

## WOE! (PART 1) MATTHEW 23.13-39

After a break from Matthew for Holy Week, we return. We left Matthew after having begun the last of the five major speeches/discourses of Jesus found in chs 23–25. Jesus is still in the temple area after having left and come back after the royal entry recorded in ch. 21. He will leave to go to the Mt. of Olives at the beginning of ch. 24. He began this whole speech section by addressing his disciples and the crowds concerning the scribes and Pharisees. He told his followers that b/c the scribes and Pharisees sit in the seat of Moses, they needed to obey them. While they needed to obey them, they were not obligated and should not follow the example of their lives. They were like Pharaoh of old who put burdens on the backs of God's people and were not willing to free them from any of them. They loved titles, recognition, and praise of others, but they didn't want the responsibility that came with those titles. As God's representatives they were to use their authority to free people like Moses did and Jesus was doing. Instead, they used their positions simply for the recognition that it brought them while oppressing people given to their care. The disciples of Jesus were not to act this way. Jesus is setting up the Scribes and Pharisees as living, breathing, negative examples for his people. "If you want to know what *not* to be like, this is it!"

Jesus is not telling his disciples these things behind closed doors and just talking about the Pharisees. He could have done that and it been okay. He did it once before when telling his disciples to beware of the leaven of the Scribes and Pharisees (Mt 16.6). What was done in secret is now being shouted from the housetops as it were. Now he is confronting his enemies to their faces. I believe he is still giving his disciples an example of what to avoid, but Jesus speaks directly to the scribes and Pharisees in some of the most sobering words he ever speaks in his ministry. Over the next two Lord's Days I want us to look at these woes that Jesus pronounces concerning the scribes and Pharisees as well as his lament over Jerusalem. In these two sermons we will see that *Jesus pronounces the disfavor of God upon the Pharisees, setting them up as a negative example to his own disciples. This disfavor of God upon the Pharisees and Jerusalem is not something that Jesus enjoys but rather laments.*

Before digging into the text itself, there are some matters we need to see by way of introduction so that we can understand what is going on here.

First, we need to understand a little bit about the people Jesus is addressing: the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes were the scholars of the Law. They were a professional class of people, probably mostly associated with the Pharisees b/c of

their own zeal for the Law and the traditions of the fathers.

They are also called “lawyers” and “teachers.” B/c of their scholarly status with all things regarding the Law, they were involved not only in teaching the people but also judging disputes among the people and deciding what would be heresy and would not.

The Pharisees were a broader class of what we might call more professional theologians even though they might have engaged in other trades as well. They arose in the time that we call the intertestamental period, developing out of a zeal for purity when the priesthood became corrupt.

Over time their conservatism (i.e. seeking to preserve the “old ways”) became a stumbling-block when Jesus came. They didn’t want to move into the future and the kingdom of heaven that was now breaking in with Jesus.

Mt presents them in his Gospel as those who take up the vocation of the devil who tests Jesus and seeks to knock him off of the path the Father laid out before him. They don’t like the shape of the kingdom that Jesus is presenting, so they oppose him at every turn, eventually handing him over to death.

Jesus throughout calls them “hypocrites.” A hypocrite is not simply someone who sins. All sin but not all are hypocrites. A hypocrite is someone who leads a double life. He confesses one thing and puts on a show for the world to see, but then lives contrary to his confession.

A hypocrite e.g. is not simply a man who commits sexual infidelity, confesses it, and repents of it. His confession and repentance is consistent with his faith even though his infidelity is not. Sin is expected and provision is made for God’s people in dealing with it.

A hypocrite is someone who preaches against sexual infidelity all the while engaging in it himself w/o any remorse or repentance.

The scribes and Pharisees are hypocrites b/c they act in this way. They are zealous for the Law and make good outward shows. But they living contrary to the Law in so many ways; ways that Jesus will make clear in his denunciations of them.

Jesus also refers to them a number of times as “blind.” They are “blind guides” (16, 24), “blind fools” (17), “blind ones” (19), and “blind Pharisee” (26). This is

double-edged.

They cannot or will not evaluate what is wrong with themselves. But they are also the “eyes” of Israel. They sit in the seat of Moses making judgments. They are guides in Israel. They are the “eyes” of Israel and, as such, they are leading Israel wrongly.

Now, it should be noted that Jesus is not condemning every single Scribe and Pharisee just b/c he is a Scribe or Pharisee. Jesus is making broad statements concerning these groups. But there are individuals within the groups that are themselves disciples of Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews (Jn 3.1), but he helped bury Jesus (Jn 19.39). Joseph of Arimathea was also on the council that condemned Jesus to death, but he did not consent, he being a disciple of Jesus (cf. Lk 23.50; Jn 19.38).

The body as a whole was corrupt, but individuals within it were not necessarily so. We can learn something from this in itself: we may justifiably understand and condemn the practices of an organization, a church, a state, a nation, etc. w/o necessarily condemning every individual within it.

We may say, e.g., that Congress is corrupt w/o saying a particular member is corrupt. We may say that a particular denomination of the church is corrupt without saying that every individual in that denomination is corrupt; whether it is RCC, OC, PCA, PCUSA, etc.

Jesus is doing that very thing here. The majority has become corrupt b/c they oppose him. This is the way Israel is being led. Those under them should not follow their lead in this, but instead act differently.

If they follow their lead, they will fall under these same woes; something that is as true for the disciples of Jesus as it was for the Jews in the days of Jesus.

So, those are the characters and some of the characteristics of the characters Jesus deals with in this section. But we also need to understand just what Jesus is saying and see it in the setting in which Matthew is placing it.

Jesus pronounces woes upon the scribes and Pharisees. But what exactly is he saying when he says this? “Woe” is the pronouncement of a condition. It is the opposite of the state of blessedness.

Blessedness is to be in a state of favor (in this context with God). To be in a state of woe is to be in a state of disfavor. Woes are spoken by the prophets of God throughout Scripture to tell the people of God of their condition before God and what that means in terms of the punishment they will receive if they fail to repent.

For instance, Isaiah, in Isa 5 pronounces seven woes upon the people of God. They are in a condition of sin and ripe for punishment by God. They are coming under condemnation. That is what Jesus is doing right here.

Mt puts this in an interesting position in his book. These woes stand in contrast to what we call the Beatitudes; the blessedness of the people of God. There are eight beatitudes and there are eight woes here. (That is, unless you are reading a modern translation which leaves out v. 14, the second woe. I believe it ought to be there.)

The interesting juxtaposition is this, those who are the ones in the position of favor before God are those who are out of power and being persecuted. Those upon whom the woes are being pronounced are those who are in power among God's people and living essentially luxuriant lives.

The perception from the outside would be that these things ought to be reversed. But the problem is that the world is upside down. Jesus came to turn it right side up. In doing so those who are blessed are those who follow him to and through the cross while the ones who are under the woes are those who have the power to crucify him.

Just for example, the first beatitude is, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The first woe deals with the Scribes and Pharisees not entering the kingdom of heaven and keeping others out of it.

They are parallel like this throughout ending with the blessedness of the persecuted and the woes upon those persecute and kill those whom Jesus sends.

There is an important truth about the pronouncement of these woes that we need to keep in mind. Anytime there is a pronouncement of judgment like this to living people, this is an expression of grace b/c it is a call to repentance.

Remember the preaching of Jonah in Ninevah. He comes through declaring that Ninevah will be destroyed in 40 days. The people hear this message (presumably with no invitation for repentance) and they repent in sackcloth and ashes.

Jesus is pronouncing that these woes and destruction are certain IF they do not heed the warning. As long as you are living and breathing, you have the opportunity to respond to the message. The Pharisees will respond, but it will not be with repentance but greater recalcitrance.

This is the effect of the message: it creates soft hearts that lead to repentance or hard hearts that lead to punishment.

Now, we are simply going to go through the woes one-by-one, covering the first several today and, as the Lord wills the rest of them next Lord's Day.

As we go through them I want us to see what Jesus was saying to the Scribes and Pharisees within their particular context. But b/c this is not only addressed to them but also an example to his disciples, I want us to examine ourselves in light of Jesus words and see where we are doing well and where we may need to change.

*Transition:* Jesus begins his prophetic pronouncements of denunciation in v. 13 where he pronounces ...

### **1. WOE TO THE FALSE DOOR-KEEPERS (13)**

As mentioned already the Scribes and Pharisees are leaders in Israel. They are the ones who interpret the Scriptures for the people, leading them this way or that according to those interpretations.

As such they are the door-keepers, guardians of the Garden and house of God. This is their assumed responsibility. Jesus' words reflect the fact that they have failed in this responsibility and stand in danger of judgment.

The Scribes and Pharisees have "shut" the kingdom of heaven in the faces of men (lit.). People have come to the door in the life and ministry of Jesus and they have actively sought to keep people away from him.

Jesus explains this by saying not only are they not entering themselves, but they are keeping others from entering who would enter otherwise. It is not enough for them to reject Jesus themselves, they must keep other people away.

This reminds me of a time when I was pastoring a church in northern MS. We were having some special meetings (i.e. a "revival") one week. One of our Southern Baptist missionaries came to talk about his work and he was rather dark

complected. He was an Indian.

A lady came into the building, turned around and walked out, and stood at the doors trying to keep others from going in. This is actively keeping people away. This is what the Pharisees were doing. They were not passively rejecting Jesus. They were active antagonists of the kingdom of heaven being realized in Jesus.

Can the disciples of Jesus possibly be guilty of such things? Well, yes. Ours may not be as overt, blatant, or as apparently sinister, but the church still acts in such ways today. We do it every time we don't like the way Christ has ordered his kingdom and we resist his ways.

Whole denominations do this when they adopt ways that are contrary to the ways of Christ in the name of being "relevant" or b/c something "feels right." E.g., when denominations don't like Christ's word concerning the sinfulness of the practice of homosexuality and the forbiddance of same-sex marriage and declare that they are accepting of these sinful lifestyles, then they are shutting the kingdom of heaven in the faces of the homosexuals by lying to them about what God says.

On the other hand, the church of Jesus Christ can become so so-called "conservative" that they reject those who struggle with sins of homosexuality, keeping them out b/c they don't want to be corrupted even though the person is not practicing that lifestyle.

The Pharisees acted like this with people whom they considered ne'er-do-wells, not believing that a kingdom prophet would eat with such people. We can shut the kingdom of heaven to those people in the same way the Pharisees did.

I must say at this point that I believe that our particular church is very welcoming of people who might fall into some of these categories. This is something that must be guarded.

But we can also do this in more sinister ways that are covered with thin veneers of piety and desires for purity. The Pharisees were also shutting people out of the kingdom by diverting people from the Word of God through their human traditions.

They were teaching people to do things that at the least distracted them from the commands of Scripture and at the most ran completely contrary to the Scriptures. We have seen some of these things in the past.

The church still does these things. We have looked at the church's adoption of icon veneration and prayers to the saints as things that are contrary to Scripture. Yet branches of the church teach these things as not only options (which would be bad enough), but as necessary for your salvation.

But lest we think that we in our circles don't have ample illustrations of how this can be done by us, let me name some things. Just like other denominations, we can make our denomination or our small group of denominations equal to the church of Christ.

Of course, we have the gospel in its purest state. Those who disagree with us, who deny the way we say things, well, they are striking at the heart of the gospel message and are outside the pale. We shut the kingdom door in the faces of others who are not just like us.

Our own denomination and particularly politically powerful people within it make their own interpretation of our Standards equal to or above the Scriptures. Our Standards have said everything there is to say about the Scriptures.

If you don't agree with the wording or don't like formulations concerning the "covenant of works" or you don't have a "law-gospel hermeneutic" then you are right on the edge if not already over the line of denying the gospel of justification by faith alone.

(What? You didn't know your soul's salvation rested in whether or not you understood these things? I fear for your souls!)

We do it in the area of the way we rear our children which includes everything from breast-feeding to how we educate our children. Yes, in some Reformed circles parents will be ostracized and essentially considered abusive if the mother doesn't breast feed.

Should that REALLY be a measure of whether we shut the door on people?

If you don't homeschool or send your children to a Christian school, then you can have the door shut on you. And heaven help you if you actually send your child to a public school! You are probably on the road to hell as we speak.

I realize that there are pros and cons that can be argued for all of these issues, and we need to examine some of things. But should these be the reasons to shut people

out of the kingdom (and people do act as if they are out of the kingdom many times)?

Beware of the sins of the Scribes and Pharisees. We are a Christian church. Granted we have our distinctives, but we should be welcoming of all who can tolerate our distinctives and live lives of repentance and peace with us as a church of Jesus Christ.

*Transition:* Jesus pronounces woe upon those who are the false door-keepers of the kingdom of heaven and then moves on to further pronouncements b/c of other sins. He denounces them secondly in the form of a ...

## **2. WOE TO THE PIOUS OPPRESSORS (14)**

I briefly touched upon the issue of the presence of this verse in the introductory material. The question about the presence of this verse arises from the various manuscripts we have that have been discovered over the past several hundred years.

Some will say that this verse is not contained in what they consider the best manuscripts, so they relegate it to a footnote. Having studied some in this discipline that is called lower textual criticism (that is, trying to discover what the original manuscripts had in them), I think some of their rules for determining the “best” manuscripts are quite arbitrary and ill-founded.

Nevertheless, there are different manuscript traditions. None of the differences effects any serious doctrinal issues of Scripture. E.g., there is no manuscript tradition that has something in it that denies the deity of Jesus.

Most are just like this one. This is a saying of Jesus that is recorded in both Mark and Luke. Jesus did say it. It is a question of whether Mt actually recorded it.

The literary structure of Mt with the parallels between these woes and the beatitudes seems to indicate to me that it ought to be there. It is there in your old AV and NKJ, but in the latter there will be a note that it is not contained in some manuscripts.

Anyway, I mention all of this b/c it can be a distraction while I’m trying to tell you what it says and you are wondering why it is stuck in the margin.

With that said, the Scribes and Pharisees are devouring widows houses. That is, they are consuming everything that widows have. But widows among God's people were to be cared for by the larger community, especially if they didn't have immediate family.

The context in which this saying of Jesus is found in Mk 12.38-44 and Lk 20.45-21.4 is the widow giving her two mites in the Temple. Jesus commends here for doing so, but it seems to be that the Scribes and Pharisees were exacting things from the widows that were not required of them.

Instead of draining the widows of all of their substance, they should have been supporting the widows. This is what God required of them. Oppressing the widow and the orphan, the most vulnerable people in society, was condemned by God as being especially abominable (cf. Ex 22.22; Dt 14.29; 16.11; Isa 1.17, 23; 10.2; Jer 7.5-7; 22.3; Ez 22.7; Mal 3.5).

The Scribes and Pharisees were doing this like the modern day televangelist who tells those widows to send in their last bit of money as an act of faith. And with great piety in their luxurious lifestyles they pray long prayers.

They cover their sins of oppression in the robes of super-spirituality. They are using their long prayers to persuade people of the righteousness of their cause in order to exploit them. That is especially heinous.

Can the church still do this today? Absolutely. As I mentioned already the hucksters who push seed of faith ministries on people in order to draw out from them money they don't have are exploiting the poor.

At least with casinos you know their end game. They are trying to get every dime from you that they can with the chance of getting something back.

These guys do it in the name of Jesus b/c they care about people they say. They want to see these people prosper. Their condemnation will be greater than that of any mobster casino owner.

But the condemnation can be directed also toward the church who doesn't support its widows when it is called for. Paul gives qualifications for widows who are to receive support and the church has an obligation when these qualifications are met. We must take care of those who cannot take care of themselves.

It is not enough to have a great liturgy or even sing the Psalms. It is all in vain and pretentious if we are not helping the helpless. Our praying is supposed to shape us to care about others around us. If it is not doing that, it is an abominable sacrifice.

Again, I don't see CPC at great fault here. I believe we do what we can when we see the need. But again, that is something that we must guard against AND we must speak out against when we see it in other churches.

*Transition:* There is a third sin which Jesus says puts the Scribes and Pharisees in a position of disfavor with God. Jesus speaks about it when he pronounces his third woe:

### **3. WOE TO HELL'S EVANGELISTS (15)**

Again addressing the Scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites, Jesus says that they travel around land and sea to make one proselyte and in doing so make him twice-fold a child of hell/Gehenna.

First, Gehenna was the trash dump outside of the city that burned day and night. It was an unclean place where all of the refuse was thrown. So, it is equated with the punishment that all of those who are cast out of the holy city will endure b/c they have been found to be unclean.

Jesus says that the proselytes, the converts, of the Scribes and Pharisees are in a worse state than they were before they were proselytized. This proselytization might have been of those who were rank pagans who were already children of hell.

If so, the condemnation of Jesus really stings. Here they thought they were making them clean and saving them from the fire. Yet they are really preparing a lower degree of hell and a greater punishment for them in it by having them convert.

This might also refer to the proselytization of the Gentile God-fearers. There were believers in YHWH who did not become members of the priestly nation of Israel ... and that was okay. But many of the Pharisees obviously didn't think so.

They go through all of their synagogues which were spread all over the Roman Empire, and they try to make the Gentiles come under the yoke of the Law, bringing them under particular and heavier obligations.

But what is more, they are bringing them in and teaching them in their ways of the

Law, which means that they are teaching them to reject Jesus. They are actually shutting the door of the kingdom to them.

There may be even another dimension to being twice-fold a child of hell. Just from experience we know that proselytes tend to be even more zealous than their teachers. So, while these Pharisees were antagonistic against Jesus, their disciples might have been double; something that is possibly revealed in the persecution of the church as well as the Judaizers that chased Paul from city to city.

In making these proselytes they are creating people who are even more antagonistic to Christ, thus, making them twice-fold children of hell. The Scribes and Pharisees are hell's evangelists.

Can the church be guilty of doing the same things today? Again, yes. As I mentioned earlier, the church can create antagonism to Christ and his word by proclaiming its opposite in his name. People come in under false pretenses, thinking they are okay, yet they have become "Christian demons" so to speak, fit for nothing but the flames of hell.

But the church also needs to be careful about just what kind of disciples we are making. Are we creating disciples of Jesus who follow him in taking up their crosses, or are we creating disciples who care only about the intriguing theological questions but don't care a wit about dying with Christ for the sake of others?

I want to tread lightly here b/c I realize there are fine lines that need to be maintained. But I also want us to guard against making disciples who simply think in certain intellectual categories (i.e. Calvinist, paedobaptist, etc.) instead of those who follow Jesus in their everyday lives.

You see, it is easy for us nowadays to traverse over land and sea without every leaving the confines of our home. We have the internet where anybody with half a brain and the ability to type can put his every thought before the world.

People have created these Christian enclaves on the internet where they all think alike, say things the same way as one another, and try to convert others to be in their chat-rooms. They blog and go back and forth in comment sections all day long staring at a computer screen never having to interact with someone face-to-face.

They are talking to some guy in Jabuti, Africa about how he needs to be

supralapsarian or he is in danger of becoming a heretical Arminian, but they don't take time to go minister to their neighbors. They are more worried about someone being a Calvinist than they are about whether or not he is a Christian.

Don't get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with trying to convince people of good biblical positions on issues against bad biblical teaching. I, for one, would argue for the Calvinistic way of thinking as being more biblical than other positions.

But there are times that people get so riled up about these things that people who aren't in my tradition or my way of thinking are consigned to hell. And in trying to convert them to your way of thinking—a way of thinking that cares more about so-called doctrinal purity than it does following Jesus in laying down your life for others—makes intellectual zealots who may not be disciples of Jesus at all.

We as a church are convinced that paedobaptism is biblically proper. I believe we should encourage other Christians to believe this way. But we should not try to convince people with the argument, “And if you don't believe this way, you, your children, and your pets will all go to hell.”

When we do things like this we are not making good disciples of Christ b/c they are being taught to be merciless toward those who disagree with us over issues that don't necessarily determine final destinies.

We must beware of the sins of the Scribes and Pharisees. Let us make sure that we are leading people to follow Jesus, teaching them to observe all that he commanded us.

These woes still stand as negative examples for the disciples of Jesus. These are things that we must avoid lest we fall under the same condemnation. Let us then examine ourselves, understand where we are strong and guard those areas. Let us also see where we are weak and possibly sinning and let us strengthen or correct these things for the sake of Christ and his kingdom.

**Taught** 4-11-10 Community PC

**Communion Exhortation:**

- Jesus pronounces these woes upon those who reject him and live lives that are contrary to him.
- Though we sin, most of us do not fall into this category.
- We are blessed, in a state of favor with God.
- Sometimes it is difficult to hear a sermon like this and feel worthy to come to the Table.
- But if you are trusting Christ and following him, you are in a favored state before God b/c you are in Christ.

**Warning:** Those who must worry are those who live in a manner contrary to the way of Christ.

**Baptism:**

**People of God:** Come now you highly favored of God and receive nourishment at his Table.

**Pastoral Charge:**