WOES TO THE PHARISEES

Matthew 23:1–39

Key Verses: 23:25,26

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.”

We’d like to get far away from those who offend us, right? It happens not only in workplaces, at schools and in families, but also in churches. Scholars who study churches have found that in recent years many have left because of the hypocrisy they’ve experienced there. Hypocrisy can take many forms, like strict legalism, being judgmental and isolating ourselves from other sinners. Hypocrisy has always been a problem. During Jesus’ life it was a problem among the Jews. When Matthew wrote his Gospel it was a problem for the early church. Hypocrisy is still a problem today. But real followers of Jesus cannot be hypocrites. In today’s passage he warns us to take hypocrisy seriously, and he shows us how to overcome it. We shouldn’t use hypocrisy as an excuse to give up and stop struggling spiritually; we should listen carefully to our Lord Jesus’ teachings so that we can grow as his healthy disciples. When churches are full of his healthy disciples, they attract many other new people. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living word today.

Chapters 23–25 is the last of Jesus’ five major discourses in Matthew’s Gospel. This last discourse parallels his first one, the Sermon on the Mount, in chapters 5–7. Just as that sermon began with Beatitudes, or Blessings, so this one does with woes, or curses. Sadly, throughout his beautiful ministry Jesus has been opposed by the Pharisees. They wanted to keep people in their synagogues, in their ways, and away from Jesus. Now, for the sake of his followers’ future, Jesus exposes the Pharisees for who they really are, ripping off their holy “masks.” In verses 1–12 his speaks to the crowds and to his disciples. In verses 13–39 he speaks directly to the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

Read verses 1–4. We notice several things here. The teachers of the law and Pharisees, Jesus said, “sit in Moses’ seat.” Archaeologists have found that at that time there was a special chair in local synagogues known as “Moses’ seat.” Those who taught from the Old Testament would sit there, expecting everybody to listen to them. Moses’ seat represented the authority of the Bible. Jesus believed the authority of the Bible. In his Sermon on the Mount he said he didn’t come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them (5:17). He wants us to carefully listen to everything the Bible teaches. What Jesus didn’t believe was the authority of many of the men who claimed to be Bible teachers.

What undermines the authority of those who try to teach the Bible? Jesus says it’s when we don’t practice what we preach. It’s when we teach the Bible to others but not to ourselves (cf. Ro2:21–23). On the other hand, if we sincerely struggle to practice in our own lives what we learn in the Bible, we gradually gain the authority to teach others.

Look at verse 4 again. These so-called Bible teachers burdened others with their teachings; they wouldn’t even lift a finger to help them. It tells us that they had no compassion for those they taught. They only demanded and pushed. This is another reason they had no authority to teach. In being so strict, so extreme and harsh, they crushed people. They were such a contrast to our Lord Jesus, who shares the yoke with us, who’s gentle and humble in heart, and who doesn’t burden us but gives us rest for our souls (11:28–30). They were such a contrast to our Lord Jesus, who doesn’t break a bruised reed or snuff out a smoldering wick (12:20). When we share his compassion for wounded and weak people, we gain his authority to teach.

Jesus goes on to expose the true motives of hypocritical teachers. Read verses 5–7. The phylacteries were little leather boxes tied to one’s forehead or arm to remind men to think about and practice God’s word. The tassels on the garments were reminders to live a holy life. They were kind of like our testimony writing and sharing. But the Pharisees and teachers of the law exaggerated the size of these things to draw attention to themselves. Thus they lost their original purpose. They were very sensitive about their public honor and titles. Frankly, they were using all their religious activities for their own honor and glory (Jn12: 43; Ro2:29b). When we seek our own honor and recognition—even through good things like teaching the Bible or praying—we’re being hypocrites. All human beings have the desire to be respected and honored. We want to be great like God because we’re made in his image. But when we’re seeking recognition from people, we get sick. We should be doing things not for people to see, but only for God to see. Jesus taught us the same thing earlier, in his Sermon on the Mount (6:1–18). He said that when we’re giving to the needy, or praying, or struggling against our own sins, we shouldn’t be trying to get people to notice us; we should be doing it very quietly, only for God to see.

Read verses 8–10. Jesus rebuked using titles for personal honor. We should take him seriously. We don’t need to create any hierarchy among us. We’re all brothers and sisters, with Christ as our Lord. Read verses 11,12. Jesus has been teaching this same thing repeatedly (20:26,27; 5:3; 18:4). Humbly serving others is the way our Lord Jesus lived, and it’s the way to true greatness for us. Instead of bragging about ourselves in various ways, we need to be humbling ourselves in every way and really serving others.

In verses 13–32 Jesus pronounces seven woes on the Pharisees—seven because it’s God’s perfect number. Six times he calls them “you hypocrites!” (13,15,23,25,27,29)—six representing the number for human beings. God alone is perfect; all human beings are nothing but sinners in need of God’s grace.

Look at verse 13. His first rebuke is that they shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. He says, “You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.” What does he mean? He’s talking about repentance. The door to his kingdom opens when we sinners repent. It’s what both John the Baptist and Jesus both preached (3:2; 4:17). But the Pharisees refused to repent of their own sins. It was too humiliating, and they were too self-righteous. They also rejected the sinful people who were trying to repent, the tax collectors and prostitutes (21:31,32). This lack of repentance was Jesus’ first and most important rebuke to the Pharisees. No matter how great we may think we are, we’re all nothing but weak sinners. We all have various kinds of sins and hypocrisies. But the good news is, no matter who we are, we can repent and turn to Jesus, and his grace changes us and enables us to live as kingdom members. We should never become too proud to repent.

Look at verse 15. Jesus notes their zeal in making converts; they were willing to travel long distances for just one person, which is great. The problem is, they couldn’t really help the people they were chasing. Why not? Because they themselves didn’t know how to repent and depend on God’s grace. So, what they were teaching people was their own kinds of self-righteous legalism: All kinds of rules about not working on the Sabbath, all kinds of rules about outward purity. And their converts learned it all twice as better as they did. All that extreme zeal and legalism only left people children of hell, Jesus said. Zeal is good, but zeal without the knowledge of God and his grace is spiritually dangerous (Ro10:2,3). We need to lead people to repent and believe in Jesus, experience God’s grace and live for his glory. We shouldn’t focus on teaching people to keep all kinds of outward rules and laws that only make them self-righteous.

Look at verses 16–19. Three times here Jesus calls them “blind” (16,17, 19). Why? It’s because in their religious practices they were teaching people to value material things more than spiritual things. They valued the gold on the temple and the gift on the altar. It meant they were trying to get people to offer more, so that they could enjoy a fancier, more glorious religious life. To Jesus, God’s own presence is more important than material things, and God’s presence is what makes things sacred or holy. God’s presence isn’t something we can buy or force or manipulate. He comes to dwell among us when we repent.

In verses 16–22 Jesus uses the word “swear” ten times. The Pharisees were teaching people to swear oaths by the gold of the temple or by the gift on the altar. It was as if money or wealth made their words more serious. But Jesus taught us to make our oaths before God himself. And he emphasizes that God is the point of the temple and the altar; God is the one who sits on his throne in heaven. We need to de-throne people and what they say and do, and enthrone God, who he is and what he says and does. Without recognizing God, we become spiritually blind, only focusing on material things, ourselves or others.

Read verse 23. The teachers of the law and Pharisees were serious about tithing. They meticulously offered God a tenth of their income, even from their kitchen spice gardens, but neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. These principles behind God’s laws all have to do with people and how we relate to them. It’s relatively easy to deal with money, numbers and computers. We can feel in control and confident in ourselves. But it’s much harder to deal with people. People aren’t easily manipulated; they need justice, mercy and faithfulness. Why are practicing justice, mercy and faithfulness so important? It’s because they’re at the core of who God is (Ex34:6,7). Jesus repeatedly taught to go and learn that God desires mercy, not sacrifice (9:13; 12:7). In God, love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other (Ps85:10). The more we know God, the more we become like him in the way we treat others. Tithing is important, but imitating God in his justice, mercy and faithfulness is way more important.

Read verse 24. Here Jesus calls them “blind guides” again (16; cf. 15:14). Why? Because they were leading people to focus on the wrong things, superficial things that really don’t matter. A gnat is a tiny bug; a camel is a huge, smelly animal. Both are unclean. Swallowing one tiny gnat is probably no big deal, but swallowing a camel is serious. Jesus is using comedy to say that focusing only on small things can make us blind to miss the really big things.

So where should our focus be? Read verses 25,26. Here Jesus teaches us to focus on inside, what’s within us. Of course we should take a shower, wash our hair, brush our teeth and wear clean clothes. But we should be even more concerned about what’s in our hearts. We can be squeaky clean outwardly, but rotten inwardly. The Bible tells us that the human heart is sin-sick. Genesis 6:5b says that “every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.” In other words, it’s as filthy as a cesspool. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer17:9) We don’t even know how sinful our hearts are! So how can we possibly clean ourselves on the inside? We can’t. We need to come to Jesus. Only Jesus can purify us from within. 1 John 1:7–9 says, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Only Jesus can free us from our sins by his blood (Rev1:5b). We need to receive his blood by faith (Ro3:24, 25a). And we need to come to his light every day, confess our sins and ask for his blood to cleanse us (cf. Rev7:14). When we do, we experience the forgiveness of sins and the riches of God’s grace (Eph1:7). This is the gospel: Jesus’ blood can cleanse our sin-sick hearts and change us from within. It’s not what we do, but what Jesus does.

Look at verses 27,28. Here Jesus is reinforcing what he just said. The teachers of the law and Pharisees looked great outwardly, but inwardly they were really unclean. Not only so, but they were making others unclean, just as people could unknowingly walk over a dead body and become unclean. When we ignore the condition of our hearts, we cannot but become a bad influence to others.

Look at verses 29–32. Jesus rebukes the teachers of the law and Pharisees for living in denial. They acted like they loved the prophets. But in fact, they were just like their ancestors who killed them. And why did they kill them? Because they told them to repent. Read verse 33. This was the same rebuke John the Baptist gave them (3:7). Being like snakes or vipers meant they were poisonous. In modern terms, they were toxic, very unhealthy to be around. Jesus predicted they would persecute his servants in the future (34). They thought they were so righteous, but actually before God they were guilty of shedding all the righteous blood that was ever shed (35,36).

What was Jesus’ final word about them? Read verse 37. His heart was broken. Though he rebuked them so severely, he had a mother’s heart that longed to protect and save them, but they wouldn’t repent. Jesus knew that it was their unrepentance that would destroy both Jerusalem and their nation (38). His message of salvation during his first coming would be transformed into his judgment during his second coming (39).

Today we learned how we can grow as Jesus’ healthy disciples instead of hypocrites. We need to be practicing what we learn from the Bible, and treating others with compassion. We need to be living before God instead of seeking human recognition, and humbly serving others. We need to be repenting and receiving God’s grace in Jesus, and helping others to do the same. We need to recognize God’s presence, keep our promises and strive to imitate him. Above all, we need to come to Jesus and trust in his blood to purify us from within.