

Sunday, November 1, 2020

Woe, Whoa!

Peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. As mentioned in the beginning of our gospel reading, we have been looking at the foundational teachings of Jesus that are found during Holy Week; His last days before He was crucified. We've been focusing on the teachings from Tuesday and Wednesday of that week. So far, we've heard the parables of Jesus. Parables that had three very clear messages. One that He is the Christ, the promised Messiah, the Son of God, the Redeemer and He has all supremacy. Second, the religious leaders were corrupt, and their teachings were far from the truth. And third, as a result of the rejection by these religious leaders, the gospel message was going to go to all who were seeking the truth, both Jew and gentile.

Last week we heard Jesus again being confronted by the Pharisees and the Scribes and being questioned about the commandments. Jesus took the Ten Commandments and He condensed them down into simply two commandments. The first is love the Lord your God with all your heart soul and mind and then love your neighbor as yourself. It's a dynamic teaching and it's one that is troubling because especially then, and today we like to be very proud of ourselves and put ourselves first. That first commandment is calling on us to understand that God is in control and that we are His servants. But as His servants, He calls us to be servants to each other. So, He ends by telling us humble yourselves. Humble yourselves, because those who humble themselves will end up being exalted in heaven. Those who exalt themselves here, will be humbled in the age to come. Like Jesus, Luther challenged those religious leaders and that set us on this course of let's go back to scripture and what the scripture teaches.

Today we will focus on the very last lessons that come out of conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. It's a sermon that's titled: "Woe, Whoa!" The word whoa, W-H-O-A is an expression of surprise, alarm, or to command attention. It can be a command to stop, to slow down, or wait. You've probably heard it in some western movies, "Whoa, hold your

horses,” and there's a message of whoa, stop, slow down, wait, listen! What is He saying to stop, to slow down, to listen to? His teaching, but it's also a call to look and see what's going on around you.

He begins, and He's speaking to the crowds, to His disciples and He says, “Beware of the Pharisees, they like to sit on Moses’ seat. Now what is He saying? Well, we have to understand a little bit about First Century Judaism. They would go to the temple for the feasts, but on the Sabbath, they would go to their synagogues. They did things a little bit differently than we do in the church today. I am teaching, preaching from a pulpit. Back then, the teacher would sit, and so there was a seat in the front of the synagogue it was known as Moses’ Seat. From here, your scribe, your pharisee, your priest, would teach you. They would teach the law and the prophets. Jesus follows that up with; “so practice and observe whatever they tell you.” It's a reference to practice and observe what is found in the law and in the prophets. But here comes the whoa, because He follows it right up with, not what they do.

And what did they do? Well, they would preach but they would not practice what they preached. We would call that hypocrisy. Jesus gives them some examples of what they are to look and see and learn from. One, the Scribes and the Pharisees, quote “tie up heavy burdens that are hard to bear,” and yet they won't even lift them. They won't even use a finger to try to lift them. What is He talking about? The Scribes and the Pharisees, in particular, had made many extra-biblical, rabbinical traditions. That means things that are above and beyond what the Bible calls for. They called them, I quote, “traditions of the fathers.” These were traditions that were based in the law, but took it to a whole new level. They primarily concern themselves in the areas of, (this probably will surprise you tremendously) tithing or money and righteousness. Here's what you need to do. Now, in the beginning the whole concept behind this was very good. They were designed to show the people that, we really owe God for our very existence, and for our Salvation. So these right living laws, these laws of righteousness, were designed and meant to show the people just how hard it is to try to be like God and how impossible it is. Ultimately, it was thought that this would drive the people to see their need for a savior, but overtime it became the way of Salvation; works righteousness.

Over time they became a means by which the Pharisees could look good or glorify themselves because; well Jesus says they do all their deeds to be seen by others. They used them for elevated their own position in life. How did they do this? When Jesus talks about making their phylactery's broad; a phylactery and think I've mentioned this before, was a box that would be put on the forehead and then tied with like a bandana sort of thing, and in it would be the Ten Commandments and it showed that the Ten Commandments were close to your mind at all times. They started making these phylactery's bigger and more ornate with not just a bandana, but a gold scarf and it drew attention to them. Jesus mentions that their fringes were long and they would wear a robe, probably something similar to this that I'm wearing now. But on the bottom of it there would be tassels. Either 12 tassels, one for each tribe of Israel, or 10 tassels representing the law. Those tassels were normally gold with a purple cord representing Gods laws sewn in them. So, they'd make them extra-long and extra-ornate so people would see them.

Jesus says they love the place of honor at feasts. This would be the feast that the people came to the temple to attend and they loved being up there in front of the people. They also loved the best seats in the synagogue; that would be the seat of Moses, the one where the people would listen to them. And they loved to be greeted in the marketplace, being called Rabbi; which means teacher or father. Which literally takes us back to that tradition of the fathers. When they would say father, it was the essence of saying, you were the one who brings us the heritage. You were the one who is our tradition. And Jesus says woah, woah, woah, slow down! You shouldn't want to be called Rabbi. You shouldn't be called Father, because God is the one who gave the law. He's the ultimate teacher. It's His law. Whoa! If you want to be the greatest, be a servant. Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord. He'll exalt you. But if you exalt yourself, whoa, whoa, whoa! You don't want to go there because it's the Lord who will humble you.

And that leads us to the woe. W-O-E, the second woe and the very last lessons of conflict. It's where Jesus says, "woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites." He says that six times and one time He says, "woe to you blind guides." that word we, W-O-E in the Greek is a very

significant term. It means certain judgment and absolute destruction. That really flies in the face of something I heard this past week about someone confronting another person based on political mindsets and thoughts. The person said, 'I know you're not a Christian because Jesus taught love and acceptance.' What evidently, that person has not read the second half of Matthew chapter 23; because if you want the antithesis of love and acceptance just use that Greek term for woe. It is saying you are so far out of bounds; you are guaranteed judgment by God and you are guaranteed eternal condemnation and destruction. So, when Jesus says woe to you scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. He is using very strong language, the strongest language you can use, and He ties it with the strongest symbolism. There are seven phrases of woe, and seven is the number of perfection so it's adding to that woe. Not just guaranteed, it is God's perfect judgement on you.

And so, He says, 'woe to you Pharisees and scribes, hypocrites. You shut the Kingdom of heaven in people's faces. How were they doing it? They didn't allow others to enter. If people were trying to find truth, and trying to do what was right, the Pharisees would condemn them and in the process; take others down with them. The Second Woe, they'll do anything to make a proselyte; to make someone become a follower. What does Jesus say? That in so doing this they are in trapping these converts and making quote children of hell through their self-aggrandizement and focus on them instead of God's word. They were guaranteeing the judgment of those who followed. The third woe, this is the blind guides. As blind guides they taught the people that if you wanted people to believe you, which right there you've got a problem; people should just believe you because you speak the truth. But they were dealing with people who were always lying like they were. If you wanted to guarantee to people that you were speaking the truth; you were to swear. Swear by the temple. Jesus' point is, God is the One who made us. God is the One who saves us, not the temple. The temple is the work of man's hands. It is no guarantee that someone is speaking the truth. This is also like Jesus tell us swear not needlessly. The only way to swear is by the name of God. That's calling on God to be the witness. Swear not needlessly. Let your yes be yes, your no be no, and if you have a habit of speaking the truth, people won't question it. The fourth woe to them is because they would tithe down to mint and cumin. They would literally tithe the

spices that they had. Why did Jesus condemn this? Because while they were so busy counting their dollars, their pennies, their mint leaves and whatever; they were forsaking justice, mercy and faithfulness; the real hallmarks of someone who follows God. Woe #5, woe to you because of your cleaning rituals. You have got to wash your hands this way. Wash your cups this way. All these pages and pages of cleaning rituals. And if he didn't do it right, you weren't really clean. Jesus' point is your hearts are filthy. You should be cleaning your hearts. You should be repenting, and not worrying about how people wash their hands. Number six, woe to you Scribes, Pharisees and hypocrites. You are like whitewashed tombs. Whitewashed tombs were simply that. Tombs that had white paint over them so that they looked clean, but inside there were dead rotting corpses. And that's Jesus point. Inside that whitewashed tomb, there is death and His point of death here specifically for them is hypocrisy and lawlessness. As a result, if you have lawlessness, you have no justice you have no mercy. You have no faithfulness. Finally, number seven, woe to you Scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites; you build tombs for prophets and monuments for those who you deem righteous, and yet it was your fathers who killed the prophets. And you Scribes and Pharisees are going to flog, persecute, kill and crucify those who God sends. That's exactly what they ended up doing.

It's right after these woes that Jesus leaves Jerusalem, gets to the other side of the Kidron Valley, on the Mount of Olives, looks back at the temple and He says, "woe, oh Jerusalem, oh Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing. See your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

So, what can we today in the 21st century, take from Matthew chapter 23 the woe and the whoa? Whoa! Take time to stop, to look, to listen, to learn and then act on what you see. Learn the lesson that Salvation is by faith, through God's grace, it is His gift to you. It is not what you do, it's what He has done. Embrace that Salvation which frees you; frees you from the grip of sin and the death that comes with it. It frees you from works righteousness. You don't have to make a list of all,

I did this right, this right, this right, oh and I did this wrong and that probably cancels out all three of those good things. No, there's not a balance sheet. It's all done for you. That should stir your heart to well up in love for a God who has saved you. He has done it for you! Then we act on that, we act on it by coming and worshipping which means to give God worth. We act on it in service to others, in and with the truth of God's word and with a true heart; genuine love for each other because we are all created in the image of God. We come on a day like today, All Saints day, remembering those who have gone before us. But also remembering what they did, and what we do, and what God has done. And how it all comes together in communion as we act. We literally come forward and we commune with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He brings with that forgiveness of sins, and assurance of Salvation and a call to live as His children.

May we be those children. May we listen to that call to whoa, stop, look, listen and learn. Learn from the scriptures, learn from the fathers who have gone before us, and have lived lives that brought glory to God. And then become the fathers, the mothers, the guides, God servants to the next generation of his people.

In Jesus Name, Amen.