

“Self-Exalting Hypocrisy”
Matthew 23:13-39
September 29, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

The first word of our text ties this passage to the previous one by way of contrast. **“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!** In contrast to those who are exalted by God after humbling themselves, the scribes and Pharisees will be humbled because they have exalted themselves through their hypocrisy. We should probably start by agreeing on a definition of hypocrisy. It is sometimes thought to be when a person says one thing and does another. That doesn’t really get at the heart of hypocrisy. A hypocrite is really someone who presents one way when the reality is something different.

Some examples will help. Let me give three, moving from less to more serious. You call your friend on the phone and it is obvious from his groggy voice that you caught him sleeping. “Did I wake you up,” you ask. “Oh no, I’m just tired.” Your friend wants to present himself as strong and always awake and productive, when the reality is somewhat different. Second, a wife speaks to her husband about not feeling like he listens to her, and he defends himself, by which he essentially is demonstrating the truth of her concern. The mask worn by this husband is that he is always right, when the truth lies elsewhere. Third, and most serious, a regular church member lives with no real sense of her sin. She is never able to think of a single sin of her own to confess during the time of silent confession in the worship service of her church. She can and does, on the other hand, often see the sins of others, for whom she finds in her heart a growing sense of disdain.

Jesus paints a clear picture of a hypocrite in his parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Both went to the temple to pray, and the prayer of the Pharisee went like this. **“God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get”** (Luke 18:11-12). In the most spiritual thing he did all week, praying in the temple, his prayer reeked of self-righteous pride. The tax collector, on the other hand, had a much simpler prayer: **“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”** Jesus said that only the tax collector left justified. This suggests that when it comes to hypocrisy, there are only two types of people. First, there are hypocrites who see their hypocrisy, fight against it and look to Jesus for forgiveness. Second, there are hypocrites who see only the hypocrisy of others, and use that insight to feel better about themselves. We have all heard the complaint many have made against the church, claiming that it’s just full of hypocrites. It sounds to my ears very similar to this prayer of the Pharisee. “I thank you that I am not like all these hypocrites in the church.”

Some object to Jesus' harsh words in this passage, finding them to be out of keeping with his emphasis elsewhere on love of enemies and neighbor love. I find these words to be entirely consistent with Jesus' love. In his mercy, Jesus is seeking to humble these hypocrites in order that they might repent and experience Jesus' mercy and be exalted by him. He does so through seven "woes." A woe is an exclamation, as correctly indicated by the use of the exclamation point in our text. It in essence says, "How greatly you will suffer," and is accompanied by emotions of pity and grief. This passage is intended as a wake-up call for hypocrites, who rarely see their own hypocrisy. Jesus' tone of voice here is not a scolding, angry voice. Rather, it is a tone of pleading, the tone a parent would use when a beloved child is making a self-destructive choice. That tone is clear in the last paragraph of the chapter, when Jesus expresses his longing for his fellow Jews to repent and come to him. So let's look more carefully at these seven "woes" and note how they describe hypocrisy in relationship to four areas.

I. Hypocrisy and Zeal – vs. 13-15

The first two woes describe the zeal of the scribes and Pharisees, a zeal which turns out to be misplaced. They **"shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces"** (v. 13). They would not have said it that way. They regarded themselves as being defenders of the Law of Moses. They saw Jesus' claim to be the new temple of God as the biggest threat to their way of life. So they did all they could, being as zealous as possible, to keep people from following Jesus. In thinking they were defending the work of God, they were actually opposing God's work.

The second woe speaks similarly of misplaced zeal, this time describing missionary zeal. **"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"** (v. 15). He is speaking of their efforts directed toward Gentiles who want to convert to Judaism. We easily mistake zeal for godliness, thinking that if we are busy doing "the Lord's work," then we must be okay. But zeal employed in the wrong effort only makes things worse. The application is simple. Don't look to busyness in serving the Lord as proof of your godliness.

II. Hypocrisy and the Scriptures – vs. 16-24

Woes three and four both involve a wrong approach to the Scriptures, an approach that strips the Bible from one of its intended purposes. God intends that the Bible serve, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to convict us of our sin. The Bible says a great deal about sins of the tongue, beginning with the

command to speak honestly. But it also tells us to keep our promises. In the Old Testament, when a person wanted to make a solemn promise, he would swear an oath. But what should you do if you swore to something that you really wanted to back off from? This passage tells of a way the Jews approached the Bible to allow them at times to get out of a promise made. They made distinctions between binding and non-binding oaths depending on the object named when the oath was taken. They said, for example, that if you swear by the temple, then you could get out of your oath, but not if you swore by the gold of the temple. These distinctions were not Scriptural, and in making them, they were actually stripping the Bible of this purpose of convicting us of sin.

Do we do the same today? The Bible says, “Don’t gossip,” but we act as if it said, “Don’t gossip unless you’re sharing a prayer request with someone.” The Bible says that sex outside of marriage is wrong. We say, “It’s not wrong if you really love the person and there is mutual consent.” The Bible says “Love your enemies,” and we say, “Unless they are on the other side politically.” We could go on and on with this. The point is that the hypocrite removes the sharp edge of the Scriptures by reinterpreting the Bible to allow them to do what they want to do without guilt.

The fourth woe is also a mistake relating to the Bible. We could call it selective obedience. The Pharisees gave significant attention to some of the Bible’s commands while ignoring others. They were scrupulous about the tithe. The Old Testament required tithes on agricultural products such as grains, wine and olive oil. It said nothing about the plants that grew in a voluntary fashion around the house, plants such as mint, dill and cumin. The Pharisees made sure to tithe these as well. In the only place I’m aware of in the New Testament where the tithe is commanded, Jesus tells them that they are right not to neglect the tithe. But he finds fault in their neglect of the more important matters of the Bible. Jesus here acknowledges that while all biblical commands are important and essential, some have greater importance than others. In particular, and probably alluding to Micah 6:8, Jesus says that the significant commands are those of justice, mercy and faithfulness. Justice in the Bible refers largely to treatment of the poor. Mercy means to have a heart for people. Faithfulness has in view covenant faithfulness to God, which we often abbreviate by speaking simply of faith. These are the same as Jesus’ great commandment to love God and neighbor. Hypocrites are selective in their obedience, focusing on those that are more external and within their natural ability to keep, while ignoring the commands that require a deep heart change.

III. Hypocrisy and the Heart – vs. 25-28

The fifth and sixth woes develop further this emphasis on the heart and make the same point using two different metaphors. The Pharisees were all

about appearances, wanting to make sure they looked good on the outside. When it came to matters of the heart, however, they were blind to the filth residing inside them. They were like someone doing a poor job of washing dishes. To update the metaphor somewhat, imagine someone cleaning only the outside of a dirty casserole dish. The inside is full of baked on food residue, while the outside is brought to complete spotlessness. Then it's put back in the cabinet in that condition. Then the next time it's used for the next casserole dish, the new food is just put on top of the old. And that process is repeated multiple times. Jesus says that's what hypocrites have done. He even specifies the inward filth, saying **"inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence"** (v. 25). They are all about the money, even while being scrupulous about their tithing, as we saw in the previous woe. They are self-indulgent, a phrase that could be translated "uncontrolled sensuality. It can refer either to sexual lust or to immoderate eating.

The second metaphor is just as graphic. They are like whitewashed tombs, white and shiny on the outside, while being full of death and decay on the inside. Jesus spoke these words at the time of year, just prior to Passover, when the tradition was to paint the graves with bright white chalk. The purpose was to make them visible so that people didn't accidentally touch them and become ritually unclean. Jesus found in this a perfect illustration of hypocrisy, where there is diligence to look good on the outside, but filth and decay in the heart. He says something shocking at the end of verse 28 when he says that these Pharisees were guilty of lawlessness. What? These were the champions of the law. How could they be described as lawless? That would have been about as shocking as saying in our state that Nick Saban knows nothing about coaching college football. But Jesus rightly levelled that charge because they blindly ignored all God's commands that related to the heart.

An obvious application question for us is to ask if we give as much attention to our hearts as we do to our physical appearance. Is your time in the gym matched by your time with God, in the Bible and in prayer?

IV. Hypocrisy and Jesus – vs. 29-39

The final woe is the climactic one, the source of all the others. The heart of hypocrisy is the rejection of God's prophet, Jesus. The point Jesus makes is that even though they venerate the prophets of the Old Testament, they are at this precise moment rejecting God's greatest prophet ever. They have this self-confidence that had they been around during the days of Israel's great prophets, men such as Elijah and Jeremiah, they would never have joined in the opposition God's people directed against them. Jesus makes a clear claim to divinity in verse 34, where he claims to be the one sending prophets. Yet they are rejecting both the prophets sent and the one doing the sending, who is also the greatest of all prophets.

CONCLUSION:

The last three verses of the chapter tell us the tone of voice Jesus uses in the delivery of his seven woes. It is a pleading tone, not a scolding tone. **“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 would not!”** When a hen puts her wings over her brood, any threat to them must go through her first. That’s what Jesus has done for us, taking the penalty for our sins upon himself.

So how do you fight hypocrisy in your own life? You do so by coming under his wings, which means to trust Jesus by believing that he loves you. When you believe that, you receive his word even when it shows you your sin. Then you humble yourself, admit your sin, and rejoice in the forgiveness and power of your Savior. I like the way that is expressed in the following account I first read years ago.

At first, I saw God as my observer, my judge, keeping track of the things I did wrong, so as to know whether I merited heaven or hell when I die. He was out there sort of like a president. I recognized His picture when I saw it, but I really didn’t know Him.

But later on when I met Christ, it seemed as though life were rather like a bike ride, but it was a tandem bike, and I noticed that Christ was in the back helping me pedal. I don’t know just when it was that He suggested we change places, but life has not been the same since. When I had control, I knew the way. It was rather boring, but predictable... It was the shortest distance between two points. But when He took the lead, He knew delightful long cuts, up mountains, and through rocky places at breakneck speeds, it was all I could do to hang on! Even though it looked like madness, He said, “Pedal!”

I worried and was anxious and asked, “Where are you taking me?” He laughed and didn’t answer, and I started to learn to trust. I forgot my boring life and entered into the adventure. And when I’d say, “I’m scared,” He’d lean back and touch my hand. He took me to people with gifts that I needed, gifts of healing, acceptance and joy. They gave me gifts to take on my journey, My Lord’s and mine. And we were off again. He said, “Give the gifts away; they’re extra baggage, too much weight.” So I did, to the people we met, and I found that in giving I received, and still our burden was light.

I did not trust Him, at first in control of my life. I thought He’d wreck it; but He knows bike secrets, knows how to make it bend to take sharp corners, knows how to jump to clear high rocks, knows how to fly to shorten scary passages. And I am learning to shut up and pedal in the strangest places, and I’m beginning to enjoy the view and the cool breeze on my face with my delightful constant companion, Jesus Christ. And when I’m sure I just can’t do anymore, He just smiles and says... “Pedal.”

Small Group Discussion Questions

Matthew 23:13-39

1. What do we learn about hypocrisy from its etymology? It was a word used in the theater of the person who would put on a mask. What are some of the masks we put on?
2. How would you respond to someone who says that they don't go to church because the church is just full of hypocrites?
3. What do we learn about hypocrisy from Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector?

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Lk. 18:9-14 ESV)

4. The first two woes deal with the kind of hypocrite who thinks that zeal indicates godliness. Are you ever tempted to substitute busyness in serving the Lord for godliness? What does that look like for you?
5. The third and fourth woes deal with the hypocrite's misuse of Scripture. In the fourth woe about tithing, they are guilty of the selective use of Scripture, giving great attention to passages that are more easily kept and ignoring others that deal more with heart issues, even though these latter are more important Scriptures. Do any areas of the Bible come to mind where we do the same? That is, we routinely overlook them, or maybe just don't emphasize them adequately.
6. Jesus says the weighty matters of the law are "justice and mercy and faithfulness," an allusion to Micah 6:8. "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Frederick Bruner translates the weightier matters of the law as "social justice, real heart, and real faith." How does your life stack up against these three "weighty areas"?
7. Jesus speaks all these words with love, as indicated by his closing lament (vs. 37-39). How does hearing the love in Jesus' voice help us as we battle hypocrisy?