

Eight Woes

Matthew 23:13-36

As promised last week, we come this afternoon to a series of eight woes, eight pronouncements of the judgment of condemnation, all beginning with the words, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees.” With all humility, I have to admit that I miscounted them last week as I mentioned only seven, but there are actually eight. And as we study them today, let me note three things by way of introduction. First, please remember the broader context of last week’s sermon, identifying the idolatry of self, namely the evil of self-promotion, a temptation which I believe affects all of us to one degree or another and underlies all the things that bring about these eight woes. Thus we read the conclusion to that broader context,

v.11-12

Second, I’m not interested in merely pronouncing judgment upon the scribes and Pharisees, nor simply studying their sin, but rather to see how we, too, are tempted by the very same sins as theirs. There is no room to respond to this chapter with the thought “I’m sure glad I’m not like those Pharisees!”

And third, I want this focus to be evident as we go through these eight woes—an emphasis upon the positive alternative. So as we study these judgments of woe, I want to draw our attention back to the blessing promised to those who, by God’s grace, resist these awful temptations. Thus, as the children of God, we aspire to the goal which is defined by the opposite of these things. In other words, these eight woes, by way of contrast, demonstrate to us to the glory of what it means to conformed to the image of Christ. So...number 1.

I. WOE TO THOSE WHO BECOME A HINDRANCE TO OTHERS WITH REGARD TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

v.13

Here is the great danger of hypocrisy, replacing true devotion and service to God with an outward appearance—you give others the impression that that is all that is necessary. The hypocrites, under Jesus’ condemnation here, are not true believers. They are not children of God. They do not love God nor serve with their whole heart. They just pretend. Their religion is a pretense. But they invite others to join them. They evangelize. They invite. They attract followers. And some of them are very good at that, winsome and engaging, personable and maybe even compassionate.

But such hypocrisy as we find in the scribes and Pharisees can only invite others to join in the same hypocrisy. There is nothing better offered, nothing better to achieve. So if that is your religion, merely an outward show of hypocritical devotion to God, then all you will succeed in doing is “shutting up the kingdom of heaven” to your followers! It is a grievous condemnation. If your hypocrisy renders you outside the kingdom, as it rightly does, then you can offer no hope, no life, to those who follow you.

In other words, Jesus is identifying another religion, a false religion. Ultimately, hypocrisy is not merely a stain upon Christian faith and life, it is the very denial of it! The hypocrite in Jesus’ view here is not a Christian needing correction, but an unbeliever kept from the kingdom of God by the practical evidence of unbelief.

v.13

Then, second,

II. WOE TO THOSE WHO HIDE THEIR EVIL BEHIND A PRETENSE OF RELIGIOUS RITUALS.

Now, all of these are related and even interconnected, some

more closely than others, but this distinctive judgment is pronounced upon those who rely upon rituals, and prayer is mentioned here. Long prayers, actually, is how Jesus puts. It is the hypocrisy of those who think that their prayers will be heard because of their many words, that that deeply religious practice of prayer, or speaking words, is what true religion is all about.

I speak somewhat often of my upbringing as a child in the Episcopal church, and it was certainly there where I developed my disdain for this sort of hypocrisy. I went to church every week, I got medals and awards for perfect attendance at Sunday School, year after year. I knew the liturgy by heart, saying the same words with the congregation together every Sunday, week after week, year after year. And several years after I became a Christian, I went back and studied those words found in the Book of Common Prayer only to realize that the words themselves were actually quite good, expressing sound, biblical, orthodox Christian faith and doctrine. But reading those words in a worship service wasn't enough. A pretense of praying, especially praying which Jesus implies is for show, a long prayer, is not enough. Even the right words, well ordered and prescribed, were not enough, not enough to be saved. Not enough to go to heaven.

Woe to those who hide behind a pretense of religious rituals, especially when that pretense of religious ritual is intended to hide evil! And Jesus mentions a particularly heinous form of evil, "you devour widows' houses." Widows represent all who are in need of safety and protection, the most vulnerable of all. And James goes so far as to define true religion and true faith with these words,

James 1:27 "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

It's an Old Testament declaration as well,

Is. 1:15 "When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. 16 "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, 17 Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow."

Woe to you who cause harm to those you are obliged to protect and defend. Because of that harm you cause especially to those who are vulnerable, "you will receive greater condemnation." How heinous it is to abuse any spiritual power or authority to cause harm, all the while making "long prayers" for a show of religious rituals. Or as Jesus expresses it,

Mat. 18:6 "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea."

To the contrary, and to be positive, recognize just how high a priority it is to honor those who are vulnerable, to care for those who are in need, in personal, practical ways, rather than offering mere empty words.

The third woe is to,

III. THOSE WHO LEAD ASTRAY THE ONES WHOM THEY PRETEND TO SERVE.

This is related to the first one, but even more severe here—severe in the offense and severe in the judgment.

v.15

Not only do "you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men,"

now Jesus says, “you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.” Even the reading of those words should make you shudder, warning of the grave danger of attracting others to join you in your hypocrisy. This is not pleasant. These words are not gentle. They are grave, forthright, and severe. But they are true.

Remember the root cause of this hypocrisy, the idolatry of self. The evil of self-promotion, self-advancement, even self-exaltation. And as easy as it might be to identify what can be labelled the low hanging fruit, as easy as it might be to point fingers to the false teachers and false prophets on the television or on the internet, we need to realize just how important a task it is for the church not to be guilty of ever leading one astray by substituting outward form for true faith and devotion to God. How useful a warning it is for us, we who rightly give attention to the propriety of our outward forms, especially our worship and our liturgy, how important it is that even those outward forms, as good and appropriate as they might be, how important it is that those outward forms not lead anyone astray by thinking that all you need is that outward form.

Then, fourth out of eight,

IV. WOE TO THOSE WHO REMOVE GOD AND HIS GLORY FROM THEIR RELIGIOUS DEVOTION.

This one is a little different, and there are more verses of explanation.

v.16-22

Many people express religious devotion by swearing in heaven’s name, refusing to identify and name God. Or they swear in the name of the earth. They swear on their mother’s grave, or on their mother’s Bible, as the saying goes, but Jesus emphasizes the grave danger of leaving God himself out of that

equation.

It begins with careless words, but those words come to express the carelessness of the heart. In the hypocrisy of outward form, some people will swear by the temple, or they swear by the gold of the temple, meaning the make reference in their religious devotion to buildings, even icons, statutes. Maybe it’s an ornate cathedral, or just the modern and extravagant building of a mega-church. The point is that these hypocrites practice religious devotion to God, utilizing those empty symbols of this world and the riches of this world. But there is nothing said about God, no devotion given to the true and living God. That’s the hypocrisy. That’s where the judgement comes from. Religious worship and devotion without God himself as the ultimate reference point and object of worship.

Actually, Jesus is saying that those who exercise this sort of empty religious devotion are nonetheless bringing judgment upon themselves. Because, actually,

v.20 “...he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. 21 He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. 22 And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it.”

Then verses 23-24, which perhaps form the climax of this series of eight woes, for now the expression of sinful hypocrisy is made quite specific and the cause for judgment very clear.

v.23-24

V. WOE TO THOSE WHO NEGLECT THE WEIGHTIER MATTERS OF THE LAW.

The scribes and Pharisees tithed, and tithing is good. They were conscientious in it, tithing of mint and anise and cummin. There is a high level of faithfulness expressed in that, and

diligence. They were doing a good thing. But this perhaps is the danger to which we can be most vulnerable. It is the danger of doing the right things, even in the right way, the danger of obeying the precepts of God's law carefully and earnestly, outwardly, but missing "the weightier matters of the law."

I'm not referring here to the common distinction between the spirit and the letter of the law, because I think that is a very dangerous distinction to emphasize, and not the focus here, as if the our obligation to some so-called spirit of the law might actually free us or release us from some conflicting understanding of the letter of the law. Rather, the problem here, the hypocrisy here, is that great danger of thinking that the law only refers to outward actions or words. Deeds, works, activity, or anything of that sort. The law does refer to those things, the law does define outward deeds and activity. But the law also defines the attitude and the commitment of the heart. It is not merely the spirit of the law that addresses the heart—it is the law itself.

So what does the law of God require of you? Well, tithing? Yes, yes it does, I believe. But even more weighty than that, the law requires "justice and mercy and faith."

Micah 6:6 "With what shall I come before the LORD, And bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, With calves a year old? 7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, Ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8 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?"

What does God require of you? Sacrifices? Yes. In the Old Covenant, animal sacrifices. But that is not what is good, what is best. God requires not just the prescribed sacrifices of the law,

he requires the devotion of your heart: "And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?"

This is such a frequent refrain in the Scripture. For example, as I read earlier,

Is. 1:15 "When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. 16 "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, 17 Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow."

Hos. 6:6 "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, And the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings."

David understands this well, for as he confesses his sin he declares,

Ps. 51:15 "O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise. 16 For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart — These, O God, You will not despise."

Woe to those who neglect the weightier matters of the law, the matters of the heart. Woe to those whose law-keeping is merely external, whose heart is immune from the influence of God's law. It is a law that requires of us humility. It is a law that requires of us that we love mercy, we love to show mercy and to show grace. It is a law that loves justice—that which is right and just. Without those things, you cannot claim to be a law-keeper, you cannot claim to be of God. Without those things, you are a hypocrite.

It's not that the so-called letter of the law can be dismissed, for

Jesus says of that, “These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.” It’s not the letter of the law versus the spirit of the law. It’s not a matter of the heart verses a matter of external duty. It is both/and. “These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.” And the concluding judgement of God is quite simple,

v.24

Such a great analogy, such an easy-to-understand rebuke. A gnat is so very small, and too often we, too, can be tempted along the lines of this hypocrisy, to focus on small things, gnats. And we work hard to strain them out. And that’s not necessarily wrong, for God calls us to be diligent. But what is wrong, is to strain out that gnat and ignore the camel. Justice and mercy and faith are the weightier matters, and we dare never ignore them, lest we be guilty of “straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel.” To love mercy and walk humbly with your God is the weightier matter of the law, and woe to those who strain out gnats while nurturing a deep-seated pride in their hearts.

Be careful, beware this danger, that as you seek to serve and honor the Lord, do not neglect “the weightier matters of the law.” Number 6, and 6 and 7 are pretty closely related.

VI. WOE TO THOSE WHO BELIEVE THAT THE OUTWARD APPEARANCE OF GODLINESS IS SUFFICIENT.

As I said at the outset, these eight woes do overlap, so I will try to emphasize what is new and distinct here. Jesus’ words are unmistakable.

v.25-26

Surely there remains today people, religious people, outwardly religious people, who think, that the outward appearance is sufficient. They look good. They dress good. They do good.

They reward good. Outward appearances of good, outward appearances of godliness.

This is perhaps the most straightforward example and definition of hypocrisy. It’s enough to be godly only in appearance. So you can preach the gospel for decades and gain much renown, yet indulge in an adulterous affair for years, hiding the sin from the view of all. Or worse, not merely an affair, but sexual violence and abuse, even abuse of children, and there are examples abundant in this age in which we live, as there have been in every age. Jesus identifies extortion and self-indulgence. You can pick any number of other examples. And they are all horrific. Horrific evil perpetrated by people who give every outward appearance of godliness. Woe to those who think that is sufficient. They fail to realize that true godliness in outward appearance is that which comes out of the heart in the first place. So,

v.26 “Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.”

Very much related to that,

v.27-28

Here my emphasis is the pronouncement of judgement and woe to,

VII. THOSE WHO USE THE APPEARANCE OF OUTWARD BEAUTY TO COVER UP THE UGLINESS OF THEIR SIN.

It’s perhaps a step or two deeper into the quagmire of hypocrisy. It is not only that outward appearances are insufficient, but the further danger of using that outward appearance to cover up sin. “You are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.”

Whitewashed tombs, all clean and sparkling in appearance. But nothing but death inside. Nothing but death, “dead men’s bones.” There may be an outward appearance of righteousness, “but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

It is easy to point fingers. It is easy to find examples, and I’m not going to spend time to illustrate this point. Rather, even in the form of an extreme warning, let this declaration be an edifying challenge and encouragement to be sure that remain free from the least little influence of this hypocrisy. Let this condemnation upon the unbeliever scribes and Pharisees be a helpful and edifying challenge that you will seek to avoid this danger with all of your effort and energy. Always be on guard, to guard your heart, that nothing in your outward appearance of righteousness would be used cover up the ugliness of any sin, whether it is the sin of jealousy, or bitterness, or impurity, or greed, or selfishness, or pride. Or anything else that might be a temptation to your heart. Woe to those who use the appearance of outward beauty to cover up the ugliness of their sin.

Then, finally,

**VIII.WOE TO THOSE WHO ARE ATTRACTED TO THE
HONOR OF HISTORICAL MEN WHILE BEARING THE
GUILT OF THEIR OWN WICKEDNESS.**

v.29-36

Beware a love of the good old days, whether those are the days of the Reformation or the days of your childhood or a previous generation. Beware of honoring “the monuments of the righteous” while failing to recognize that you are afflicted with sin as well, and that but by the grace of God, you, too, “are sons of those who murdered the prophets.” You are no different. You are no more righteous in yourself.

As I’ve said before, these are words of condemnation to the ungodly, to unbelievers. These are words of judgment to those whose hypocrisy is so great that they cannot and will not acknowledge their sin, so Jesus calls them “serpents, brood of vipers!” And he says to them, “How can you escape the condemnation of hell?” Surely these words are severe, and these judgment will be inflicted by Jesus.

v.36

But even with the promise and hope of the gospel, that, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus,” let the seriousness of these warnings be an edifying reminder to be rid of all measure of such hypocrisy in your life. And let, then, your love and devotion to God be expressed earnestly and sincerely, with the whole of your heart. For “this is the first and great commandment,”

Matt. 22:37 “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”