

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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WOE TO YOU ... HYPOCRITES (2)

Matthew 23:13-31

Matthew 23 contains seven denunciations against the Jewish leaders. 'Woe to you,' Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees. We saw in our previous lesson that the expression 'woe to you' is an exceptional cry of grief as well as a threatening complaint. We have already discussed woe #1, #2, #3 and #4. In this lesson, we will look at woe #5, #6, and #7.

Woe #5

This is what Jesus says in woe #5. Matthew 23:25-26.

Matthew 23:25. 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.

The fifth woe deals with another weakness of the Pharisees: their exaggerate concern for outward cleanness. The Pharisees were quite obsessed about the cleanness of utensils in matters of ceremonial purification. At first, it seems that the woe is addressing the strict ritual cleanness practiced by the Pharisees in their use of various cups, vessels and containers. But when we read that the inside is said to be filled with 'extortion and self-indulgence,' it becomes clear that the hygienic cleanness of objects is an analogy for moral cleanness and that the 'inside and outside' of the vessel is a metaphor for the inside and outside of the person.

So what happens to the Pharisee is this. When you look at him, from the outside, he seems to be a very good person. He is very presentable. He looks very spiritual. Remember verse 5. He wears these phylacteries on his forehead and on his arm. And he has very long tassels dangling at the corners of his garment. We are impressed by his appearance.

But what about the heart of that person? Well, it is not good at all. Jesus said that *inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence*. The Greek word for 'extortion' is *harpagē*. It is also translated by the words 'greed' or 'robbery,' and refers to the act of seizing something with force. Put in a simple way, it describes a person who wants to take or keep something that does not belong to him. And very often, that person will find some way to justify it.

We can take king Ahab as an example. Ahab wanted a piece of land owned by a man named Naboth. 'I will buy it from you,' the king said to Naboth, 'or you can exchange it for a better land in my kingdom.' When Naboth declined the offer, Ahab's wife, Jezebel, had Naboth falsely accused of

blasphemy against God and against the king and had him stoned to death by the local authorities. The death of Naboth allowed the king to take the coveted land. This is what being 'full of extortion' means. You take something by force, something that is not yours.

Jesus accused the Pharisees of the same sin. The problem was not the Pharisees' immaculately clean cups and plates. The problem was the way the content, the food and drink, was obtained. They were proud of the beautiful things they had when, in fact, the way they acquired them should have shamed them. But instead of shame, they felt indifference. It does not matter how they got it. It is nobody's business.

The other word is 'self-indulgence (*akrasia*)' which, in Greek, means 'lack of self-control.' This word is used in 1Corinthians 7:5 in relation to sexual desire.

1Corinthians 7:5: Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (akrasia).

Self-indulgence, lack of self control, *akrasia*. Here it is used by Paul in the context of sexual abstinence. It can be applied to many other situations, in the use of our tongue for example. We want people to respect us. And that is normal. We like people to think well of us. Perhaps we want to have a reputation that is better than what we deserve. So we tell stories about us that make us look good. We begin to twist the stories in order to look better than what we really are. And soon our tongue becomes out of control.

The outside is clean; the inside is dirty. It is possible to appear righteous outwardly while in fact that appearance hides an inward uncleanness. It was the outside that concerned the Pharisees, for it was the outside that was seen. So they were careful to wash the outside very well. The inside is not seen by men. There was no incentive for them to pay attention to it. They left the inside dirty. They were full of extortion and self-indulgence. As with the tithing, they put the emphasis in the wrong place.

In Jesus' teaching, it is the heart that we should pay attention to. It is the inside that should be cleaned. Once the inside is clean, then the outside will be clean. V. 26: *First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.* A clean heart will lead to a clean life. This principle is the same that Jesus spoke about in Matthew 15:11. *Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.* It is the inside of a man that determines his behavior. It is the heart that determines what a man does.

Woe #6

Let's now look at woe #6. Matthew 23:27-28.

Matthew 23:27. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 28 So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

In this sixth woe, Jesus compared the Pharisees to 'whitewashed tombs,' tombs that had been painted in white.

In what sense were the Pharisees like tombs painted in white? Every year on the month of Adar, the month before the Passover, the graves were painted with bright white chalk so that people would not defile themselves accidentally. Jewish law said that anyone who touched a dead body became unclean for seven days (Numbers 19:16). Therefore tombs had to be clearly marked to prevent a person from becoming religiously unclean.

There was one particular time during the year when the danger of touching a tomb could be quite problematic. It was during the Passover season. Imagine the disaster for a Jew who cannot participate in the joy of the Passover because he touched a grave. At that time of the year, thousands of pilgrims swarmed over the roads and countryside leading to Jerusalem. One of the preparations made for the Passover celebrations was the whitewashing of the tombs in order to make them clearly visible.

Jesus was saying, 'You see those whitewashed tombs there? Everywhere you go, the tombs are marked out so plainly that you will not touch it accidentally. Even in the dark, you will not step on it by accident because they are so obvious. Now, you are like those whitewashed tombs. The outside is very noticeable. It is very nice, clean, beautifully white, impressive. But look at the inside. What you see is repulsive. It is filled with bones of the dead and all sorts of uncleanness.'

So here the themes of cleanness and of outside/inside continue. The Pharisees, outwardly, appeared righteous to people. They appeared righteous by making broad their phylacteries (v. 5), by lengthening the tassels of their garments (v. 5), by travelling over sea and land to make one convert (v. 15), by paying tithes of all manner of herbs (v. 23), by cleansing the outside of the cup and platter (v. 25)... But in reality, inwardly, they were filled with dirt, with 'hypocrisy and iniquity.' What men see is one thing. What God sees is something else.

This is a dreadful situation. How is it possible that a man comes to the state in which outwardly he looks so good. He has made himself to appear so good to others. And yet, inwardly, he is full of rotteness.

Some of us have gone through the shocking experience in which a person we always thought to be a very fine Christian from the way he conducts himself, or the way he speaks or thinks, and suddenly, one day it is revealed to us that he is not as marvelous as he appears to be. I am thinking of this man who founded a Christian organization. He preached at various evangelical gatherings, expounding the gospel, speaking in pious language, appearing righteous to men. And one day, we had the shock to discover that during all that time, he was living in sin.

This has such a disillusioning effect on us. It shatters us to the core. The whole foundation of our faith trembles when we have an experience like that.

Such was the situation with the Pharisees. While they wanted to appear righteous, in fact they were unrighteous, 'full of dead people's bones.' Notice the notion of death in that sentence. 'Inside of you, there is death,' Jesus told them. This is referring to spiritual death. The Pharisees go through life living acceptably in the eyes of men, but they are spiritually dead to God. Their acts are the acts of a morality made by man, not the acts of true morality as revealed by God in Christ.

In Revelation 3, Jesus speaks about a church which appeared alive but inwardly there was death. Tragically, the church was full of dead people. Only a few were truly alive. This church was the church of Sardis. Let's read Revelation 3:1-5.

*Revelations 3:1. And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works; **you have the name of being alive, and you are dead.** There you have it. They have the name of being alive (white washed on the outside, righteous on the outside), but in reality they are dead.*

Revelation 3:2. Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Notice, the church had works - all sorts of programs, ministries and activities. How could a church be so active with so many ministries and yet be dying?

Revelation 3:3. Remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent. If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. Even though they have received and heard the word of God, some have spiritually fallen asleep.

Revelation 3:4. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy. There were a few faithful believers in the church, those who have not allowed sin to corrupt their lives. They will walk in white with Christ.

Revelation 3:5. He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. Those who are dressed in white clothing, who have not soiled their garments, will not be blotted out of the book of life. This seems to imply that those who walk with soiled garments, those who do not remain faithful to Christ, those who are at the point of dying or have already died, will see their names being erased from the book of life.

Woe #7

We now come to the 7th and last woe. Matthew 23:29-33.

Matthew 23:29. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous,
30 and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'

31 Consequently you bear witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.

32 Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers.

33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell?

What is the end of hypocrisy? What is the end of this whole story? It all ends in hell. Here Jesus says, 'If you live in this hypocrisy, how shall you escape the sentence of hell?' 'You, Pharisees and scribes, belong to the people of God. Not only that, you are the elite of the people of God. How can you escape being condemned to hell?'

The Pharisees probably disregarded Jesus' question. They felt safe. They were after all the religious leaders of the nation. They set the high standard of righteousness in Israel. They kept the law down to the minutest detail. They did not think that Jesus was speaking to them. He was perhaps talking to the people out there who did not know the law. But not to the Pharisees or the scribes. They, of all people, expected to be in heaven.

But it is precisely to them that Jesus said, 'Do you think that your 'belief' in God will save you? Do you think that your righteousness will save you? Do you think that the covenant which God has made with Israel will save you?' And their answer would have been, 'Yes, indeed, we think it will save us.' But the Lord's answer was, 'No, it won't. It won't save you. Why? Because of what is inside of you - what you really are.'

What was wrong with them? They adorn the monuments of the righteous. They built the tombs of the prophets. And they dissociated themselves from the actions of their fathers. 'Some of our fathers,' they admit, 'killed the prophets. But we wouldn't have done that. See, we are building the tombs of the prophets now. We are honoring them.' This was a facade covering an endemic lack of receptivity to the messengers sent to Israel by God. Jesus pointed out that they were no different from their ancestors for they were plotting to kill another messenger from God, the Messiah Himself.

The words of the Lord in Isaiah 29:13 express well the situation: ... *These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.*

'These people, they honor Me with their mouth. But when I look into their hearts, I see that their hearts are far from Me.' When God look into our heart, what does He see? Is my heart near to God? As far as salvation is concerned, that is the question to ask.

So here we see that we can be engaged in God's work, or think ourselves to be engaged in God's work, doing something for the glory of God, in this case building the tombs of the prophets to the glory of God and yet, our heart can be very far from God.