Just Jesus Stories – The Seven Woes

1. As we mentioned last week, Jesus was not a cartoon. That said, any reading of the Gospels will show that he was usually gentle, kind, and willing to help. Still, some things upset him. Sometimes he had to go away to the wilderness for awhile – a few times with friends but most often alone.

2. When we come upon one of the hard sayings of Jesus, as we did last week and three weeks ago, it should make us pay attention. It may look like he is acting out of character and that is our clue that something else is going on. We come upon one of these passages in Matthew 23, the longest, sustained broadside against any group of people in the Gospels.

3. Jesus decides it is time to give the Pharisees one more chance to get God right and get true religion right before He, Jesus, faces the cross. There is a lot of good in the everyday Pharisee, but their leaders are leading them the wrong way. Many of us were told how to serve or please God only to find out that that was not what the scripture said. As CS Lewis told us, “going backward” is exactly the right thing to do if you find you have been going the wrong way.

4. Matthew 23 comes after Jesus told the Pharisees that the greatest command was to love God and to love each other (Matthew 22:34-40). While good works were a big part of Pharisaical life, they were not sourced in love but in obligation. They were acts of obedience done in order to please God, but they were not done in love, not done because of the preciousness of others, and were not done sacrificially.

5. Matthew 23:1-7. We have seen this at work over the last two years as rules for the rest of us are ignored by Those Who Matter…and who made the rules in the first place (masks, eating out, hair salons, Super Bowl). It’s not a good look.

6. It also isn’t a good look when those who lead churches use their positions and power to sexually harass members and staff, or who use the money to enrich their own lives – and we are seeing more and more ministers and staff resigning in shame in the last few years.

7. God calls us to serve without the desire to be seen or recognized. That is hard to do but that is why public ministry is the only job in the whole of scripture that has a warning label on it written by the brother of Jesus (James 3:1). Instead, Matthew 23:8-11.

8. Here, Jesus begins a series of 7 woes. It seems out of character and is certainly not the kind of teaching we are used to from Jesus…and that makes it all the more necessary to pay attention.

9. Matthew 23:13. The Pharisees had a lot of rules about cleanliness, worship, order, and what to believe. It seemed to keep growing and the rules became unbearable. I cannot help but think of Jesus' brother, James, in Acts 15 when churches came to Jerusalem so that the elders there could decide on a question that was dividing the people. James wrote "it seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to make things harder than they need to be."

10. Matthew 23:15. The second woe – they worked very, very hard to convert someone to their sect but, by doing so, they pulled them away from God. I have attended too many funerals where the person was lauded for their lifetime dedication to "the church" but no mention of Christlikeness or humble, sacrificial service. Are we serving our branch of the church or are we serving Jesus? There IS a difference.

11. Matthew 23:16-22. This one is strange to us but it is an example of splitting hairs so that we can release ourselves from an obligation. When people leave a church, if they leave to the right, we are upset. If they leave to the left, we say they weren't really faithful. We find a way to make our failures a sign of faithfulness. (the faithful remnant…people just don't want to listen to truth…) Jesus is saying that what we say matters and our obligations don't go away because we phrased things cleverly.

12. Matthew 23:23-24. This goes with our lesson last week. DO the little things. DO the tedious things but do NOT neglect the bigger things. Again, "faithful to the church" is not the same as "faithful to God." And the most important matters of the law are NOT what we fight about: worship, creeds, etc. God says what is important is justice, mercy and faithfulness.

13. Matthew 23:25-26. As last week – clean yourself inside first. Don't worry about what others are seeing or saying about you. That is all outside – work on the inside. (and we are not to judge the outside anyway)

14. Matthew 23:27-28. Same as above.

15. Matthew 23:29-30 and following. Jesus begins the transition from the woes to what will be the consequences of the Pharisees (and larger community's) failure to be righteous: their whole system and society will vanish forever. But first…

16. He warns them against chronological arrogance. We see a lot of that today when people say that they would have had their exact same ideas about race, justice, right and wrong, what words to use, what words can't be used and more…even if they lived 100 years ago or more. No…that is unlikely. We are ALL children of our culture. We are ALL blind to what our people are blind to. We will ALL of us give our grandchildren something to be ashamed of…

17. Because that is the way it is supposed to be! As we draw nearer to God, we will drop more and more of the evil thoughts and actions that we once thought were good and fine – normal, even. We WANT our greatgrandchildren to be better than us! So we go as far as we can toward Jesus and then trust them to go even further.

18. For the end of the woes is not salvation, but obliteration. But the people of Jesus will continue to give, love and serve. We can escape the woes and their consequences by taking up the image of Jesus and living out what he said was of most importance: love of God, love of each other, justice, mercy and faithfulness.