

The Hypocrisy of the Pharisees' Proselytism
Matthew 23:13-15
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

Matthew 23 records the condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees by Jesus. This condemnation is addressed sequentially to each of the three groups who had gathered. In Matthew 23:1-7, Jesus addressed His condemnation of these false leaders to the crowds who were listening. In Matthew 23:8-12, Jesus addressed His disciples. His exhortation was for them to avoid the example of the scribes and Pharisees who sought to exalt themselves by their religious status. Now in Matthew 23:13-36, Jesus spoke directly to the scribes and Pharisees, with a series of seven distinct statements of condemnation. He concluded His last words that He spoke publicly to the Jewish crowds with warning to them, as their own capital city and temple were under pending judgment for their rejection of their Messiah.

These seven statements of condemnation addressed specifically to the scribes and Pharisees address their practices, their priorities and their proselytism. In each, they are called "hypocrites" and are described as hypocritical in their conduct. Jesus reserved His most serious judgment for this group of religious leaders who were the most influential in leading the Jewish people astray. This is one of the most dramatic passages of judgment in the Scripture.

The scribes and Pharisees were seemingly committed to the word of God, but this was a facade, as in reality they were doing the work of the evil one, *"You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father"* (John 8:44). This was unsurprising for in the words of Paul, *"No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds"* (2 Corinthians 11:14-15)

Preventing people from the kingdom of God (23:13)

Jesus began to address the scribes and Pharisees directly in verse 13 by contrasting them with His disciples, as their destiny was destruction. This is emphasized by the condemnation of "woe," which was a judicial expression of the Messiah, who would be their ultimate judge as *"the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead"* (Acts 10:42; cf. Romans 14:9; 2 Timothy 4:1).

This word “woe” is used in this Gospel as an exclamation of compassion, “But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days!” (Matthew 24:19). It can be used for both condemnation and compassion, as can be seen in Matthew 18:7, “*Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!*” Indeed, Jesus had earlier used this word as an expression of judgment, “*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes*” (Matthew 11:21).

This section of “woe” in Matthew parallels the section of “blessed” in Matthew 5:3-10. In both, we have a repeated exclamation that is a statement of fact. They are not the bestowal of either blessing or judgment, but rather are a representation of what is true about the actions that are described. People are ultimately either blessed or condemned.

This judgment upon the scribes and Pharisees will be repeated in each of these seven sections of Jesus’ address to them (23:13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, and 29). The basic reason for this expression of condemnation is because they were “hypocrites.” This declaration of “woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites” is repeated verbatim in six of the seven sections (omitted in 23:16).

They were hypocrites in what they did, in contrast to what they claimed they were doing. In each case, Jesus provided an explicit example of their hypocrisy. They supposedly loved God, but they did not. They were the quintessential false teachers that “*profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed*” (Titus 1:16).

The first reason the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees were condemned was “*because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people.*” This is the essence of all false teachers, for their words lead people away from the kingdom of heaven. Regardless of their power or popularity, and in spite of providing excitement and stimulation (cf. 2 Timothy 4:3-4), they fail to bring the good news of Jesus Christ that delivers people from their sin.

Whenever the gospel of God’s grace is replaced by any human endeavor, people become shut off from the kingdom of heaven, because they consider themselves worthy of God’s blessings. This message of good works was the essence of the Pharisees, leading prideful people away from Christ. Adherence to a moral code is useless, for “*without faith it is impossible to please Him*” (Hebrews 11:6).

The reason the message of works shuts off people from the kingdom of heaven is because it makes them dependent upon their own deeds to appease God. Not only is this impossible, for “there is none righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10), it leads people to consider themselves in comparison to others in adherence to some human standard that can be accomplished by men. They then are trapped by such legalism by thinking that they actually have accomplished something in their own strength. They then are moved to continue to advance themselves in their human religion, void of the humility that comes from true faith.

Jesus said of the scribes and Pharisees, “for you do not enter in yourselves,” meaning they shut off the kingdom of heaven from people because they themselves were not a part of it. Their standard of perfection still left them outside of God’s kingdom, as Jesus had taught back in Matthew 5:20, “*For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.*” Because they considered themselves righteous but were “*sons of hell*” (23:15), they were called hypocrites for presenting themselves as something that they were not.

Because they were not part of the kingdom of heaven, they therefore did not “*allow those who are entering to go in.*” They had no actual power to prevent anyone from the kingdom of God if it was the will of God, but this imagery gives the sense that the scribes and Pharisees considered themselves as the doorkeepers, who closed the door on those seeking to enter the kingdom.

To understand how the scribes and Pharisees did not “*allow those who are entering to go in,*” it is helpful to observe the parallel passage to Matthew 23:13 from Luke 11:52, “*Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you yourselves did not enter, and you hindered those who were entering.*” Therefore, they did not allow people to enter by means of hindering them. The way they hindered people from entering the kingdom of heaven was because they “*have taken away the key of knowledge.*”

In other words, they took away their ability to know the truth, which hindered them from entering the kingdom. They did this by confusing people with their wrongful understanding of the application of the Old Testament (e.g., “*you have heard that it was said, but I say to you*” in Matthew 5:21-48), and by “*teaching as doctrines the precepts of men*” (Matthew 15:9). Since “*by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition*” (Matthew 15:6), the scribes and Pharisees served to leave people confused about the truth of God. Furthermore, while Jesus taught the truth of God, these leaders sought to discredit His teaching.

Pretending to be in the kingdom of God (23:14)

Many modern Bible translations, such as the ESV and NIV, omit Matthew 23:14, placing it in a footnote reference. This is because, as the NASB notes in its footnote, this verse is not found in early manuscripts. Many manuscripts that include this verse, place it before Matthew 23:13, and some after it.

This is very likely an insertion of verses from Mark and from Luke into Matthew's Gospel by later scribes. In both Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47, Jesus says to beware of the scribes *"who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers. These will receive all the more condemnation."* This led to the words *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation"* being labeled as Matthew 23:14 when verse divisions were added in the 16th century.

Therefore, while these words accurately represent what Jesus truly said, they were almost certainly not included by Matthew in his Gospel. Later scribes took the words of Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47, which speak of the scribes as practicing deeds worthy of greater condemnation, and inserted the phrasing of Matthew 23, *"woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites"* to fit it into the chapter better.

Jesus did condemn the scribes for devouring widows' houses, which both Mark and Luke follow with the example of how they did this. The story of the poor widow who put her two copper coins in the temple treasury immediately follows and Jesus said, *"Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on"* (Luke 21:3-4). While Jesus commended the widow for her great sacrifice, the scribes were guilty of manipulating her to contribute so that she increased her great need even more. Thus they *"devour widows' houses."*

They also pretended to be committed to obedience to God, *"for a pretense you make long prayers"* (Luke 20:47). Mark 12:40 describes them doing this practice *"for appearance's sake."* This is consistent with Matthew 23:5, *"But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men."*

This is another example of the frequent practice of those who copied the Gospel manuscripts. The earliest copies were not compiled into an entire New Testament, but were individual Gospels. When copyists had access to other Gospel accounts that added details, they sometimes included them in their copies.

Perverting people from the kingdom of God (23:15)

The second woe that Matthew included in his Gospel also related to the allowing people to enter the kingdom of heaven. In this case, it involved their practice of proselytizing, *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.”*

The scribes and Pharisees traveled long distances to *“make one proselyte.”* A proselyte is one who converts from one religion to another. This travel was likely directed to the God-fearing Gentile people who had already followed Judaism. Acts 2:10 describes those responding to Peter’s sermon as *“visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes.”* Since this was years before the gospel had gone to the Gentiles (Acts 10-11), it is apparent that the proselytes were these God-fearers who had traveled to Jerusalem for Pentecost. The scribes and Pharisees traveled on land and sea to convince these God-fearing Gentiles to become full converts and follow their Pharisaical traditions.

They did not seek to simply make converts to Judaism but to make converts to their particular corrupt version of Judaism. They had elevated their oral rabbinical traditions above the Old Testament and taught others to do the same. It was this drive to advance themselves in their standing among their contemporaries that drove this zealotry for proselytism. Since that convert was *“twice as much a son of hell as yourselves,”* they were likewise destined for hell, or Gehenna, the place of eternal damnation in the lake of fire (cf. Matthew 25:41).

Notice that Jesus did not take issue with their zealotry or travel but rather for what they taught their converts, and specifically, what they were causing their converts to become. They created followers of themselves, not followers of God. In this sense, their own lack of faith in God hindered people from entering the kingdom of heaven. Paul was an example of this zealotry, *“I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions”* (Galatians 1:14).

Paul also was an example of the negative influence such zealotry for traditions has over the proselytes. Paul testified, *“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today”* (Acts 22:3). In his zealotry, he *“was in hearty agreement with putting him [Stephen] to death”* (Acts 8:1).

When we look at Gamaliel in Acts 5, we see that Paul's opposition to the church exceeded Gamaliel's. After Peter and the other apostles proclaimed Jesus in Acts 5:33-39, we read of Gamaliel's response, *"But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. And he said to them, 'Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away some people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.'"*

Therefore, Paul was willing to go further than his mentor in opposing the believers. As such, he was an example of one who had become *"twice as much a son of hell as yourselves."* So often, pupils take the teachings of their mentors farther than their mentors ever did. They then can become even more destructive, as was true of the disciples of the Pharisees.

This is why we must adhere to the authority of the Scripture, and not consider legalistic traditions and practices as authoritative. These opinions of man, if adhered to with the vigor of the word of God, will unleash a never-ending volume of extra-biblical requirements that seekers of God must obey. The promotion of such traditions results in followers who become *"twice as much a son of hell."* The only check on this legalistic expansion of what is necessary to follow God is a commitment to the word of God, in contrast to a commitment to any other man-made methodologies.

Conclusion

As Jesus began His stinging rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees, He began with how they hindered the good news of the kingdom of heaven. They were the stumbling blocks that Jesus spoke of in Matthew 18:7, *"Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!"* Jesus proclaimed that *"the kingdom of heaven was at hand"* (Matthew 4:17), but these religious leaders were preventing people from hearing this good news. Because they were an obstacle to God's salvation, they stood condemned.

Those who follow in the footsteps of the Pharisees deserve to be opposed. Their worldly wisdom of human effort to achieve righteousness is a corruption of the gospel of the grace of God. We are not delivered unto holiness by any works-based system that adds requirements to God's revelation in the Scripture.

Paul made this clear in Colossians 2:20-23, *"If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!' (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence."*

Such systems have the appearance of wisdom but are of no value against fleshly indulgence, and when employed by religious leaders today in countless forms, only serve the same end promising something that cannot be achieved by human effort, but only by the grace of God. Therefore, as we follow the teaching of Jesus and the apostles as revealed in the New Testament, we must reject all attempts to impose such tactics that only serve to *"tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders"* (Matthew 23:4).

Not only are these legalistic attempts to bring godliness of no value, they serve the ends of those who implement them, for they end up building themselves up in their superiority as they succeed with their own standards. *"For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding"* (2 Corinthians 10:12).

The resultant sense of superiority is opposed to the grace of God, which *"is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast"* (Ephesians 2:8-9). When people are led to trust in what they have done, the grace of God is diminished and people are hindered from the kingdom of heaven.

"I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly" (Galatians 2:21).