Standard Bible and in the King James Bible which is based on the Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47: *“Beware of the scribes . . . who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”* Here Jesus is rebuking those who - instead of mourning over their own sins, and mourning over the needs of widows - in the course of bringing “spiritual comfort” to widows, took advantage of the needy widows and robbed them, under the cloak of false righteousness. Condemnation for spiritual con men will be great.

In Matthew 5:5 Jesus said: *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”* In Matthew 23:15 he then declared: *“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.”* The Jewish nation was always supposed to be missionaries to the Gentile nations. The promise to Abraham included that *“all the families of earth shall be blessed”* through him and his descendants (Genesis 15). They were to be a *“light to all nations”* (Isaiah 49). But the Pharisees became barriers in that mission. They demanded that these Gentile converts also follow all the minutia of the rabbinical traditions too. The self righteousness of scribes and Pharisees was enough of a curse, but their Gentiles converts would become so legalistically zealous for their new religion, that their zeal would even surpass their teachers in self righteousness, and thus *“twice as much a child of hell.”* True Christianity is not about a religion, it is about reconciliation of the sinner with His Sovereign creator through redemption and justification by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to be opening the door to eternal life, not teaching and preaching and leading people to a religion of legalistic death.

In Matthew 5:6 Jesus said: *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”* In Matthew 23:16-22 he declared: *“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.’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? 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.’ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.”*

False spiritual teachers/leaders make bogus vows. They make promises they have no intention of keeping. Jesus called them *“blind guides”* because they were so ignorant of the truth. The Pharisees were blind to the true values of life. Their priorities were confused. They treated making vows much like children who claim to invalidate their promises by crossing their fingers. They developed an elaborate system of what was binding and what was not. In this way they could sound very pious by making all sorts of boastful promises without ever keeping them. The Pharisees practiced *“Corban”*—anything dedicated to God could not be used for others (Matt. 15:1–9; Mark 7:10–13). These men were not seeking for the righteousness of God; they were greedy for gain. They worked out a “religious system” that permitted them to rob God and others and still maintain their reputations. But those who were hungry and thirsty for righteousness could not find satisfaction. True born again followers of Jesus Christ are to be people of their word. If they say it, then they should do it.

In Matthew 5:7 Jesus said: *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”* And in Matthew 23:23-24, he declared: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the 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. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!”* The scribes and Pharisees were also neglectful legalists. They majored on the minor and neglecting the major. They were caught up in minutia as they sought to fulfill the Mosaic command to tithe to the nth degree. The scribes and Pharisees thought they were pleasing God by their attention to detail. Jesus points out their folly with the illustration of being careful to strain their wine, perhaps even drinking through clenched teeth, in order to make sure they would not accidentally drink a gnat, an unclean animal, yet they would end up eating camel for dinner, another unclean animal.

They were so concerned about details, that they neglecting the larger issues – which made them blind guides because they either ignorant or defiant of the very truths they claimed to be experts in. They were supposed to lead people to God and teach them how to walk with Him, but they neglected true righteousness and led their followers into the self-righteousness that legalism brings. Justice, mercy, and faithfulness are the important qualities God is seeking. Obeying the rules is no substitute. While it is good to pay attention to details, we must never lose our sense of priorities in spiritual matters.

In Matthew 5:8 Jesus said: *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”* And in Matthew 23:25-28 Jesus then said: *“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. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. 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. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”* Here Jesus rebuked the false teachers/leaders for their hypocrisy regarding the spiritual purity of their hearts. Jesus used two illustrations: the cup and platter, and graveyard tombs. They both stated the same truth: it is possible to be clean on the outside and at the same time defiled on the inside. Imagine using dishes that were defiled! Whatever you put into the dish or cup would also become defiled. The Pharisees were careful to keep the outside very clean, because that was the part that men would see; and they wanted the praise of men. *“Blessed are the pure in heart,”* was our Lord's promise. Proverbs 4:23 tells us: *“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”* D.L. Moody used to say, *“If I take care of my character, my reputation will take care of itself.”* The Pharisees lived for their reputation, not the character of their heart.

In Matthew 5:9-12 Jesus said: *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”* And in Matthew 23:29-33 he declared: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, 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.’ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?”*

Here Jesus rebukes the Pharisees by contrasting how peacemakers and those persecuted for Jesus Christ are God's children – by how those who are persecutors of those of the prophets who proclaiming the coming of Jesus Christ are the devil's children. When Jesus called the Pharisees *“serpents ... brood of vipers,”* He was identifying them with Satan who is the serpent (Genesis 3:1). In His Parable of the Tares, Jesus made it clear that Satan has a family (Matt. 13:38). Satan is a murderer and a liar (John 8:44), and his children follow his example. The Pharisees were liars (Matthew 23:30) and murderers (Matthew 23:34). It was traditional for the Pharisees to build, improve, and embellish the tombs of the martyrs. But it was *“their fathers”* who killed the martyrs. Not their biological fathers, of course, but their *“spiritual fathers”*—the hypocrites of the past ages. What will be the result of all these murders? *“How are you to escape being sentenced to hell?”*

*“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, 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.”* Matthew 23:37-39

Jesus spoke these words as a sincere expression of His love for Jerusalem, and his grief over the many opportunities for salvation that they had passed by. “*Jerusalem*” refers to the entire nation of Israel. The nation’s leaders had been guilty of repeated crimes as they rejected God’s messengers, and even killed some of them. But in His grace, Jesus came to gather the people and save them. “*How often would I have gathered ... and you were not willing!*” summarizes the tragedy of final rejection of the truth. There is no argument here about divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Both are included. God would not force His salvation on His people; neither would He change the consequences of their stubborn rejection. In John 5:40 Jesus said “*yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.*”

The image of the mother hen gathering and covering her brood is a familiar one. Moses used it in his farewell sermon (Deuteronomy 32:11). It is a picture of love, tender care, and a willingness to die to protect others. Jesus did die for the sins of the world, including the nation of Israel: but “*He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him*” (John 1:11). “*Your house*” probably means both the temple and the city, both of which would be destroyed in A.D. 70 by invading Roman armies. The temple was “*My house*” in Matthew 21:13, but now it has been abandoned and left empty. In Matthew 24 Jesus will leave the temple and city and go out to the Mount of Olives. Yet, Jesus left the nation with a promise: He would one day return, the nation would see Him and say, “*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, and he has made his light to shine upon us.*” This is a quotation from Psalm 118:26-27, that great messianic psalm that was quoted so many times in His last week of ministry. The crowds had used those words on Palm Sunday.

When would this promise be fulfilled? At the end of the age when Jesus Christ returns to earth to deliver Israel and defeat their enemies. The fact that Israel rejected the King would not hinder God’s great plan of redemption. Instead of establishing His glorious kingdom on earth, Jesus would build His church. When that work is finished, He will return and take His church to heaven. Then there will be a time of judgment on earth in the Day of the Lord - at the end of which He will return to deliver Israel.

We cannot read this severe rebuke of our Lord Jesus without marveling at the patience and goodness of the Lord. No nation has been blessed like Israel, and yet no nation has sinned against God’s goodness as has Israel. They have been the channel of God’s blessing to the world, “*for salvation is from the Jews*” (John 4:22). Yet they have suffered greatly in this world. Jesus was born a Jew, and He loved His nation. We who are Gentiles ought to thank God for the Jews, for they gave us the witness of the one true God, they gave us the Bible, and they gave us Jesus Christ the Saviour. Amen? Amen!

This morning we also need to consider these rebukes and warnings. Those of us who claim Jesus Christ to be our Lord and Savior can rejoice that our sins are forgiven, but that doesn’t mean we’ve stopped sinning. Because we still have a fallen nature, any and all of us at any time can and often do exhibit the attitudes and behaviors of false teachers and false leaders. We all, to varying degrees, at different times, reflect the traits of self-appointed authority, hypocritical demands, lovelessness and indifference, pretentious displays of spirituality, and pride and arrogance. Jesus, in being God, is keenly aware of what goes on within our hearts and minds and souls – and he surely would have cause to pronounce his woes against us because our constant rebellion and rejection of His beatitudes. This is why Jesus went to the cross. “*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus*” (Ephesians 2:4-7).