

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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WOE TO YOU ... HYPOCRITES (1)

Matthew 23:13-31

In our previous lesson, we began the study of Matthew 23, a well-known chapter where Jesus exposed ruthlessly the failings of the religious leaders. Seven times He used the solemn expression 'woe to you.' Six times He called them 'hypocrites.' Twice He spoke of them as 'blind guides,' twice as 'fools and blind,' and once as 'serpents and a brood of vipers.' This is probably the most stern and sustained denunciation of a group of people by Jesus.

We also mentioned that in our interpretation of this chapter, we must be careful not to stereotype Pharisaism. If this text is to be of any benefit to us, we should approach it with the understanding that each of these expressions could well apply to us.

In this lesson, we will study the seven woes and try to look at the principle involved in each of them.

But first, let us consider the meaning of the word 'woe.' What does 'woe' mean? This is not a word that is commonly used in our conversations. 'Woe' in the Scriptures is an interjection of grief, or distress, and also of warning. It expresses grief in the first instance, a grief that is so intense that it gives us distress. It gives us pain. And in that distress and pain, it also becomes a warning, just like when our body feels pain, we know that something potentially dangerous can be happening.

With this in mind, let's examine the first 'woe.' Matthew 23:13.

Woe #1

Matthew 23:13. But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

The expression 'to enter the kingdom of heaven' is used in many verses to describe a saving relationship with God (Matthew 5:20; 7:21; 8:11; 18:3; 19:23-24; 21:31). It is now developed in the idea of a door to the kingdom of heaven which can be shut against those who desire to enter. As the official instructors of the law, the scribes and the Pharisees had the responsibility to help others to live by the will of God. Instead they have kept people out and they themselves have failed to find the right way in. This is a particularly devastating accusation for those who saw themselves as the guardians of the truth.

Could this happen to disciples of Christ, that we shut off the kingdom of heaven from people? How many times have we heard non-Christians complaining to us, 'Christianity may have good things to say. But I don't think I want to become a Christian. I have had bad experience with certain Christians. They are so arrogant. They give you the impression that they are superior to you. They think that the whole world is bad except them, and they want us to believe in their message. Well, if they represent Christianity, I do not want to have any part in it.'

Isn't that exactly what it says here in v. 13? Let us examine ourselves carefully to see whether we do these things or not. Of course, we do not deliberately try to hinder other people from going into the kingdom. But there might be something in our attitude, in our conduct, in what we say which hinders others from entering the kingdom. And that particular thing might even prevent us from entering the kingdom. On the day of judgment, some people who view themselves as Christians will realize that they have shut the door to heaven against others and against themselves.

The Pharisees did not purposely stop others from entering the kingdom. They did not intend not to enter the kingdom. In fact, they thought they have the best seats in the kingdom of God. They were under the impression that if any place had a special welcome for them, it would be the kingdom of God. Because of all the Jewish people, they were the most religious.

There is something terrible in thinking that 'I am all right' when, in the eyes of God, I am not. 'I am OK. I have been baptized. I have made my profession of faith. I attend a good church and I do much for the Lord. I teach the Bible. I preach. I seek every opportunity to evangelize. A lot of people know me in the Christian circle. Surely, my name must be in the book of life.' Of course, we don't say these things out loud. But we think of it, and we feel safe spiritually. We are confident that we are among the elect of God.

If anybody had assurance, the Pharisees definitively had it. They were certain that not only will they be in the kingdom of heaven, but they will be very high up in the kingdom for they were the leaders of the religious community. They were the teachers of the word of God. Were they right? You see, what matters is not how we view ourselves. It is how God evaluates us. Just because the Pharisees think that they are going to enter the kingdom of heaven does not mean that they actually will. The same is true for us.

True assurance is not that I assure myself that I am saved. I look at my contribution to the kingdom of God and I feel confident that I have a seat in heaven. That can be a pretty deceiving perception of salvation. It does not work like that. True assurance comes only from God. It is very different from self-confidence. Paul tells us that true assurance is founded on the testimony of the Holy Spirit with our own spirit. Romans 8:16: *The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.* The person who is open to the Spirit of God will receive assurance from God that he is a child of the heavenly Father. That is the only kind of assurance in the Scriptures.

Woe #2

The second woe is found in v. 15, and not in v. 14. Verse 14 is missing in some of the oldest manuscripts. Most theologians think that it has been transposed from Mark 12:40 to this place where it does not belong. So v. 15 is the second woe.

Matthew 23:15. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

What is a proselyte? A proselyte is simply a convert to Judaism. He was a gentile, maybe a Greek or a Roman or whatever else, who embraced the Jewish religion.

So the second woe is concerned with making converts, with missionary work, something that is particularly dear to us isn't it? When you visit churches, you cannot fail to admire the zeal that many show for missionary or evangelistic activities. Many messages, many signs exhort people to be involved in missions of various sorts. The preacher talks about braving the world to share the gospel. He encourages his congregation to go to the jungles of Africa or to the ice of the Arctic to evangelize. When we hear that, we feel good. 'Wow, here is a church that has great vitality! People take very seriously the Lord's command to reach out to the nations.' Because we tend to judge the spiritual vitality of a church by its missionary zeal, don't we? Is there anything wrong with that? Well, according to Jesus' words here, something can be terribly wrong.

We should not make the mistake of thinking that our missionary zeal is equivalent to our zeal for God. There is no equivalence between the two necessarily. The Pharisees could not be beaten for their missionary zeal. They were willing to 'cross land and sea' in order to gain proselytes. This is a hyperbolic expression which shows how much energy they were willing to spend in order to win someone for God. They were satisfied if they travelled the whole world and had only one convert. That was not a waste of effort. Does that language sound familiar to you? How many times have you heard Christians say, 'If all the things we have done for today's evangelistic event resulted in one person being saved, that would have been worth it.' The Pharisees thought the same thing, long before us.

You see, the Lord strikes us at the least expected point, at a place that is often considered as 'sacred.' Who would dare to criticize missionary efforts? 'These efforts are noble and must not be attacked. A church that is not concerned to reach out to the world is a dead church.' Well, it is often behind these spiritual activities that we are able to hide our unspirituality. Of course, to seek for proselytes is not in itself a fault. Jesus tells us to do just that (Matthew 28:19). The problem is not the outward activity. The problem is what we really are inside. Because the real issue is the spirit in which we do these activities. One can become a full-time missionary for the wrong reason. The second woe of Jesus tells us that a person can be consumed with God's mission in the world in a self-centered way, bringing people to his own ideas of religion, not to a personal relationship with God. And the result is disastrous: the converts are so misled that they become 'twice as much children of hell,' i.e., destined for divine judgment. However well intentioned he is in his religious commitment, such a person is basically an enemy of the kingdom of heaven.

This passage should cause us to search and evaluate our hearts. Are we actually doing just what God has called us to do: to live and work as servants and messengers of God, and not as lords of a certain religion and saviors of the world? It should drive us to our knees to pray for purification of zeal, and for a discernment that refuses to confuse activity with authenticity.

Woe #3

Let's move on to the third woe. It extends from v. 16 to v. 22.

Matthew 23:16. Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obligated.'

17 You fools and blind men; which is more important, the gold, or the temple that sanctified the gold?

18 And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering upon it, he is obligated.'

19 You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering?

20 Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it.

21 And he who swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it.

22 And he who swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.

Notice the repeated use of the word 'blind' in this passage. It appears three times. 'Blind guides' (v. 16). 'Blind men' (v. 17 and 19). This draws attention to the lack of spiritual perception of

the Pharisees. How is their blindness being expressed? In their lack of truthfulness. You see, their way of expounding the Scriptures was such that they regarded certain oaths as binding and certain oaths as not binding. It depends on how it is stated.

Here is a case. If a Pharisee says, 'I swear to you by the temple that this is so and so,' that oath is not binding. If he says, 'I swear to you by the altar in the temple of God,' that oath is not binding either. But if he says, 'I swear to you by the gold of the temple,' that oath is binding.

In fact, if you read the Mishnah, the Jewish book of law, you will discover a whole section that deals with the technicalities of oaths. For example, if a Pharisee says to his father, 'I swear by the Torah that I will give you \$500,' he does not have to give him a cent. It is only when he swears by the content of the Torah that he is bound to keep his oath. So if the father was not aware of that, he will never get the \$500. And yet, the Pharisee thinks that he is right because in his mind, it is the other person's responsibility to know that an oath by the Torah is not binding. If you do not know enough of the Pharisaic teaching, it's your problem. It's too bad for you.

On this matter of oath as practiced by the Pharisees, Jesus asks two interesting questions. V. 17: *Which is more important, the gold, or the temple that sanctified the gold?* V. 19: *Which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering?*

The Pharisees distinguished between an oath by the temple and an oath by the gold of the temple. They also distinguished between an oath by the altar and an oath by the gift upon the altar. They made the altar binding, but not the former. In doing so, they gave more importance to the gold and the gift than the temple or the altar.

Jesus questions their discernment, calling them 'blind guides, 'fools,' and 'blind men.' Which is greater? The gold or the temple? The gift or the altar? If the gold had any sacredness, it is because the temple, God's house, makes it so. In the same way, the gift by itself is nothing. It becomes sacred because the altar sanctifies it.

Anyone with a bit of common sense would have a proper conception of the sanctity of an object. He would know that the temple is more sacred, and therefore, greater than anything that is within it, and that the altar is greater and more sacred than the gift that is laid upon it. Therefore it was totally foolish to make oaths by the gold of the temple and gifts dedicated to its service more binding than such as were by the temple itself.

In this woe, Jesus' point is not that the Pharisees simply had matters reversed, but that an oath must in every case be regarded as binding. Their subtle distinctions in swearing were deceiving and showed a total lack of truthfulness. They were merely trying to evade commitments. They wanted the right to change their mind and break their words if it benefited them later. In the Lord's own view, oaths were altogether unnecessary (Matthew 5:34-37). He said to His disciples, 'Don't swear at all. Don't make any oath at all. If you say 'yes,' then it's 'yes.' If you say 'no,' then it's 'no.' If you say you will do a certain task, you will do it. You don't have to take an oath of any sort. It is a matter of truthfulness.'

Woe #4

Let's come to the fourth woe. Verse 23 and 24.

Matthew 23:23. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.
24 You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

The fourth woe focuses on the Pharisees' distorted sense of proportion. They have a meticulous concern for detail which leaves out the most important biblical principles.

Tithing, like the swearing of oaths, is a matter covered by the Jewish law. It was used to keep up the temple and to provide for the priests. According to Leviticus 27:30, 32 and Deuteronomy 14:22-23, tithes were to be paid on the produce of the land (corn, oil, wine and fruits) and on cattle. The Pharisees expanded the tithe to all crops, including garden plants such as mint, dill and cummin. Such plants were grown only in small patches for a family's use and never in large quantities. Imagine such strictness that would tithe the leaves and the stalks of those plants which cost very little! Jesus did not object to that practice as such. 'It doesn't have to be neglected,' He said in v. 23. What He condemns is the unbalanced piety which gives great attention to the relatively insignificant rules but misses out the things that really matter. Everything in the law is important, but some are more important than others. The Pharisees are being criticized for not devoting the same level of care to working out the most important matters of the law as they do in their tithing of herbs.

What are those more important matters in Jesus' mind? Justice, mercy, faith. Justice, mercy, faith. These are the things that the Pharisees should have given priority to. Jesus' statement is very close to Micah 6:8 where the prophet makes true religion as consisting of three elements. *He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to **do justly**, to **love mercy**, and to **walk humbly with your God**?* Justice, mercy, faith. These three matters are at the heart of the OT. In describing this trio of virtues, Jesus was showing that inward righteousness alone gives meaning to ritual observance. Having the right sense of spiritual proportion is necessary in making possible the 'righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees' (Matthew 5:20).