

The Hypocrisy of the Pharisees' Practices
Matthew 23:25-33
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Matthew 23 records the condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees by Jesus. In Matthew 23:1-7, Jesus warned the crowds who had gathered about these false leaders. In Matthew 23:8-12, Jesus exhorted His disciples to avoid the example of the scribes and Pharisees who sought to exalt themselves by their religious status.

In Matthew 23:13-36, Jesus spoke a series of seven distinct statements of condemnation to the scribes and Pharisees. These seven statements of condemnation spoken specifically to the scribes and Pharisees addressed their proselytism (23:13-15), their priorities (23:16-24), and their practices (23:25-33). Jesus reserved His most serious judgment for this group of religious leaders who were the most influential in leading the Jewish people astray through their hypocrisy.

Externality results in robbery (23:25-26)

The practice that the fifth woe Jesus spoke against the scribes and Pharisees concerned their practice of robbing others in order to indulge themselves, *“inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.”* This evil selfishness was illustrated by the metaphor of vessels used for eating, a cup and a dish, *“first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.”*

This imagery clearly refers to the practices of the Pharisees, which were entirely focused upon the outward appearance of the Jewish people, rather than their internal character. *“For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.”* They themselves were circumspect with regard to the practices of their religion, but completely ignored the motivation of the heart regarding those practices.

Jesus did not advocate that anyone ignore the practice of obedience. Rather, He oriented His listeners to how a person can truly obey God, *“first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.”* This follows the problem of the scribes and Pharisees who emphasize the wrong thing by neglecting the weightier provisions of the law (Matthew 23:23-24). Just as they were consumed with straining gnats rather than camels, so they were concerned with externals that did not defile, rather than internal issues that did defile.

This metaphor of cleansing a cup and a dish would be relevant to the Pharisees, who actually debated what rendered a cup unclean. Jesus used their concerns about uncleanness to make the point that it was they themselves who created defilement. Because they were unclean inwardly, “*full of robbery and self-indulgence,*” they could never become clean, regardless of the effort they put into their external practices.

The reason that Jesus charged the scribes and Pharisees with robbery and self-indulgence with the metaphor of an unclean inside of a cup and dish is because their teachings were self-centered, and robbed the Jewish people of the knowledge of true righteousness. Their misrepresentation of true righteousness being only concerned about external practices that did not bring godliness led people to miss the true means of sanctification. In their misrepresentation, they elevated themselves by practicing their external righteousness before men to be noticed by them (cf. Matthew 6:1).

When people today fail to emphasize the importance of the matters of the heart, they fall into the same Pharisaical evil of robbing their listeners of true righteousness. We can never submit our heart to God by merely following external practices. We must first commit ourselves to God in sincerity of heart so that our practices will align with God’s will. Otherwise it is merely external service in order to please men (cf. Colossians 3:22).

Externality results in lawlessness (23:27-28)

In the sixth instance where Jesus pronounced “woe” upon the scribes and Pharisees, He referenced whitewashed tombs. In the days leading up to Passover, the Jews in Jerusalem would whitewash the tombs of the city to make them stand out more clearly in order to alert the visitors to the city of their presence. This was because if any Jew unintentionally came in contact with one of these tombs, they would become unclean, and therefore were prohibited from participating in the Passover feast. We find instances of concern about defilement ahead of the Passover in John 11:55 and 18:28.

Yet such whitewashing of the tombs did not make them beautiful, since it was the structure of the memorial over the grave that was beautiful. The reason the tombs were whitewashed was because, though appearing beautiful, was considered to bring defilement. Numbers 6:6-8 describes a corpse as making one unclean, and Numbers 19:11-12 describes the duration of such uncleanness as lasting for seven days, if he purifies himself with water.

The comparison with the scribes and Pharisees was clear. They *“outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”* Just as the whitewashed tombs appeared beautiful on the outside, but defiled those who came in contact with them, so too the scribes and Pharisees gave an outward impression of esteemed religion but also contaminated their followers with their focus on external religious practices. The contrast between the inner decay and spiritual deadness was starkly opposed to the facade of their outward appearance and supposed spirituality.

They were inwardly full of hypocrisy because they appeared to people differently than who they really were. They were inwardly full of lawlessness because their heart was sinful, and opposed to the law. In spite of their outward piety, their heart was ungodly. No external actions can offset internal corruption.

This truth emphasizes that the proper response to God must be a complete surrender of ourselves to God, not merely conforming to a religious code. Therefore, any attempt to represent God in ministry must address the significance of the response of our heart toward God. This is why Jesus taught the greatest commandment was, *“you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”* The heart is the basis for the greatest commandment, since all obedience to God’s commandments must flow from the heart.

Externality results in murder (23:29-33)

The seventh and final woe that Jesus spoke in condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees involved their hypocrisy of honoring the prophets whom they refused to listen to. *“For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, ‘If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’”*

This follows the sixth woe in the inclusion of building of memorial tombs. The actions of beautifying the tombs and monuments to those ancestors who were heralded as prophets and righteous men testified against the scribes and Pharisees in their opposition to their words. Obviously, these tombs of the heroes of Jewish history were numerous and were very important to the people of Jesus’ day. In Acts 2:29, we find Peter, when preaching about Jesus at the day of Pentecost, referencing the tomb of David that existed in his time, *“Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day.”*

These scribes and Pharisees were not just the physical descendants of their ancient ancestors, but more importantly, they were the spiritual descendants of them, *“you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.”* At that moment, they were plotting to do the same thing as their forefathers by killing the greatest prophet of them all, Jesus (cf. Matthew 12:14) . This plot was a testimony against them, that they were following in the same evil footsteps of those who murdered the prophets of God throughout the history of Israel.

Jesus’ exhortation to *“Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers”* is not a command for them to do evil, but rather is a statement about the consequences of their sinfulness. The point is not to implore them to kill Him, but to threaten them with the fullness of their impending guilt in doing so. This is the same way that the Old Testament prophets spoke to those headed for judgment as well (Isaiah 8:9-10; 29:9; 47:12-15; Jeremiah 23:28-30; 44:25-26; Ezekiel 3:27; 20:39; Nahum 3:14-15; cf. Revelation 22:11-12).

Thus, the Lord’s judgment was near, as their cumulative guilt would climax in the crucifixion. The Jewish nation would be judged as the work of God on earth would depart from them and move to the church that would be established in the coming days with the arrival of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2; cf. Acts 1:8; 11:14-15). The Jews would eventually be scattered and their temple destroyed.

The scribes and Pharisees were the influential leaders behind the plot to kill Jesus. Jesus spoke of the personal judgment coming upon them, *“You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?”* In Matthew 3:7, John the Baptist had called the Pharisees *“brood of vipers”* and in Matthew 12:34, Jesus called them this as well. Their destiny was hell because they were filling up the full measure of the sin of their forefathers, whose murder of the prophets they were extending to Jesus Himself.

Conclusion

This series of seven condemnations upon the scribes and Pharisees by Jesus comes to a climax in the comparison of these leaders to the Israelites who rejected the prophets of God in their history. Like their forefathers, the Pharisees opposed the truth of God, and the killed messengers of God, leading to their own spiritual destruction. Each of the previous woes teaches some aspect of how these leaders distorted the revelation of God in favor of their own misguided priorities and evil practices. Yet if they would have heeded the words of the prophets that they honored through the monuments, there would have been no need for these words of Jesus against them.

The practice of the scribes and Pharisees to enhance their appearance of righteousness without the internal righteousness of their character is alive and well in religion today. We do not have scribes and Pharisees, but we certainly have hypocrisy in the church. Church leaders who present themselves as the righteous defenders of the Christian faith must not be *“full of robbery and self-indulgence.”*

When Christian leaders charge large sums for events and manipulate the finances of their followers in order to enrich their Christian enterprises and ultimately themselves through those endeavors, they are robbing God’s people in the manner of the Pharisees. Certainly, prosperity teachers corrupt the word of God to enrich themselves, but this can happen in all types of churches, since this is more related to the character of the leaders than to just the doctrine of the leaders. Yet when the word of God is distorted by selfish people, their followers will then be robbed of the truth of God. Each person must actively seek to know the revelation of God’s word for themselves.

The corollary to robbery by Christian leaders is self-indulgence. When people plot to enrich themselves off the people of God, they do this to indulge themselves. While *“the Scripture says, “YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING,” and “The laborer is worthy of his wages,”* (1 Timothy 5:18), people ought to *“be content with your wages”* (Luke 3:14). *“If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs”* (1 Timothy 6:8-10).

This interest in the outward appearance of righteousness is hypocritical when it does not reflect the inward reality of righteousness. It is impossible to fulfill God’s command if the heart does not conform to the will of God. No amount of whitewashing can cover such inward decay. Such hypocrisy is the enemy of God and His people.

Hypocrites seek to bolster their righteousness by attaching themselves to others with a reputation of righteousness. This is why the scribes and Pharisees had adorned the monuments of the righteous. This allowed them to be thought of as being aligned with the prophets while in reality they were not. They declared themselves to be against those who murdered the prophets, while they supported the same evil system of religion that the prophets spoke against. They were so opposed to God that they were unable to see their own hypocrisy.

While there is no prohibition against building monuments to the prophets, there is a remarkable disinterest the New Testament shows toward religious memorials. There is nothing to memorialize any physical monuments to Jesus, Stephen, James, or any one else who had died in the early church. This may be due to the belief in the resurrection and the near return of Jesus.

Yet one of the convictions of the Protestant reformers, particularly Calvin and Zwingli, was to remove and destroy all statues and religious art of Jesus, Mary and Catholic saints when they became in control of churches in certain areas of Europe. The perspective against such memorials was known as iconoclasm, and is why there are no such items in most evangelical churches today.

Along these lines, the tendency for religious people to attach themselves to well-known Christians, present and past, to gain credibility for themselves is real. They can claim allegiance to people who would have opposed their beliefs and their practices, similar to how the Old Testament prophets would have viewed the scribes and Pharisees. The founders of most denominations would be appalled at what is being taught and practiced in our day.

Fundamentally, the scribes and Pharisees rejected God's revelation through the prophets. This resulted in their sinful concern for their appearance before men, rather than their personal righteousness. If we listen to the revelation of God, and respond with our whole heart, then we will do His good deeds. However, we cannot overlook our heart's proper response to God's truth. Truly, we must be more concerned with our character than with our reputation, for who we are before God is of the utmost importance.

When we become consumed with the practice of religion, we will ignore the reason behind the practice. When we become overly concerned with how things appear to people, we will become less concerned with how they appear to God. This leads to a works-oriented approach that is opposed to true faith. It is the externalism of the Pharisees and must be opposed.

“He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds” (Titus 3:5-8).