

Jesus' final verdict on the Pharisees

Matthew 23:13-39

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Some animals are incredibly cute on the outside. But if we don't know much about them, we could be setting ourselves up for serious injury or even death if we get too close to them. Take the Pufferfish. Look at that adorable face. But it is the second most poisonous vertebrate on the planet. Their venom kills by paralyzing the diaphragm and has no known antidote.

How about the Slow Loris with its big eyes. They are normally very calm but you wouldn't want to get on their bad side. They can release venom from the side of their elbows which when mixed with their saliva can cause death by anaphylactic shock.

How about the moose? Look at that cute cartoon like grin. But when threatened, they can charge humans with an aggression that has caused many deaths and injuries over the years. The article I learned this from claimed it is more likely to be injured by a moose than a bear.

But surely this little guy is okay. What a cute baby cat. But most big cats would happily eat us for lunch. Lions, tigers, cheetahs and cougars can threaten lone hikers or children.

Then there's probably my favorite on this list. The Cassowary is not very cute but looks somewhat crazy, though beautiful with its colors. Found in the rainforests of Australia and New Guinea, it looks like a flamboyant Ostrich. If disturbed by a human it will become aggressive and territorial. Using its large claws to try to disembowel its victims. Finally, there's the wolverine. He looks a little like a cuddly mini bear. But in reality he's an aggressive weasel with powerful jaws and claws.

An animal's cute or beautiful appearance does not necessarily guarantee a pleasant encounter with them. The same is true with people. Someone can look good or have a good reputation or hold a position of status or power. But that does not guarantee that their interior life is good or their motivations are good.

This can even happen in the lives of religious people. A person can go to church; sing in a choir; serve on a committee; help out in the kitchen; teach a Sunday School class; join the church leadership and even pastor a church yet their heart is far from God. Religious people can be lost and far from God.

We too need to be aware of this possibility in our own lives. We can fall prey to the mistaken belief that as long as we participate in some religious activity, we're right with God. But the Scriptures consistently testify that this is not

what God wants. He desires worshippers whose external actions of worship come from a sincere heart and a devoted life. Jesus echoed God's desire through His criticism of religious leaders in that day. They lived inconsistent lives where the external appearance of righteousness did not match what was in their hearts. Last week we met two groups of religious leaders - the Scribes and Pharisees. If anyone seemed to be "right with God," they would be at the top of the list. But Jesus is about to render His final verdict upon them.

This passage contains some of the harshest words of Jesus found in the Gospels. They might even shock some of us if we have never read them before. But we must remember, they were not delivered in glee or triumphant anger. They were more a lamentation – a sorrowful declaration of truth. They aimed to splash water in the faces of these religious leaders so they would turn to Him here. **Jesus pronounces His verdict on the religious leaders revealing their lostness and need for repentance.** Perhaps part of the struggle with passages like this is we focus so much on God as love, which He is! But God also judges – and will call to account those who reject Him. That's what Jesus does here.

If we will heed His words, we might see some areas where we may be slipping into their way of thinking and our need for repentance. But I pray the spirit will also affirm you for ways in which you live to honor the Lord. So we will examine what Jesus exposes and where these leaders went wrong. I will present these along with an alternative healthy practice. Once we've gone through Jesus' words, I want to give us some time to respond to what He might say during our time together.

Matthew 23:13-39 (ESV) (Page 698 in Bibles) Jesus' talking

¹³ "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. ¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ "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.' ¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸ 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.' ¹⁹ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹ And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. ²² And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

²³ "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe 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. ²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

²⁵ “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. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

²⁷ “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. ²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

²⁹ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous,³⁰ 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.’ ³¹ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. ³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?³⁴ Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, ³⁵ so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. ³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

³⁷ “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! ³⁸ See, your house is left to you desolate. ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Jesus begins His speech with the word “Woe.” We don’t use that word very much unless we’re riding a horse and want it to slow down. But in Israel’s prophetic tradition, a prophet pronounced a woe upon a person or people far from God. It served to warn and mourn. It warned that unless the listener changed, they would fall under some sort of judgment from the living God. But it also mourned by looking ahead to a great sorrow that would come upon listeners who did not repent. So Jesus takes the stance of a prophet here. The religious leaders had many opportunities to respond to His teaching. They have seen His miracles. But collectively, they oppose him and will soon join in the plot against Him.

So Jesus begins with the first woe in verse 13. The Pharisees had rejected Christ and life in the kingdom of heaven as He described it. So if they rejected the messenger from the kingdom of heaven, they certainly weren’t going to open the door for others to enter. This would be especially true in their teaching. They held positions of honor so people listened to their teaching. But their rejection of Christ meant their own teaching would shut the door to Christ’s teaching. In their positions of influence, they would lead people away from the true Christ. When people inquired about Jesus with curiosity or sincere questions, they would direct these inquirers away from Jesus. This shut the door to life in the kingdom

of heaven that God was holding out to His people. **Here he reveals that a lost religious person shuts the door to God's kingdom for other people. But a saved religious person points the way to God's kingdom.**

Which one is true of us? Are our lives a stop sign to the Kingdom of Heaven or a signpost pointing the way to it? Sometimes Christians and Christian leaders can point people to themselves rather than to Christ. I saw this in myself especially when I was brand new out of seminary. I had a seemingly limitless supply of energy, ideas and enthusiasm. Though great gifts, these can blind a person into thinking that he or she is the solution to people's problems. They believe they can come up with the answer or provide the energy or solve the problem so that others can be happy in life. So many self-help books are basically the author's story about what worked for them. Then people try to copy that to see if it will work in their lives. Or in churches, we can read or follow the success stories of other churches. Then we can try to copy that in our context to see if that will work. But though some helpful information may be gleaned, our ultimate need as individuals and a church is Christ himself. The sooner we realize this, the more helpful we can be to others. So our message needs to be "Don't look at me. Look to the one I've found. Look to the Lord and discover Him." If our interest is more in pointing people to Christ rather than gaining recognition for ourselves, this indicates a heart headed in the right direction with Christ.

The second woe is found in verse 15. Most of your Bibles will not have a verse 14 in chapter 23 because it's not found in the earliest manuscripts we have of the New Testament. So in verse 15. Jesus talks about how the Pharisees go to make a proselyte or convert. We talk about evangelism and converting people to Christianity. The Pharisees already did this during Jesus' time. He does not take issue with the practice of proselytizing or making converts. But since the Pharisees would convert people to their ways, that meant they led people away from Christ. They made converts that would literally be going to hell. When Jesus uses the phrase "twice as much a child of hell as yourselves," he may refer to the tendency of some converts to be more zealous than their teachers.

So in today's terms, the lost religious person can make converts to their ways of thinking. But if their way of thinking is not Christ's way, their converts are as lost as the religious person. Instead, we need to make converts of Christ or converts to God's kingdom. **23:15 - Make converts to my way of thinking – Make converts to God's kingdom.**

I remember for a while in my Christian walk, I believed that if someone didn't agree with basically everything I and my close colleagues emphasized, their salvation was in question. I'm certainly not for watering down the Gospel or

anything like that. But sometimes people have a very different lens through which they view the Scriptures. We need to hear them.

A couple of weeks ago I spent some time in Wisconsin on the annual preaching retreat I attend. Our speaker this year was a man named Danny Carroll which is a pretty American sounding name. But Danny was of mixed race. His father was an American and his mother a Guatemalan. So he was half Hispanic half American. He spent 13 years in Guatemala and goes back there regularly to teach. He shared the perspective of a Central American worker where many live in poverty while a few get rich. They read the Scriptures a lot different than middle class North Americans who might never have experienced oppression. He asked the question does capitalism and free market economy contribute to Godliness? He pointed out that we are most likely to justify the economic system where we can live profitable lives. But if we are oppressed, we are more likely to question and oppose a system that benefits the few. That's why the prophets and their condemnation of the religious and royal elite of ancient Israel resonated so much in Latin America especially in the 1970's. They experienced what the ordinary poor Israelite experienced.

So we need to recognize that our way of thinking does not contain all truth or a complete perspective. We need to recognize how prone we are to cluster with those who agree with us and maybe show those who don't. We can even do this within church circles. We hang around with those who agree with our view on the opening chapters of Genesis or the End Times. But when we begin to think like this, we may be more committed to making converts to our way of thinking than converts of Christ.

Jesus moves on to a more extended woe 3 in verses 16-22. He calls the Pharisees blind guides for their teaching about oaths. Apparently people swore oaths before God based on something to do with the temple. But when they didn't want to keep the oaths, they wondered about escape clauses. So a whole section of teaching developed that outlined what made an oath binding or not binding. From Jesus' criticisms, it seems the Pharisees taught that if you swore by the temple, your oath wasn't binding but if you swore by the gold of the temple it was binding. If you swore by the altar, your oath wasn't as binding as if you swore by the gift on the altar. Jesus says, "Stop splitting hairs about which oaths are binding." Whatever you swear by, it all belongs to God. So simply keep your word before God.

So the Lost Religious Person looks for technicalities by which he/she can disregard obedience to God. But the saved religious person walks in constant accountability before God. **(23:16-22 - Look for ways to escape obedience or**

judgment - Walk in constant accountability to God). They aren't concerned about the details of an oath. They are most concerned about an honest walk before God.

We can act like the Pharisees in our vows. Maybe we make a vow to the Lord that we're going to devote 1 hour to prayer every evening. But then that evening comes along and there's something really good on TV or there's some interesting stuff on Facebook. We say to ourselves, "I didn't mean 1 hour every evening. I meant 1 hour when I had a free evening." We can begin to live lives that look for ways we can ignore God's Word. But instead of trying to get away with things, we need to get to know God. Getting to know Him is actually our most desperate need.

Woe #4 points to something that always stuck me as crazy. In verse 23, Jesus points out that the Pharisees spend time tithing their spices – mint, dill and cumin. So they apparently spent time laying out their spices and would maybe measure out 10 equal parts. Then they would gather up 1/10th to give to the temple. Now that is detailed obedience to God's law to bring forth a tenth of the first fruit of your crops. But there was just one problem. They neglected those major areas of justice, mercy and faithfulness to God.

Last week we thought about truly great people in our lives. If you think about the truly great people in your life, would any of them be known for tithing their spices? Most probably had something to do with mercy towards you or justice or faithfulness to God.

We could summarize it like this. **Lost religious people major on the minors. Saved religious people major on the majors of mercy, justice and faithfulness.** Lost religious people pour way too much energy into trivial or less important matters of the faith. Saved religious people continually grow in showing mercy, doing justice and walking faithfully before God.

One minor area might be appropriate dress at a Sunday morning service. People have different opinions about this. Certainly, we don't want to dress in a way that distracts or is immodest. But might there be times when we are to concerned about how someone else dresses that we forget the weightier matters?

I was in a church where a person believed that any man serving communion had to wear a suit – so a tie and a jacket. There was one younger guy who wore only a shirt and tie while he served communion. (And he had pants on also). After every communion service, this concerned person would confront this young guy about why he didn't wear a jacket. Now was that the most important thing? Did that rank right up there on God's agenda compared to showing

mercy to others; seeking justice for the oppressed and walking faithfully with God? Or did it damage the fellowship and relationship between the two. In fact, the young guy was so discouraged, he stepped back from serving communion because of this pressure. Sometimes we can major on minors. The Pharisees did this to the own detriment of their walk with God.

Woe #5 shows up in the dish washing world. Apparently, when the Pharisees washed cups and plates, they put more emphasis on the outside of the cup and plate looking clean than if they actually got the inside clean. Then if people came to their house and saw their cups and plates from the outside, they would conclude – their plates are clean. They are ritually pure. But apparently they might not pay as much attention to the inside where they drink went or the food touched.

Then Jesus applies this to their lives. They were more concerned about their external reputation than their internal character. Or in Jesus' words, they clean the outside of the cup and plate but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. **So the lost religious person is more concerned about their reputation than character. The saved religious person is more concerned about their character than their reputation.**

This kind of disjointedness can happen in churches all the time. People come to church. They attend a worship service and others see them there. They may even hold a ministry position. They seem to love God and want to follow His way. But at home it's totally different. Or at work, or at school no one would even dream they were a Christian. They live double lives, maybe without even knowing it.

Woe 6 continues on the theme of inconsistency between external appearance and internal reality. **23:27-28 - External image does not match internal heart – Most concerned about the heart from which flows the image.** This might be one of Jesus' most famous criticisms. Verse 27: *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.* Now what is this all about? Well people apparently painted or whitewashed their tombs to make them identifiable. This was especially important during Passover because Jerusalem was crowded with pilgrims from around the world. If they accidentally touched a tomb containing someone's remains they became ritually unclean. They couldn't go to the temple. So the whitewashed tomb warned them of this. But apparently, some did more than whitewash. They began to adorn

the tombs or make them look beautiful in some way. Yet that didn't change the fact that inside the tomb there was a dead body.

Jesus says the religious leaders gave the appearance of avoiding unrighteousness but inwardly they were unrighteous. They did not have transformed hearts by responding to Jesus. The lost religious person is like the cute animal who looks attractive on the outside. But the potential for death lurks inside.

The final woe concerns the religious leader's attitude toward the prophets of old. Archaeology from that time reveals the Jews began building elaborate memorials especially to famous prophets from the past. Apparently, the religious leaders approved of these building projects. They also claimed had they been leaders at that time, they would not have participated in the killing of the prophets. But Jesus picks up on this claim. Do their actions indicate they accept God's prophets? They rejected the prophet John the Baptist. They were plotting to kill God's ultimate prophet who stood before them. So Jesus rejects their claim.

Maybe we can apply this to our modern context by saying that **lost religious people shut down other righteous voices but saved religious people listen to other righteous voices**. We can fall into this pattern if we get stuck on listening to only one preacher – or only to those we completely agree with. There are other Christian traditions that can teach us about Christ. I experienced this going to EP Wahl lectures in March. Dr. Michael Gorman from St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore spoke about Romans. He said a fair amount I disagreed with. Yet he challenged me to think about Romans in ways I hadn't thought of before. We can grow in knowing God when we listen to the voices of others committed Christians.

So Jesus pronounces these 7 woes on the Pharisees. We might think, "Well maybe the Pharisees should work on this." But what does Jesus say in verse 33? "You serpents. You brood of vipers. How are you to escape being sentenced to hell?" These are not minor character issues. Jesus declares they need a major heart transplant or they will be lost. They were so self-deceived and trusted so much in their system that they failed to realize they were far from God. If we carry on with any of these in our lives, despite our religious activity, we may not be close to the Lord.

Jesus concludes by prophesying about how they will treat the prophets or messengers of God. They will kill and crucify them like they would him in a few days. They will flog them in the synagogues and pursue them from town to town like they would with the Apostle Paul. They would join their forefathers in shedding the blood of God's messengers.

Then Jesus weeps over Jerusalem, the city where many prophets were killed throughout its history. He weeps over it because He sees ahead to what's coming including the destruction of the temple that they so cherish. We'll get more into that in the weeks to come.

But today, I want to invite us to conclude by pondering this statement.

Since some religious people are lost, we must submit to Jesus' examination and repent where needed. If there is anything God has revealed in our lives that imitates these Pharisees, then we need to turn away from that. We need to ask the Lord to change our heart. I pray that you are also encouraged to see that you're already living like a saved religious person because you're concerned about your sin and you desire to stay close to God continue on the path. Maybe God has revealed to you that you have been practicing religion with no heart for him. Will you confess that and acknowledge your need for Christ now? Let us come to Him in prayer now.