

THE KINDNESS OF THE KINGDOM

Matthew 23:14

14 [“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites,
because you devour widows’ houses,
and for a pretense you make long prayers;
therefore you will receive greater condemnation.]
(Matthew 23:14, 2022 LSB)

Preliminary Matters on Matthew 23:14

From the time of Moses until just a few hundred years ago, biblical manuscripts were copied by hand. Even after Gutenberg invented the printing press, copies were made by hand for several hundred years. Whenever something is copied by hand, variations creep in. We recognize variations in the New Testament text because we have more than 5,800 handwritten copies. Some of those copies are full books; others are just a part of a page. All of them help to identify and correct variations in the text.

By the way, the invention of the printing press did not keep errors out of the Scriptures.

- A 1631 edition gave the seventh commandment as “You SHALL commit adultery.”
- A 1653 edition of First Corinthians 6:9 was rendered as “Know ye not that the unrighteous SHALL inherit the kingdom?”
- In a 1716 edition, Jesus tells the woman caught in adultery, “Go and sin on more” (John 8:11).
- And a 1944 edition urged wives to “submit to their OWL husbands.”

Well then, we know that Matthew 23:14 was not originally included by Matthew. It doesn't appear until the 5th century. I would guess that the man copying Matthew was familiar with Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47. In both of those verses, Jesus condemns the scribes and Pharisees because they "devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation."

So why did the copyist add them to Matthew if they were already in Mark and Luke? This is my theory. Very few people in the 5th century had the entire text of Scripture available to them. The copyist knew that whoever received his copy of Matthew might never see Mark or Luke, and he wanted them to have as full a record of Jesus' words as he could provide. He took what Mark and Luke recorded but which Matthew did not and added it for the sake of being complete.

Now, if I had plans to preach through Mark or Luke, I might skip verse 14 and cover it when I reached in those Gospels. But there is a lot of Scripture I haven't preached, and I might never preach through Mark or Luke. So, we'll look at it today.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, We agree that Your Word is perfect, sure, right and pure. We ask that you would restore our souls, give us wisdom, cause our hearts to rejoice, and enlighten our eyes as to Your glory. Captivate our hearts and minds this morning that we would know and trust Jesus with greater faithfulness and endurance. Amen.

JUDGMENT IS PASSED

14 [“**Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites,**
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(Matthew 23:14, 2022 LSB)

I spent some time on the word “woe” last week, so I’ll just remind you that it is a cry of anguish or a declaration of terror to come. It is usually used to describe eternal judgment. It is never used regarding Christians because Jesus has satisfied God’s righteous wrath against us.

Matthew 23 is not a last chance for scribes and Pharisees; it is not a warning for them to repent and believe the Gospel. It is the declaration that judgment has been passed on them.

God, by His mercy, saved some, like Nicodemus (John 3:1-2, 19:38-42) and Saul of Tarsus, also known as Paul the apostle (Philippians 3:5; First Timothy 1:15).

But by and large, the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day were condemned to eternal torment, and Jesus explains why in Matthew 23.

What reason does Jesus give in Matthew 23:14?

Devouring Widows' Houses

14 ["Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites,
because you devour widows' houses ..."
(Matthew 23:14, 2022 LSB)

To devour means to greedily consume until nothing is left behind. They were locusts, and widows were the fields. Six hundred years before Christ, Yahweh said through Jeremiah, "Everyone is greedy for gain," including false prophets and derelict priests. (Jeremiah 8:10).

Luke 21:1-4 contains an example of the scribes and Pharisees' abuse of widows.

1 And [Jesus] looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury.
2 And He saw a poor widow putting in two lepta.
3 And He said, "Truly I say to you,
this poor widow put in more than all of them.
4 For they all put in their gifts out of their abundance;
but she, out of what she lacked,
put in all that she had for living." (Luke 21:1-4, 2022 LSB)

A lepton was 1/144th of a denarius. It would be like a widow today having only a dollar or so to live on, and she gave it all.

What a sweet, wonderful story! What godly generosity! What blessed selflessness!

No! What a tragedy! What an abuse! What terrible fear this woman endured! The scribes and Pharisees had developed a tradition that pressured and shamed her into giving everything she had for survival.

What does the Law of God say? First, Yahweh never required anyone to give their last penny, only a tithe. Second, tithes were to be paid on what someone gained, usually crops or livestock, but also money. Third, Yahweh commanded every man to give a benevolence tithe every three years for Levites, sojourners, orphans, and widows, “that they may eat within your gates and be satisfied.” (Deuteronomy 26:12). God did not command poor widows to give; He commanded the people to give to them all that they needed to eat and satisfied.

But the people quickly oppressed and abuse the widows and orphans. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Malachi all condemned Israel for their hardheartedness toward widows and orphans. Yahweh says in Malachi 3 that Israel robbed HIM by refusing to bring the tithe into the storehouses. That’s not a reference to MONEY being given to the church but FOOD being given in for the sake of the needy.

Jesus said that the widow in Luke 21:4 “**put in** all that she had for living.” But God never required that; He required the opposite, that she be able to freely **take out** all that she needed to be satisfied. Rather than generously and kindly and obediently providing for those who had nothing, the traditions of the Pharisees commanded this widow to bankrupt herself for the sake of THEIR kind of righteousness.

And so Jesus pronounced judgment on them.

In our time, the scribes and Pharisees have been replaced by prosperity teachers. Kenneth Copeland is worth somewhere between seven hundred and fifty million dollars and one billion dollars. Benny Hinn owns mansions and regularly stays in hotels that cost tens of thousands of dollars each night. These men and those like them have been enriched by people who are often the poorest and most desperate.

A few years ago, a journalist cornered Kenneth Copeland and confronted him about his new three-million-dollar jet. Copeland giggled with delight over it like a little girl with a new puppy, callously ignoring the fact that people had suffered to give him that money. It's one thing for a needy widow to give so that someone else can eat. It's quite another thing for her to give out of her poverty so that Copeland can fuel his jet or Hinn to order caviar from room service.

Those men and others like them are under the same judgment that Jesus pronounced on the scribes and the Pharisees.

Religious Pretense

Jesus goes on to say that the sin of the scribes and Pharisees was multiplied by their religious disguise.

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The word *pretense* means a fictional story, a concealment, a disguise. They used the cloak of religion to enrich and empower themselves, all the while despising those on whom they depended. They made long prayers to impress the people and convince them of their holiness, very much like the prosperity teachers who weep and pray on television and then go and count their riches.

By the way, the Lord had mercy on Benny Hinn's nephew, Costi, who was once part of his uncle's so-called ministry. Costi came to true salvation in Christ and abandoned the prosperity Gospel as a Satanic deception. I highly recommend his book, "God, Greed, And The Prosperity Gospel," which contains his testimony and an insider's look into that world.

The outward show of the Pharisees is nothing more than a pleasing disguise. Jesus says in Matthew 23:27-28,

27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
For you are like whitewashed tombs
which on the outside appear beautiful,
but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.
28 In this way, **you also outwardly appear righteous to men,**
but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."
(Matthew 23:27-28, 2022 LSB)

Because they used religion as a means of concealing sin and attracting prey, they faced greater condemnation and multiplied judgment.

So, what is the lesson we need to take from Jesus' condemnation of these men?

CARING FOR WIDOWS

One of the beauties of Scripture is that the entire Bible, although it was written over a 1,500 span of time, in 66 different books, by more than 40 authors, on three continents, by men of every imaginable walk of life, it remains the singular, unified, consistent Word of God. As time progressed, God revealed more and more details to us without setting aside the core of what had been revealed before.

The fifth commandment says this:

12 “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which Yahweh your God gives you.” (Exodus 20:12, 2022 LSB)

Because the ten commandments are founded on the nature and character of God, they had always existed as a standard. So we see the devastation in Hagar’s life when Abraham and Sarah banished her. We also see God’s care for her and Ishmael.

God specifically promised to hear the cry of the sojourner, the orphan, and the widow and threatened vengeance on their behalf toward those who mistreated or oppressed them (Exodus 22:21-24). On the other hand, those who blessed and properly cared for the needy were blessed by God. He even made caring for them a condition upon which He would bless Israel. (Isaiah 1:17-18; Jeremiah 22:3-4). God’s eyes were on orphans and widows, paying close attention to their suffering, bringing blessing on those who blessed them, and cursing those who refused to help them.

The first real crisis in the church took place in Acts 6. The Hellenists (that is, Jewish Christians born and raised outside of Israel) grumbled against the Hebrews (that is, Jewish Christians born and raised in Israel) because the Hellenist widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. Setting the conflict aside, we see that even the newborn church recognized the need to care for widows and did so.

The church, of course, is not Israel and doesn't possess nation-sized resources. And so Paul wrote to Timothy in detail about caring for widows, establishing several principles. This is found in First Timothy 5:3-16.

The church is to give priority to “widows indeed.” These are women who are alone regardless of the reason, have nothing to sustain themselves, and have no family willing to step in. Some are widows in the literal sense; their husbands have died. Others are figuratively widows; they never married, but as time has passed, they find themselves alone.

The church is to give priority to godly women. Women whose hope is fixed on God and spend time in prayer. He contrasts godly women with those who found themselves alone and then gave themselves to sinful indulgence.

The church is to give priority to “motherly” women. They have served others during their lives by helping to raise children, showing hospitality to strangers, serving believers in humility, and being happily involved in all kinds of good works. I think that it's possible that at that time, supporting “widows indeed” did not mean raising money and giving them a weekly stipend, but rather having a church family sort of “adopt” them as a grandmother. In that way, she would not simply be given a living but a life and the chance to continue to bless and serve others according to her ability. But she clearly had to be the kind of woman who would strengthen a home by setting a godly example and not the kind who would weaken a home by becoming a source of conflict.

But the church is not to give priority to younger widows. Paul urges them to remarry, bear children (or help raise their second husband's children), and keep their house. Paul is nothing if not practical. He had observed that when younger widows had nothing to do, they tended to become gossips and busybodies, and some even abandoned the faith. To protect everyone concerned, younger widows needed to follow God's pattern of marriage and child-rearing, fulfilling God's design for them as women.

Now, let me make a couple of additional points.

First, these words are given in light of the limited resources of the church. The church doesn't possess nation-sized resources. When ten people show up needing help, but there is only enough for two, how do we determine who to help? Paul gives guidelines so that we will have an idea of how to proceed in a way that glorifies God and blesses His people.

Second, the Scripture doesn't forbid making other decisions. For instance, perhaps a widow has children and grandchildren, but they refuse to come to her aid. Or perhaps a younger widow is simply not in a position to remarry. We must certainly step in and help.

Third, nothing in First Timothy 5:3-16 is meant to be insulting or uncaring toward widows. On the contrary, Paul recognizes the danger that Christians face under various circumstances. God created men and women to put their main energies into their families. Men were to work hard to provide for their families. Women were to work hard raising children and keeping the home. Men and women who become idle – for any reason – fall into various temptations and often abandon the faith. Paul focuses on younger widows since his theme is caring for widows. The best life for any man or woman is not to live in self-indulgence but to serve others according to God's design.

BRINGING IT HOME (DEDICATION)

To bring this to a practical level, what are Christians to do with widows? The scribes and the Pharisees used and abused them. We obviously must not do that, but rather the opposite.

Let me give you two more thoughts.

First, we must keep sanctification and discipleship as our priority.

Widowhood is neither the end of life nor sanctification. She must still keep faith in the Lord Jesus. She must still obey Him as Lord. God's glory is still the priority. Jesus remains Lord and Savior. We need to remind widows in their loneliness to fix their hope on Christ. We need to remind them in their strength to serve according to their ability.

Second, we need teach and urge families to care for their own. First Timothy 5:8 says that a man who does not provide for his own is worse than an unbeliever. This is especially true regarding widows (and widowers). We need to fulfill the spirit of the fifth commandment. Sometimes a man or woman only has the church. The folks in that congregation need to become their family, and the widows and widowers need to step up as aunts and uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers. Even if financial help is not needed – and in our time, it's probably rare that much help is needed – there is the need for loving relationships, opportunities to serve, and having a place at a family table.