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THE GOSPEL OF JESUS

SHUTTING UP THE KINGDOM

MATTHEW 23:13-39

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Chapter 23 – The harshest words ever spoken by Jesus
 - 1. So harsh, in fact, that some theologians claim Jesus never said them
 - 2. They claim it's too out of character for Him. In this study we will see why these scathing condemnations perfectly align with who Jesus is.
 - a) In fact, anything less would have been a contradiction of His character
- B. It is a painful chapter that must be applied correctly
 - 1. Without the full context of Jesus' ministry and an understanding of His audience we can develop a false impression of who Jesus is
 - 2. These are His closing arguments against the Jewish leaders. His final sermon. And it deals with the single greatest danger to the church and its mission
 - a) What do you think the greatest danger is to the church's mission? Is it Hollywood? Overly sexualized culture? Substance abuse? A particular political party and their policies? The media? Foreign governments?
 - b) The single greatest danger to church's mission are men and women who have a form a godliness but deny His power
 - c) Those who practice, as William Barclay puts it, theatrical goodness – those who parade around with an outward goodness but with hidden evil agendas
 - d) Those who peddle the gospel of Jesus Christ for their own personal gain – pretending to care for others but really only caring about themselves
 - (1) These people come in all shapes and sizes – but their motives are the same – exploit the deep spiritual need the exists in all of us for their own personal gain – to use people to fulfill their own fleshly desires
- C. The first 12 verses were a warning to Jesus' disciples and the crowds about the Jewish leaders
 - 1. Do what they say, not what they do
 - 2. Three indictments – they place burdens on others but are unwilling to lift a finger to help, they are more concerned about impressing others that they are about pleasing God, do what they do for appreciation and not out of appreciation
 - 3. Now Jesus turns His attention to the very men that He was warning the crowds about

Matt 13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."

II. THEY SHUT UP THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

- A. Jesus pronounces a series of woes against the scribes and Pharisees
1. Just like in the sermon on the mount - Jesus uses Old Testament vernacular
 2. Blessed are the poor and spirit, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – pronouncing a blessing
 3. Woe was a curse in the Old Testament – Isaiah - Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil – **Eze 13:3 Thus says the Lord God: “Woe to the foolish prophets, who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!**
 - a) It wasn’t wishing bad on someone else – it was a proclamation of certain judgement
 4. But the word itself is painful cry of the heart – the Lord finds no pleasure in this – throughout His condemnation there is a sense of sorrow and broken heartedness that culminates at the end of this chapter
 - a) **Matt 23:37 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! 38 See! Your house is left to you desolate; 39 for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’ ”**
- B. The first woe reveals to us the source of Jesus’ righteous anger against these Jewish leaders
1. The core of the issue. The Pharisees stood in the way of the lifesaving message of the gospel. What Jesus hates is only a reflection of what He loves, and He loves to rescue people out of their sin and bring them into the family of God
 2. And these religious leaders not only rejected the message, would not enter in themselves, but they shut the door for others to come in as well
 3. That is what we have to be careful of. As born again believers, as children of God, we are loved and accepted by God through His Son Jesus. We are citizens of heaven. But pharisaical mindsets and behaviors can creep into our lives – instead of preparing a way for Jesus we can stand in the way
 - a) Instead of ambassadors we can start looking more like bouncers
- C. What made the Pharisees dangerous was not their sinfulness, we are all sinful, it was their sinfulness shrouded in spirituality
1. They were the authority on God’s law, experts in the scriptures, wielding their God given authority to interpret the scriptures – if anyone should have been making a way for Jesus it should have been them!
 - a) But instead of making a way for men to enter into the Kingdom of God, they were shutting them out
 2. Contrast them with John the Baptist’s ministry – **Matt 3:1 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2 and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” 3 For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.’ ” 4 Now John himself was clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him 6 and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.**

3. Look who shows up – ***Matt 3:7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “Brood (generation) of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, 9 and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 10 And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”***
 - a) What a stunning standoff this would have been – the Pharisees and Sadducees in their robes and fine linen, their long tassels, with their giant phylacteries tied around their heads and wrists and then John – looking and smelling like a man who lived the wilderness – if that is all you had to go off of, who would you say is a man of God. Who would you have listened to?
 - b) That is the problem with making judgements based on outward appearance – man looks at the outward appearance, the Lord looks at the heart

III. THEATRICAL GOODNESS

Matt 23:14 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.

- A. How did the Pharisees shut the door to the Kingdom of Heaven? How can what we learn from Jesus be both a warning and an encouragement to us as we carry on His mission of redemption in this world?
 1. There is that word again – hypocrites – they practiced theatrical goodness – on one hand they are making long prayers in public but behind closed doors they were devouring widows' houses
- B. When the Pharisees saw the vulnerable, they saw an opportunity for exploitation
 1. Convincing widows, in a time of the bereavement, to sign over their deeds to them in their wills or even sign the deeds over while they were still living
 - a) The worst part about it, they would claim it was God's will – it was a righteous act and if they didn't do it they would be sinning against God
 2. This kind of thing is so widespread today – a popular evangelist was exposed for targeted mailings that went to senior living facilities - in his solicitation letter the evangelist warned the senior citizens that if they neglected to pay attention to what God was saying, then Satan would take advantage and hit them with “bad things” and they would “wish they had never been born.” On the other hand, the evangelist stated, through the gift of prophecy he had been told that recipients could expect creative miracles: things seemingly dead in their body, their spirit, their mind, and their finances would come alive again.
 - a) Two-fold impact on the church – the obvious is the harm done to the victims, but the secondary impact is the message this sends to the world when these men are exposed

- b) We've seen that in the news with both a celebrity pastor and a well-respected Christian apologist – using their position and influence to exploit others
- C. How are we to be different?
 - 1. Special care and concern for the orphan and the widow is seen throughout the Old Testament and New
 - 2. Psalm 146 The Lord watches over the stranger, He relieves the fatherless and the widow – the vulnerable in the population
 - a) Those without care and protection.
 - 3. A true ambassador of Christ, one who makes a way for Jesus provides extra care and compassion to the most vulnerable of our population – a voice to the voiceless – ***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.***

15 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

IV. MULTIPLICATION

- A. The great commission is all about multiplication – we are gathered today because men and women in the early church embraced their calling of spreading the gospel
 - 1. Missionaries willing to travel the world to spread the message of God's grace and salvation through faith in His Son Jesus Christ
 - 2. The Pharisees were pretty good at evangelism too. A proselyte was a gentile convert. A non-Jew who had converted to Judaism. Who had gone through all the ceremonial rituals and cleansings to become a Jew.
 - 3. And the Pharisees would travel the world over to win just one convert. The problem wasn't the effort they were putting in to make a single disciple – Jesus celebrates going after the one – the problem was they were making disciples of themselves
 - a) And if you're a son of hell, what is your disciple going to be? Jesus says twice a son of hell as you are.
- B. The pharisaical heart is more concerned about making personal followers than followers of Jesus
 - 1. Warning to pastors today who are more concerned about building their kingdoms than building the Kingdom of God
 - 2. Not just pastors but it is warning to anyone who is comfortable with people following them and not following Jesus.
 - 3. We see this in Acts 14 after God healed a man through the apostle Paul. The crowds started shouting “the gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” They called Barnabus Zeus and they called Paul Hermes. Their priest brought oxen to sacrifice to them.

4. ***Acts 14:14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out 15 and saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them***
 - a) Even after that they could scarcely keep the people from worshiping them because human nature would rather worship the created and not the creator
 - b) Not enough to simply ignore the praise, we must actively discourage it.
- C. Refreshing to hear the news of a popular pastor’s Sunday morning livestream
 1. They had noticed that during the pandemic their Sunday morning livestream viewership had skyrocketed on public platforms – through their own research they discovered that many of these new viewers were forgoing their local church’s livestreams to watch his – so he pulled their livestream off these public platforms and replaced it with a message to support their local churches
 2. That kind of big picture Kingdom mindedness is unusual as men and women try to construct their own kingdoms.

16 “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.’ 17 Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? 18 And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.’ 19 Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? 20 Therefore 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.

V. JUSTIFICATION FOR DISHONESTY

- A. Trust is a hard thing to build and an easy thing to lose
 1. If someone lies to you it becomes very difficult to trust them in the future. The Pharisees were so dishonest with one another and with others that their word didn’t mean anything
 2. So they would have to make vows with one another – I swear by the temple that I will pay this debt or I swear by this altar to try to give some credibility to their promise
 - a) We did the same thing as children – I swear on the grave of my grandmother or on my mom’s life
- B. The only people who have to do that are people who have been caught in their lies. Whose word is no longer enough

1. **Matt 5:33 “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’ 34 But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; 35 nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.**
 2. The Pharisees had created an entire system around justifying their dishonesty
 - a) I vow by the temple that I will pay you this much for your labor – well you should have known that it is the gold in the temple that really matters
 - b) I vow to you by this altar that I will give you this animal in trade – you should have known it is not the altar that is important but the gift or the sacrifice on the altar
- C. You are blind guides
1. **Rom 2:17 Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, 18 and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, 19 and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law. 21 You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? 22 You who say, “Do not commit adultery,” do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? 24 For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,” as it is written**
 2. God hates lying and they found a way to put a spiritual spin on their dishonesty and in so doing, they blasphemed the name of God amongst the Gentiles

Matt 23:23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. 24 Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! 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. 27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. 28 Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. 29 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 30 and say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’ 31 “Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers’ guilt. 33 Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? 34 Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, 35 that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.