

Woes

In the Book of James, our Lord cautions us that not many people should be teachers, because in the Day of Judgment, teachers will be held to a much stricter standard.

And we are also warned in 2 Peter 2 that there will be false teachers and leaders among us, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies.

And as we found in the scripture passage that we studied in last week's message, the Lord Jesus was, and is, very concerned about the trustworthiness of those who would be leaders within our churches. And as we noted, His words about those men who were in leadership during His day were not words of praise and approval, but criticisms, strong criticisms and warnings. And those criticisms and warnings continue on into the passage that we'll study here today.

Listen to the words of the Lord Jesus as He addressed these false teachers and corrupt church leaders of His day. Beginning in verse 42 of Luke chapter 11, Jesus said,

⁴²"But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.

⁴³Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.

⁴⁴Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like graves which are not seen, and the men who walk over *them* are not aware of *them*."

⁴⁵Then one of the lawyers answered and said to Him, "Teacher, by saying these things You reproach us also."

⁴⁶And He said, "Woe to you also, lawyers! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.

⁴⁷Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. ⁴⁸In fact, you bear witness that you approve the deeds of your fathers; for they indeed killed them, and you build their tombs. ⁴⁹Therefore the wisdom of God also said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and persecute,' ⁵⁰ that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be

required of this generation, ⁵¹from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple. Yes, I say to you, it shall be required of this generation.

⁵²“Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered.”

⁵³And as He said these things to them, the scribes and the Pharisees began to assail *Him* vehemently, and to cross-examine Him about many things, ⁵⁴lying in wait for Him, and seeking to catch Him in something He might say, that they might accuse Him. (Luke 11:42-54)

When the Lord Jesus came in the flesh to live among us, He came for a very special purpose. His mission was a mission of mercy. He came “to seek and to save those who were lost”.

A favorite verse in these scriptures that we all know well is John 3:16, which tells us that,

¹⁶ . . . God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

And then, the very next verse, John 3:17 tells us that,

¹⁷ . . . God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. (John 3:17)

From these words of promise, we can know that even though these Scribes and Pharisees that Jesus was addressing with these words were thoroughly corrupt and perhaps even reprobate. As He pronounced these “woes” against them, His intent was not to condemn them, but rather to warn them, and to even reclaim some of their souls from eternal condemnation.

And His words were not as the “lawyer” accused Him in verse 45, saying,

⁴⁵ . . . “Teacher, by saying these things You reproach us also.” (Luke 11:45)

Yes, if this were you or me saying these things, it would simply be another “rant” on our part, one of many that we often do. But for the Lord Jesus, His words were never just another senseless rant of reproach.

No, Jesus genuinely loved these men, with a love far greater than we can ever imagine.

And yes, at the end of time, on that great and terrible Day of Judgment, condemnation will surely come to some, or perhaps even to all of them, as it will come to all people who reject the Lord Jesus and the redemption He provides.

But until that day, and though Jesus' words may not exactly fit our version of a call to repentance, His words truly were intended for that divine purpose, to reprove and rebuke those men, calling them to repentance.

But sadly, within His words, and especially within the use of the word "woe", we can detect a sense of deep regret. That's because Jesus already knew the hearts and even the very thoughts of those men. And He knew that most of these men would ultimately refuse to repent.

But as the divine "gatekeeper" for all mankind, the "watchman" over all men's souls, Jesus knew that it was His calling to warn them of their sins and of the impending doom that awaits anyone who refuses to turn from their sinful ways.

Jesus had spoken those very words through the mouth of the Prophet Ezekiel many hundreds of years earlier, holding Ezekiel accountable in his day. And then here, holding these Pharisees accountable in their day, and even and especially holding Himself accountable.

Listen to those words of warning given through Ezekiel several hundred years earlier. Ezekiel chapter 3.

¹⁷ Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore hear a word from My mouth, and give them warning from Me: ¹⁸When I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked *man* shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. ¹⁹Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul.(Ezekiel 3:17-19)

Folks, Jesus is not exempt from His own law. And even with the full knowledge that many of those men would not listen and repent, He was still faithful to fulfill His responsibility as the "Watchman" and to warn them.

But also, you and I need to clearly understand that these words are being spoken to us, to you and to me, to warn us, to reprove and rebuke us, and to call us to repentance. But also, and very importantly, to make us to know that we also must be “watchmen”, “watchmen” who will and who “must” warn others of the impending judgement to come.

And so that no one will have an excuse for “not knowing”, here the Lord Jesus carefully laid out the rules, which if not followed, would surely become a “formal indictment” on that great Day of Judgment.

Here, as he did on so many other occasions, Jesus clearly explained to these religious leaders that although they were keeping the tiniest details of the law, the ceremonies, the customs, and traditions, they were missing out on the real intent of God's heart, that men should “do justly, love mercy and walk humbly before our God”.

And they were missing out on the “first and greatest commandment”, that of loving the Lord their God with all of their heart, all of their soul, all of their mind and all of their strength. And then also loving the people as they loved themselves.

Unfortunately, these men were little more than “whitewashed tombs”, clean and well-dressed on the outside, but dead on the inside, keeping the tiniest detail of the law and the customs, but forgetting justice and the love of God.

But why and how could they have gotten so off-course, both in their own direction and in the direction they were leading the “sheep” they were called to pastor.

The fault lies within the same pitfalls that besets even us today. The failure begins within our own souls, and then is further provoked by the evil one, the devil, who is ever and always leading us off into wrong directions.

In our own souls, there seems to be implanted this “great lie”, the “lie” that tells us that we must surely have to “do something”, even do lots of things in order to save our souls, great efforts on our part by which we “earn” God's approval, and in the process, “earn our salvation”. And though we are told clearly in these scriptures that such belief is not true, we still fall victim to it.

And unfortunately, that belief about works was, and still is, foundational within the Jewish faith.

As we can see from the warnings given by the Lord Jesus, how that “great lie” was manifest in the Pharisees’ incessant custom of tithing on everything, even on the cooking herbs and medicinal spices, mint and rue and herbs.

Unfortunately, misguided beliefs and customs can often win out in the minds of men and women. Why? It’s because again, it simply seems logical that we should have to do something to “earn” God’s favor.

But even worse than that, because they, the Scribes and the Pharisees, were in authority over the people under their care, they could and did also demand the same foolish customs of the people they pastored, leading them down the same wrong path that they themselves were on.

But again let us also always remember and never forget that within the mix of this and every transaction between God and men, the devil and his armies of demons are also ever and always busy about their tasks, slithering their way into the minds of men and waging war against our souls.

And no, we are never able to see those enemies of our souls. All we ever see are the faces of men and women. But behind those faces, and behind all those foolish demands that are made in the name of religion are the armies of satan ever guiding, ever influencing, ever confusing even the most well intended person to reach out and to misguide others.

Through the unseen subtle ways of the evil one, men and women are influenced to take the otherwise good and perfect measures of God’s law and grace and carry them to corrupt extremes.

Those influences are seen here in these scriptures in the responses of these governing Scribes and Pharisees. And Jesus clearly warned them about it. On at least one occasion He even told them that their father was the devil.

But we, you and I also must be clearly warned. It truly is no different for us in our day. Those same influences are taking place every moment within many of our

own religious leaders, and within our government and within our culture, and yes, even within our own souls.

And what are satan's favorite weapons of influence to lead, to guide and to manipulate us into our corruption. His most favorite of weapons is the very one that corrupted and enslaved him. It is the same basic sin that satan in turn then used to enslave Adam and Eve, and it is the same basic sin that satan consequently uses to enslave most all of mankind, especially these Scribes and Pharisees. It was, and it is, "ego", "pride"! Listen! Verse 43,

⁴³Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. (Luke 11:43)

The Scribes and Pharisees loved their significance. And so do we, you and I! We enjoy being recognized and held in high esteem.

But we need to beware, as we bask in our significance, there are pitfalls at every turn. As Jesus warned these Scribes and Pharisees, their pride would lead them into other sins, sins like hypocrisy. The Pharisees seemed to have that double-standard of belief where they could say to themselves I am always thinking the very best thoughts and doing the very best things, but then judging others to be thinking and doing less.

But they would not permit others to have those same liberties! While they might be able to live a double-standard existence and believe themselves to be free from guilt and sin, others on the other hand were not allowed that same privilege. They were guilty. And the Scribes and the Pharisees would use every "jot and tittle" of the law to condemn them for it.

Folks, that is hypocrisy! Verse 44,

⁴⁴Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like graves which are not seen, and the men who walk over them are not aware of them." (Luke 11:44)

Do we not know, can we not understand that we are ever and always a witness before everyone we know, to our families, to our friends, and especially to those that look to us for authority and guidance.

Many of them trust us and will follow our guidance, our witness! Do we, perhaps unknowingly, do as these Scribes were doing and misguide them with the things we do, or even worse, with things that we don't do, but should do? Verse 52.

⁵² Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.”
(Luke 11:52)

And listen, just as Jesus is warning these Scribes and Pharisees, if our direction is the wrong direction, truly “woe be unto us if we lead one of God's little ones astray. It would be better for us if a millstone were tied to our neck and we were thrown into the deepest sea”.

Here, Jesus was saying that these religious leaders were being as unmarked graves that made others unclean by their teachings and their behaviors. Under the Old Testament law, a person who touched a grave became unclean. Sometimes a body might be buried in an “unmarked grave”, causing an unwary traveler to become unclean by walking over it. And like those unmarked graves hidden in a field, the Pharisees corrupted anyone who would come near to them and follow after their witness and teaching.

Do we, do you, do I do that? Folks, I must conclude that, yes, we do exactly that. Why would I pronounce such an accusation upon us? It is because, I have only to look at some of the beliefs, the habits and the behaviors that I have passed along to some of my own loved ones to see that, yes, perhaps unknowingly so, but still the same, I have led them astray.

Unfortunately, I can sometimes hear my words from days gone by, being re-spoken to me. And I am immediately convicted of my sinful misguidance of those dear ones.

So, yes, I am a wretch, and I am a hypocrite. I have thought that I knew it all for most of my life. And I do want to repent of that wretched sinfulness.

I do not want to be as this “lawyer” here in verse 45, who insisted on defending himself. He had no defense, but neither do I. And neither do you! None of us has any defense. We are all guilty, to some degree, of being those unmarked graves that contaminate anyone who comes near to us.

But folks, I don't want to be that way anymore. And I know that you don't want to be that way either. But where do we begin? We begin by dealing with the basic problems that Jesus spoke about here, our "ego", our "pride".

Our "ego", our "pride" is overcome by one thing and one thing only, and that is humility. And the only true source of humility is the Spirit and Person of Jesus Christ.

As we know from those precious words in John chapter 15, Jesus is the vine and we are His branches. And as His branches, we are to always be bearing good and righteous fruit for others to see and to enjoy. And you and I must diligently seek to allow Him, Jesus Christ, to live and abide within our souls. And as we yield ourselves to Him, His fruit of humility will come to the surface and become our normal behavior.

This is God's message to you and to me today, that in these Scribes and Pharisees we must be willing to see many of our own sinful attitudes and behaviors, and to take warning from Jesus' words.

And we must be willing to take a humble look at ourselves, an evaluation that gives no defense, and we must yield ourselves completely to Christ. If we will do that, then He will not only change our lives, He will also then be able to change other people's lives through us.

That is God's promise to us and He is faithful to fulfill it. Listen, and we'll close with these words given in Matthew 11:28.

²⁸Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Let's pray.