

Gospel of Matthew

23:14~39

Woe to The Pretenders!



Last week ago, we caught a glimpse of a side of Jesus that shows Him to be more than a gentle healer. He will one day be a conquering King, carrying with Him the righteous vengeance of God! So we see just a little of that here in our text today. He showed himself to be a fiery orator who could call things as they actually were. He thrilled the crowds of onlookers and well-wishers with His flawless logic, rhetoric, and peerless analogies. He excelled at defining the perspective and will of God, and at living it out in the most practical of ways! No one before Him had ever challenged a despotic religious establishment who sought to go far beyond the Law of Moses to control just about every movement of every individual in the land! These men and men like them had added layer upon layer of minutia to the basic tenant of social and religious law until it was this huge, suffocating monstrosity that sat on the chest of Jewish society. And Jesus was having none of it! In this He was like the Sadducees who also resisted religious laws that were a later oral tradition/addition to the written Law of Moses. I'm not saying that Jesus did not conform to the written Law of Moses – because He absolutely did! He just wouldn't comply with all the extra layers. Those layers were an attempt to cover all the possible variations of human behavior so that it could “protect” individuals from even coming close to breaking the Law! It had good intentions but ended up creating a maddening undercurrent of *hypocrisy* in the system. It attempted to regulate all aspects of human behavior, but failed dismally at regulating the fallen and corrupted human heart! People could manage to keep all these “laws” and yet fall far short of God's express will for humanity! For instance, they could refrain from tying their sandal improperly on the Sabbath day of rest, but they couldn't control their condescending pride and arrogance, their envy, and green-eyed malice, their self-serving greed and self-righteous entitlement to power over the lives of others. It was a performance-based practice of their religion rather than authentic! Judaism had become a pervasive, powerful cult of self-worship, and as part of His plan to go to the cross, Jesus was calling them out, making them see red, and putting MURDER in their hearts! ²



The "Woes" of chapter 23 are the most blatant attempts by Jesus – more than ever before – to both speak the truth *and* stir up murder in the hearts of these men! He was intent on fulfilling His mission, and His mission was to shed His blood and die for the sins of humanity. So this was how He was *making* it happen!



The first thing He points out in our text, starting in **verse 16** is that they are *liars / deceivers / misleaders*! Because they had devices in their "God-speak" whereby they could swear oaths that made it possible for them to not keep that oath – *by design*! They could swear by the very temple of God or by the alter upon which the sacrifices were offered, or by heaven itself, and never have intended to keep that oath, because an oath sworn by the temple was not considered to be a binding oath! So they believed that they could legitimately swear to do something they had no intention of actually doing, depending upon what they swore upon! That is bad, folks! It indicates bad character. It indicates someone who plots and schemes for their own advantage in deal-making. But an oath by "*the gold of the temple*" was a binding oath. These were men who were not honest because they could rationalize ways to be dishonest! The teaching of Jesus to His followers was "*Don't do what they do! Don't swear on anything! Simply let your 'yes' mean 'yes', and your 'no' mean 'no'! Always be honest!*" You can be a religious person and be dishonest. You cannot be a Christ-follower and be dishonest. ³

The next thing that Jesus goes after is their tithe. They were proud of their tithe, because it was something from the law that they conscientiously followed – even tithing their herbs. Jesus isn't faulting them for tithing, but neither can He affirm them because, while they tithed, they were **bigoted and unjust, harsh and unmerciful, faithless and unfaithful!** *I'm* not saying that! Jesus did! He says they should have been just, merciful and faithful *and* have been tithers on top of that – in that order! But obviously He read their hearts and knew that kindness, compassion, love, caring, wasn't true of them! They were arrogant, malicious, selfish people that used God for their own purposes – purposes that had nothing to do with God. They used Him to garner reactions of respect; if not respect, fear from other people. They used Him to become wealthy. They used God to leverage control over others - to lord it over them – to be spiritual bullies. They used God to protect their territory. *As the scriptures say – there is nothing new under the sun.

I just had a nephew resign his position as worship pastor and overseer of small groups this past week, due to his executive pastor being threatened by his popularity in the church. So, behind the scenes this senior pastor had systematically waged psychological warfare on my nephew – running him down in front of other staff – criticizing his work/disapproving continually, over-working him and so on. Now this is happening to one of the most gifted, dedicated, gentle souls I have ever run into. But on the face of it – what everyone sees in that church is that this senior pastor says all the right things, seems very caring of his congregation, is an ambitious visionary for the future of the congregation, and is a good speaker! That is all they see. It is the behind-the-scenes garbage that the congregation doesn't see that is actually who this guy is. Even if my nephew was the only person in this guy's life that he chose to single out and pick on (and, of course, he is not the only one, but if even if he was...), this shockingly petty, and ungodly behavior should disqualify him from positions of ministry leadership completely! But, of course, it is a tightly held secret within the inner circle! This kind of thing is pandemic – everywhere, but especially in large city churches! Ambition - the drive to be BIG... to be SOMEBODY, combined with selfishness, combined with unresolved daddy issues, results in a driven man who is basically, under all that surface confidence and pizazz, insecure, and therefore prone to bouts of paranoia (people are against me), jealousy – is he trying to ingratiate himself with the people so that he can turn them against me and take my job (the traitor)! Why, last week I even refrained from my habit of calling him “incompetent”, the ungrateful wretch! If we only could read people like Jesus did, we would see so many with unsundered hearts, and because of it, ugly on the inside!



That is the type of character deficiencies that Jesus could clearly make out in the personalities of these men. They represented God to the Jewish people, but they represented Him badly because then didn't know Him or really care to! They only knew how they could use God and that was of vital importance. They had carved out their territory, their sphere of influence, their self-centric world, and Jesus was jeopardizing all of it with his strange new take on the teachings of Moses, and his upside-down values, and His obvious disdain for their religious brotherhood.



In the same paragraph Jesus concludes his thought with a general observation about the way they practiced their religion. “***You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel.***” - Brilliant imagery – so memorable in its wording that it has become a well-known saying in modern vernacular! They made a big deal out of nothing while letting the important things slide! In their world of prohibitions, they strained credulity in what passed for being okay and what didn't pass for okay! Character issues vs strange utilitarian prohibitions – like God cared about straining a gnat out of one's soup because it was believed to have cloven feet like a camel, but didn't care about their plotting against His Son! Really?! What this came out of was the fact that animals with certain foot structures were specifically prohibited by the Law of Moses from human consumption. Why that was so - well - we do not have that information. Believe me, there was a reason, but the ages have separated us from that knowledge. But the crazy thing about a teeny-tiny bug like a gnat was that no one even knew for sure if it was true! No one could see something as small as a gnat's foot, and, of course, there were no magnifying devices to actually have a good look be sure. But, regardless, some respected rabbi of a long-previous age had put his stamp of approval on it this conjecture and it had become mired in religious legalities – ***passionate*** legalities! These people had become personally **invested** in this issue of straining one's soup ***for bugs with possible camel-type feet!*** To them, the coming of the Kingdom of God hinged on minutia such as this! This was the kind of thing, (I would think), that the Pharisees and Sadducees fought about all the time since the Sadducees didn't accept oral tradition additions to the Law! So passions were ignited by something so stupid and trite, while no one saw the real and underlying issues of ***really bad character*** that were at play just under the surface! They had normalized hypocrisy, along with the vicious scheming and plotting that would soon send Jesus to a Roman cross – a cross the Roman authorities ***disagreed with!***

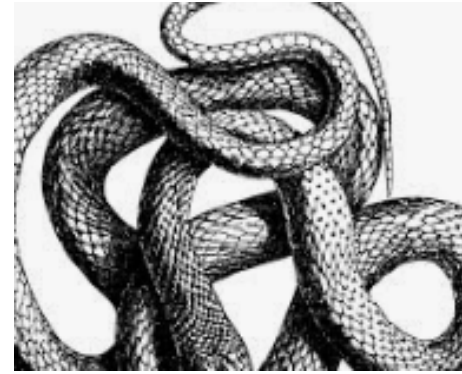
So then from there He piles on insult to injury! I'm just going to go down the line here of his true insults. There are insults that are not true. That is usually a joke. Then there are insults that are partially true. That is usually intended to be funny, but since it is based at least a little bit upon the truth, it usually is not funny to the one who it is about. And then there are the true insults! These usually utilize sarcasm and are based upon complete truth – truth that everyone ***knows*** is true – but it makes the person the obvious butt of the joke or ridicule! It makes a fool out of them because of a known behavior that is made to look ridiculous! That is what Jesus is using here – known behaviors of the religious elite that were exposed and open to ridicule!



He likens them to a cup that has been given a good washing on the outside, but when you peer into the inside you see a distasteful swill of old rotten backwash swishing around in the bottom of the cup like a disgusting, smelly bilge in the bottom of a boat! He says that when you peer into the depths of the average Pharisees, especially the aggressive ones that came out to attack Him on a daily basis, there was greed and self-serving practices in the bottom!

Then He doubles down and likens these same people to tombs that are well cared for by their living relatives – beautiful monuments, actually, but, He points out, they are full of “dead men’s bones”. They look good, but they contain death! *In Denmark their grave yards are amazing! I’m not joking! Many of the grave plots, even most of them, are surrounded by their own little hedges, with cedar or juniper shrubs and flowering perennial gardens around the edges! The headstones are often large uncut and unpolished field stones, maybe 300 to 700 pound stones from 2 to 4 feet high - a third or half sunk into the ground, with a name(s), dates, and a caption deeply engraved into them! It really is charming,.... ***until you remember what you are looking at!*** The fact that there are the remains of a dead person under the garden pretty much ruins your appreciation for these beautiful mini-parks! Jesus says these Pharisees are well kept up on the outside, but inside they are generally full of overall qualities such as hypocrisy and wickedness - qualities that sadly render them inaccessible to God!

They carefully tended to the graves of prophets from long ago, prophets who were disbelieved by their contemporaries – kings, king’s counselors, priests – who then marginalized them, muzzled them, persecuted them with various cruelties, and even murdered some of them! And Jesus points out that they *say* they would never have joined the persecutors of the ancient prophets, but Jesus reveals that in going against Him they disprove their claims. They actually would have joined right in, and the fact they had consistently, at every turn, pooled their efforts against Him, *proved it!* Then he taunts them. “*Go ahead and do what you have plotted to do against me! Finish it! Kill me like you would have killed them!*” Of course, Christ was just about ready for the cross by this time. His delaying tactics were over, so I think He was resigned to the terrible suffering to come and just wanted to get it over with. He is providing them with all the dark motivation they will need to hate Him enough to have Him killed



We don’t know this for sure, but I think Jesus had been getting wound up throughout this discourse, and by this time in it He was yelling! “***You SNAKES!***” He screams in verse 33, “***You brood*** (descendants) ***of vipers!*** *I am sending more prophets to you and you will pursue, persecute and murder them too because you do not like their message, just like your predecessors did to God’s messengers all through the ages. And so will come upon you the wrath of God that has been pent up against people like you since the beginning - and then YOU will be the ones to suffer.*” It was a prophecy, that in A.D. 70 certainly came true!

Yet, in verse 37 we see Jesus offering Himself to Jerusalem, which is another way of saying the very temple crowd that had put a plan in motion to capture Him and have Him killed – a plan that Jesus knew every detail of well in advance! Yet He speaks of His desire for them even though they always had been and still were a murderous pit of venomous snakes. But they had lost their opportunity now. They were committed to take the pathway to ruin and to hell! So very, very, deeply, sad!



I have to say here that I have run into religious opposition to Christ here in this “Christian” city on a regular basis. I saw one brochure put out by a denomination represented by a church here in town, that spoke to the errors and evils of “Decision Theology”, denying that anyone had the right to decide for themselves to follow the living Jesus and enjoy a loving relationship with Him! It must be brokered (by their church, of course). I have been astounded to read this! This is a church whose underlying belief is that *as* God’s only earthly representatives, THEY have the exclusive right to say who will be saved – through their denominationally sanctioned rituals! If they could, they would discourage an individual who was contemplating the option of following Christ! Think of it! They would say to such a person *“It is not up to you, it is up to us! But to be accepted by God you will have to do as we say – church sponsored baptism administered by our particular licensed clergy, communion, church membership, financial contributions, and a few other things”* – all superficial activities by the way, and not central to salvation. Salvation IS personal! It IS a thing that occurs between the individual and their maker. It IS a choice! The only essential ingredient to salvation is the Living Lord Jesus Christ! John defined Salvation first in His gospel, when He said in John 1:12,13, that to anyone who *“receives Him* (Christ)” – alluding to the idea of welcoming Him into one’s life - welcoming Him as the central authority figure. And He (Christ) would give all who willingly do this the right to become a favored child of God with all the rights (using the traditions of that culture) as a son and heir! And Christ has continued holding out His hands to even the most stubborn, obnoxious, resistant rebels and with the loving persistence of God, has continued to invite you in! That is the good news of the Gospel! Take advantage of it! This is a most generous offer! It is not an offer that lasts past the final deadline - the day of your death. Some people, like these oppositional Pharisees, had already gone past the point of no return *before* they died! That CAN still happen to people who have taken themselves out of the possibility of reconciliation with God by their fierce hostility to God! Such a person has to be as fiercely opposed to God as God is fiercely and unrelentingly holding out His love to them! But it does happen where God withdraws His offer and judgment takes its place Don’t let that be you! Just,.. DON’T!

[Rom. 10:21]