

# Sermons on Matthew

## The Woes

*Matthew 23:13-36*  
A Sermon for Children

*With Study Questions*

*Pastor Paul Viggiano*  
*Branch of Hope Church*  
*2370 W. Carson Street, #100*  
*Torrance, CA 90501*  
*(310) 212-6999*  
*pastorpaul@integrity.com*  
*[www.branchofhope.org](http://www.branchofhope.org)*  
*12/2/2007*

## The Woes

*Matthew 23:13-36*

## Introduction

### Woe

Eight times in just one chapter Jesus is going to begin a sentence with the word 'woe'. This is not to be confused with the word 'whoa' which people say when they're surprised or impressed or when they want to stop a horse. 'Woe' (*ouai*) means dreadful, horror, bad. It is just the opposite of what Jesus meant when He gave a sermon talking about how blessed people are when they're merciful and forgiving and peacemaking. Woe is bad.

One very important thing for us to know about these 'woes' Jesus is telling us about is that the people He is saying 'woe' about are people who are supposed to teach other people about God. They're called the scribes (people who write things—usually about the Bible) and the Pharisees who would have been like the pastors.

Since I'm a pastor, I try to read this very carefully because I wouldn't want Jesus to say these things about me. And since you learn from pastors, you'll want to listen carefully so you never allow these types of pastors to cause you to believe wrong things about God. This is in the Bible for us, so we can know when we're being lied to.

**-But \_\_woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in (Matthew 23:13).**

### Hypocrites Shutting Heaven

Jesus calls these teachers hypocrites. A hypocrite isn't somebody who just sins; we all do that, even though we shouldn't and we should always repent. A hypocrite is someone who is pretending to be something they're not. It's like if you pretend to be a princess or a king or a policeman. It's okay to do that when you're playing, but if you were really trying to convince someone that you were a policeman when you weren't, that would be hypocrisy.

These people were pretending to believe in God, believe in the Bible and care about God's people when they really didn't. And because people trusted them, they were actually keeping people from going to heaven. It was like they were shutting the door to heaven. We should only trust what

pastors say if it helping us understand what the Bible says. They were ruining what the Bible said. They were taking away the knowledge found in the Bible. Jesus said about them:

**\_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 (Luke 11:52).**

There are things God wants people to know, and they weren't telling them. And the main thing God wants people to know is something we see in a prayer by Jesus:

**And \_\_this is eternal life, that they may know You, \_\_the only true God, and Jesus Christ \_whom You have sent (John 17:3).**

People need to know about Jesus because He is the one who opens the door to heaven. Actually, the Bible teaches that Jesus is the door (John 10:9). They were shutting the door to heaven because they didn't teach about Jesus. Jesus is the door to heaven. The door is open when, by the grace of God, we believe.

**\_Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! \_\_For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation (Matthew 23:14).**

### **Stealing from Widows**

These guys would pray and pray and pray just so other people would admire them. There is nothing wrong with praying. But they only did it to impress people. Then they would go to a lady's house whose husband had died (a widow) and take her stuff. I see widows every week and there are still people like this trying to take their things—usually people on television or people who send them letters promising that God will be good to them if they give them money.

Jesus does not like it when people act that way. Jesus wants to protect the widows so there is bad condemnation for people who do that. When someone is condemned they usually go to prison. But the prison Jesus is talking about is worse. Jesus is talking about hell. Listen to what He says:

**\_Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of \_\_hell as yourselves (Matthew 23:15).**

## **Good Church and Bad Church**

These pastors weren't lazy. They worked really hard to get people to be like them. Having a lot of people in church can be a really good thing or a really bad thing depending on what's happening in church. When people become members of our church we do our best to make sure they believe in Jesus—since He is the door to heaven.

But if people go to a church that doesn't believe in Jesus, they're worse off than not going to church at all. Jesus told a story one time about how evil spirits work. If the evil spirit leaves the person and the person doesn't believe in Jesus (but leaves his own soul empty) that spirit will return with seven other spirits more wicked than himself (Matthew 12:43-46). But if we believe in Jesus the evil spirits run away (James 4:7).

**-Woe to you, \_\_blind guides, who say, \_\_' \_Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.\_' -<sup>17</sup> Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold \_or the temple that \_\_sanctifies the gold? -<sup>18</sup> And, ' \_Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.\_' -<sup>19</sup> Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift \_\_or the altar that sanctifies the gift? -<sup>20</sup> Therefore he who \_swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. -<sup>21</sup> He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by \_\_Him who \_dwells in it. -<sup>22</sup> And he who swears by heaven, swears by \_\_the throne of God and by Him who sits on it (Matthew 23:16-22).**

## **Telling the Truth**

Evil people are always trying to figure out ways to make it okay to lie, or to not keep promises that they make. These pastors were no different. Sometimes when people try to convince others that they're not lying they'll say something like, "I swear on the sword of my father." But if it turns out their father doesn't have a sword, then they don't have to keep the promise. It's like making a promise and crossing your fingers.

They were doing this at their church. They said if they swear by a building they don't need to keep the promise but if they swore by the gold they did have to keep the promise. But the building they met at (called a temple) was the way God presented Himself to them. So to swear by the temple was to swear by God Himself.

The point of all of this is that whenever we make a promise, no matter who it is to, first and foremost the promise is to God—and we should keep our promises. These pastors were using their belief in God to convince others that it was okay to lie and not keep promises. Jesus said:

**...let \_\_your ' \_Yes' be ' \_Yes,\_' and your ' \_No,\_' ' \_No.\_' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one (Matthew 5:37b).**

**\_Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! \_\_For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and \_\_have neglected the weightier *matters* of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.<sup>24</sup> Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! (Matthew 23:23, 24)**

## **Chez Camel**

The Bible teaches that a tenth of whatever we make belongs to God and should be given in the offering at church (Malachi 3:8; 1 Corinthians 9:8-14). Even though Jesus teaches that we “ought” to do that, it is not the most important thing to God.

These pastors wanted people to think that they were so good and righteous that they would take spices (like the kind you see in your mother's cupboard—pepper, sugar, salt, etc.) and weigh out a tenth of it to give at church. Sometimes people who are sinful in big things will try to be good in little things, for everyone to see, so they'll think they're really holy.

The kind of behavior that is important to God is “**justice and mercy and faith.**” A person who truly believes in Jesus will be *just* or fair. They will always seek to be *merciful* and forgive others. And they will always seek to be *faithful* and do what they say they will do because of their faith in Jesus and their desire to be obedient. Somebody once said:

it is easy...to lie, and...pretend to *love God*. But the duties of brotherly love fall under the senses (are easier to see), and are placed before the eyes of all (parenthesis mine).<sup>1</sup>

A verse in the Old Testament that Jesus might have had in mind is Micah 6:8

**He has \_\_shown you, O man, what *is* good; And what does the Lord require of you But \_\_to do justly, To love \_\_mercy, And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)**

Jesus compares trying to be good at the little things while not trying to be good at the more important things to straining a gnat and swallowing a camel. It's like making sure you don't swallow a tiny little, almost invisible bug, while chomping down a big, disgusting, hairy animal.

**-Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! \_\_For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and \_\_self-indulgence. <sup>-26-</sup> Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also (Matthew 23:25, 26).**

## **Clean on the Outside**

If you were going to drink a cup of milk, would you rather have the outside of the cup clean, or the inside? These pastors only cared about the outside so they could impress other people. But inside they were evil. God cares about what is going on in our hearts—and He knows what is going on in our hearts.

### **For He knows the secrets of the heart (Psalm 44:21b)**

One of the most important things for me as a parent and a pastor is for my children to desire to live a life pleasing to God. Sometimes I can be fooled, but God always knows everything. Jesus teaches that if the inside of the cup is cleaned, then the outside will also be clean. By clean, He means to have our sins washed away. And this happens when we believe in Him and repent of our sins (Acts 2:38).

---

<sup>1</sup>Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

**\_Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! \_\_For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead *men's* bones and all uncleanness. <sup>-28-</sup> Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matthew 23:27, 28).**

## **Impressive Tombs**

Jesus is kind of saying the same thing here. Only instead of a cup that is dirty with sin on the inside, He talking about a tomb that is big and beautiful on the outside but is full of a stinky dead body. Some people are impressive and beautiful on the outside but dead on the inside.

The promise Jesus makes to those who believe in Him is that they will never die (John 11:26).

**-Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and \_\_adorn the monuments of the righteous, <sup>-30-</sup> and say, ' \_\_If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. \_\_'  
<sup>-31-</sup> " \_\_Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that \_\_you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. <sup>-32-</sup> \_\_Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' *guilt*. <sup>-33-</sup> Serpents, \_\_brood \_\_of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? <sup>-34-</sup>  
\_\_Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: \_\_*some* of them you will kill and crucify, and \_\_*some* of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, <sup>-35-</sup>  
\_\_that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, \_\_from the blood of righteous Abel to \_\_the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. <sup>-36-</sup> Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation (Matthew 23:29-36).**

## **God's Patience**

There will always be bad people who will try to kill good people. In the Old Testament part of the Bible, we often read about God's true prophets and ministers being attacked and killed by evil people.

What Jesus is saying here is that these hypocrites are trying to convince people that they would never have killed God's people—that they honor God's people and make sure their graves are always nicely

decorated. But Jesus is saying that they are more like the bad guys who killed God's people. And they're going to get worse.

Jesus is going to send them true prophets and wise men and scribes. Even after He dies and is resurrected and ascends to heaven, He will continue to send His apostles who will tell the truth. But Jesus knows that these evil people won't listen to the truth. They will continue to do what the other evil people did, which is try to kill God's true messengers. And when they do this, God's patience will run out.

God is a patient God (Exodus 3:6). He gives us many chances. He gives churches chances to repent, He gives nations chances to repent and He gives individuals chances to repent. But there is a time when God's patience comes to an end and His judgment begins. Only God knows when that is but we shouldn't tempt God by continually resisting the truth.

God was going to judge these evil people. Ever since Abel was killed (Genesis 4:8) in the very beginning of the Bible until Zechariah, who was one of the last people killed in the Old Testament (2 Chronicles 24:20) God had been patient. But these scribes and Pharisees were going to kill Jesus and many of His apostles and God would finally destroy them. God does not let evil continue forever. Good wins out.

In a way, these people who were about to be judged can be compared to us. They knew many things about God. God had been very good to them. But hopefully we won't follow their example of evil behavior and unfaithfulness. God has given us much. And the Bible teaches that God requires much from those who are given much (Luke 12:48).

So let us make sure we always trust in Jesus rather than men, no matter how impressive they may try to make themselves look.

## Questions for Study

1. What's does 'woe' mean (page 2)?
2. Who are the people Jesus is saying these 'woes' about (page 2)?
3. How do people shut the door to heaven (pages 2, 3)?
4. Who is the door to heaven and how does one enter (pages 2, 3)?



5. How does Jesus feel about widows? How does He protect them (pages 3, 4)?
6. Are all churches and religions good? Why or why not (page 4)?
7. Is it okay to lie or not keep promises (page 5)?
8. What are some of the most important things to God (pages 5, 6)?
9. Is it more important to be good on the inside or outside (pages 5-7)?
10. Is God patient? Will His patience last forever (page 8)?
11. After listening to what Jesus taught, what is it important for us to do (page 8)?