

The Verdict is In Matthew 23:1-39

Introduction

Beginning of the End: Today's sermon is the first in a new series (*Beginning of the End*) but it really serves as a sort of transition between the last section and the current one. We've seen Jesus journey to Jerusalem, we've seen him come into conflict with the Pharisees and other religious leaders. He's answered all of their objections and proven his identity and authority. Rather than believe, they are eventually going to crucify him. **Everything is heading toward the cross.** Everything now turns toward his final words, his last days, his march to the garden, the trial, the cross, and the tomb. His betrayal, death, resurrection, and commission are coming. The end is nigh.

- So now, the tone shifts from persuasion to judgment. The time for contemplation is over. The people need to decide, will they follow Jesus (the Messiah, the King, God become flesh) or will they follow the empty rules and bogus traditions of the religious leaders.

Rebellion Can't Last Forever: At some point, the conversation is over, the arguments cease, the verdict must be read. Judgment is coming (Long Island man hasn't paid his mortgage in 23 years, just evicted; maybe he thought he would get away with it forever). We think of judgment as "judgmental" but today's passage is not vindictive or spiteful, it is just and true, it is judicial. It is honest.

Judgment is Good: This text is seriously difficult, not really because it is hard to understand, but because we don't like to think about its main themes. We don't like to think about judgment. We don't want to linger on the idea of punishment. But **judgment is actually good.** Because a world without justice (i.e., righteousness) is not a world of fairness (think playground). Usually we want grace for ourselves and justice for others.

- God isn't gonna just wave a finger, that would not make him fair and just. God's character is perfect, true, and unchanging. So, for him to be perfectly just and righteous, as well as compassionate, loving, and gracious, then he can't just dismiss sin.
- Every sin must be paid (forgiveness, whether large or small, requires payment; someone bears the weight of forgiveness).
 - We know that "the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:23). Salvation is free but it is not cheap because it costs Jesus his life. For you to receive salvation, Jesus received the punishment you and I have earned.

What About Us?: There are three things to keep in mind as we walk through this passage:

- (1) Learn which kind of leaders are really hypocrites that we shouldn't follow.
- (2) Think seriously and soberly about the reality of God's judgment of sin.
- (3) Consider whether I am a hypocrite or am genuinely and truly following Jesus.

- “It is possible for you and me to believe we are doing God’s work, obeying God’s word, and accomplishing God’s will yet be deceived and experience eternal punishment” (Platt).
- True of many religious people, spiritual seekers, well-behaved folks.

We need God to open our eyes, expose our hypocrisy, and humble us so we can repent and believe in Jesus and receive the grace he longs to give us.

(*Not going to read all of it at once, but as we go).

1. The Portrait of a Bad Leader (1-12)

¹ Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, ³ so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. ⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, ⁶ and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷ and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. ⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. ¹⁰ Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. ¹¹ The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Scene 1: Jesus starts off talking to the disciples and crowds *about* the scribes and the Pharisees. The **main point** in these first twelve verses is to show the disciples **what not to do** (sometimes we learn best this way).

- These crowds should follow Jesus, rather than the religious leaders opposing him. The main reason they are not worth following is their **hypocrisy**.
 - Their behavior invalidates whatever authority they should have by their position (sit on Moses’ seat).

Do As I Say, Not As I Do: Some of the things they say are actually not (necessarily) wrong: so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do.

- We see this all the time. We can’t let the hypocrisy of a bad leader discourage us from believing and obeying the biblical truths they taught (e.g., pastor who baptized you falls away; theologian like Ravi Zacharias proves to be a predator; the baptism and the theology is not valid because of them but in spite of them).
 - But there is a truth we need to all understand: we (as Christians and *especially as Christian leaders*) should not make it hard for people to follow Jesus by our lives (e.g., father make it easy to believe in a heavenly father; doesn’t make God less of a good heavenly Father but it does make it harder to believe it).
- We can’t invalidate the gospel with our sin (nothing can invalidate the gospel, it is the “power of God”). However, we can invalidate our witness. We can unsave with our lives

what we claim with our lips. We can tell people by our actions the opposite of what we say with our theology. Our theology must impact the culture in the church (e.g., grace, forgiveness, compassion).

Pride-Filled Hypocrisy:

- All talk and no action. For they preach, but do not practice. What a powerfully succinct definition of hypocrisy and a reminder and warning to every one of us who follows Christ. There's a reason why the Bible warns that "not many should become teachers," that those who teach the Bible are under a stricter judgment: "It is the great liability of a teaching ministry: knowing you will likely out-teach your own ability to obey, knowing there will be days when you will not practice what you have preached" (Wilkin).
- They expect others to live up to a standard they don't live up to themselves.⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. Want everyone else to do the hard work, but not doing it themselves. **Beware of leaders who won't do what they expect you to do.**
 - There's a difference between freeing a leader to pray and preach (e.g., deacons, etc.) and letting them off the hook because of their giftedness.
 - There's a danger of celebrity worship. Gifts don't make up for character. Power and accomplishments (as an end) don't justify ungodly means along the way.
 - The real problem is less about activity and more about spirituality. They've imposed all sorts of burdensome rules on others that they themselves don't live up to. Their hearts do not match their words.
- When they do "godly" things it's not from a heart of faith but a desire to be seen from others.⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long,
 - Loud prayers, fasting (Matt 6); "my humility and how I achieved it"
 - Phylacteries (boxes with law texts worn on arm or forehead); become charms not genuine (amulets); jerseys (not really on the team), good luck charms (your phylacteries are showing)
 - Fringes (*tzitzit*; Num 15:37-41); a thing meant to help them focus on commandments become a very visible sign of godliness (extra long); getting a big Bible so others can see?
 - What are our versions of this? Instagram posts (Bible and coffee); Christian t-shirts; not bad "necessarily" but not necessary and runs the risk of being for show (the heart is what matters). Just read a book and use the info (don't have to post about it). You don't have to brag about it, you can just do it (one thing I love about my dad).
 - Social media presents an image, what people don't see is your true character.
 - If you're not careful, you'll end up pretending to be spiritual without being spiritual (cheating your way through med school then having to use the knowledge in the real world).

- These outward activities (surface idols) were signs of the underlying motivation (root idols). ⁶ and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷ and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.
 - They want power and approval, they want the love and adoration (worship?) of others. They want for themselves what rightfully belongs to God!
 - They want people to call them “rabbi”. Beware of leaders who *demand* respect (even pastors with “honorary doctorates”, etc.).
 - They don’t want people to follow God but follow them.
 - Be skeptical of someone who consistently interprets Scripture in such a way as to give themselves authority.

Are We Different?: ⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. ¹⁰ Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. ¹¹ The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

- When God has the ultimate place in our lives, we don’t seek the glory for ourselves (e.g., revival even if it comes from another church).
- We should have different values in the church. No special titles here (it’s cool if you “call” us pastor, but we will not “demand” it). Cf. Dave Black not as Dr. Black and not requiring attendance in class. When you’re secure in who you are in Christ, you don’t need some arbitrary title to validate it.

Self-Assessment: Does your heart delight in receiving honor from others or from God? Do you feel better when you have more power or a higher position? Do you compare yourself against others more than God?

- Humility is a prerequisite for kingdom living and can only be produced by the gospel (humbles us because we know we aren’t good enough to earn it). “Humility is the beginning of worship” because it takes our eyes off of ourselves and allows us to see Christ (Calvin).
 - Some think you have to be nasty to win (e.g., modern politics). That is not the way of Jesus or the way of gospel leadership, it’s the way of the world and it won’t lead to Christ, it will lead to destruction.
- But these leaders are not humble, they are hypocrites. They are trying to look the part (of righteousness) rather than *actually* being righteous.

2. The Indictment of Hypocrisy (vv. 13-35)

- Jesus indicts them with 7 “woes” (not Joey Lawrence). “How Dare You.” This isn’t “sweet Jesus.” He’s serious (e.g., blind guides, hypocrites, vipers, etc.).
- This is **Scene 2**, as he turns from the disciples and the crowd and addresses the scribes and Pharisees directly.

(1) Harm Others (vv. 13-15) *combined woes 1-2

¹³ “But ¹woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. ¹⁵
²Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

- Because of their self-deception, they not only are leading themselves astray but others as well. They are working hard to “convert” people to their ways which lead to death, not life.
- Your hypocrisy not only harms you but harms others (e.g., children, neighbors, etc.). “No man is an island).
- *Missing v. 14 (scribal interpolation missing from earliest MSS).
- Bad shepherds lead the sheep away from safety and provision. Bad shepherds abuse the sheep rather than protect them.
- Make sure you’re winning people to the right thing (goes for church, pet causes, soapbox issues, political positions).
- Twice as much a child of hell: Be careful the trajectory you send others on. What is a little deviation from you, will be a wild swing from others (e.g., 1° isn’t much at the beginning of a line but it is a lot down the way).

(2) Ignore Important Things (vv. 16-24) *combined woes 3-4

¹⁶ ³“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ ¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸ And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ ¹⁹ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹ And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. ²² And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it. ²³ ⁴“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

- The short summary of this section is that they focus on the minutia of the law but ignore the important things. They are experts on the trivial but ignorant of the essential.
 - They shouldn’t be giving oaths at all, but they’ve come up with complicated times they can or can’t tell the truth.
 - Looking for loopholes to obedience.
- They spend more time figuring out what they don’t have to do than worrying about what really matters.
- They’re trying to justify their sin. They justify sin with tradition rather than flee sin according to God’s truth.
- This picture of tithing is very instructive: they are measuring out the correct percentage of spices to give to God but are neglecting “justice and mercy and faithfulness”.

- Meticulous observance is fine (and maybe even good) but not if you neglect more important things.
- What good is it, if you obey all sorts of liturgical rules about when to pray and when to work and when to wash if you neglect to “love God with all your heart, soul, and mind” and “love your neighbor as yourself”?
- The indictment is strong with hyperbole: you “[strain] out a gnat and [swallow] a camel.”
 - One way to misinterpret the Bible is to fail to emphasize in due proportion what the Bible emphasizes. Ever seen that person that majors on some obscure soapbox? Of that person that worries about that person that has the weirdest spiritual peeves? They spend all their time worrying (or complaining) about dress codes, music, vague ideological threats, political issues **to the neglect** of loving God and others.
- Why? It’s control, it’s self-righteousness. None of us ever masters love (we can only hope to be mastered by God’s love). But we like things we can control: if I can vote rightly, dress rightly, spend my money rightly, etc. then I can convince myself I’m righteous without dealing with **what I love**. Man-made rules become convenient opportunities to prove my goodness without ever expressing costly love (Platt).

What about you? In what ways are you trying to control God rather than love him? If you read enough Bible this week he’ll bless your finances? If you say enough prayers, he owes you a good grade on that test? If you have perfect attendance at church, he’ll give you a better job? Do you love God or are you using him for your own desires?

(3) Illusion of Righteousness (vv. 25-28) *combined woes 5-6

²⁵ ⁵“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. ²⁷ ⁶“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

- The result of all of their activity is only the **illusion of righteousness**. They *appear* clean on the outside but are unclean in their hearts. They look religious but they are spiritually diseased. They are religious busybodies but their hearts are dead to the things of God.
- If you had to pick (only one), would you want your water bottle to be clean on the inside or the outside? Obviously, one is pretty and one is healthy. One looks good, one is good. One is useful for decoration, the other for its purpose (drinking water).
- The gospel doesn’t aim to fake good behavior, it aims to change your heart to conform to Christ. We aim for healthy roots, trusting that they will produce healthy fruit. You can decorate the tomb with all the flowers you want, the inside is still a corpse.
- The solution to our problem requires real change, from life to death, not a spritz of religious perfume on the corpse of our wickedness.
 - What eventually happens? Rot, decay, smell, etc.
- The **gospel really can change you** (overcoming persistent sin, producing love, etc.) but it requires a recognition of your sin and a turning to Christ.

- These Pharisees (and many of us) settle for the easier and less invasive task of decorating our tombs rather than asking God to raise the dead.

(4) Self-Deceived (vv. 29-35) *woe 7

²⁹ ⁷“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰ saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ ³¹ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. ³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? ³⁴ Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, ³⁵ so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

- We see just how deluded these religious leaders are. They reject Jesus, greater than any prophet, yet say they would have welcomed the prophets of old.
- The prophets who brought God’s word were killed by the people to whom they came to deliver. Their self-righteousness has deluded them into thinking they’re different, yet they are going to kill the very Word of God become flesh. They wouldn’t have done better and they won’t do better. They are the sons of their fathers who killed the prophets.
- We like to think we would have done differently (e.g., racism, slavery, etc.)
 - We are the children of our first parents who rejected God’s word for the lie of the serpent. Would we do any better? No.
 - From Genesis to revelation the problem goes from parent to child, but there is a solution. God sent his very own son to live “a life of perfect obedience to the will of God and die a perfect substitutionary death on our behalf” (Powlison).

3. The Sorrow of Ignored Grace (vv. 36-39)

³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. ³⁷ “O Jerusalem, 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! ³⁸ See, your house is left to you desolate. ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

- There is a lot of talk of sin and judgment, but don’t miss the central role of God’s grace here at the end.
- Jesus laments. This is a sad moment. This judgment is heartbreaking because it is not God’s heart for them.
 - How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!
 - He desires to protect them, to save them, to rescue them. Sin must be judged, but he is willing to bear the brunt of that judgment on himself. Judgment is real, but so is grace. Jesus longs to protect them from the judgment they have earned.

He will take the wrath of God on his shoulders to spare those who find refuge under his wings.

- God longs to save you. Come to him. Find rest in him.
- The only thing preventing the Pharisees from salvation is their refusal to turn to Jesus. They are relying on their own righteousness to save them, and it is not enough.
 - The next time they see Jesus, they will recognize that he is the King who has come in the name of the Lord (Ps 118:26). “Every knee shall bow” (Phil 2) either in the worship of their savior or fear of their judge.
 - When you stand before the throne of God in eternity, will you be standing before your gracious King or your consuming judge?

Conclusion:

- Be honest with yourself. Are you living a hypocritical life or has the gospel penetrated down to your heart? Is your righteousness only decorative or does it flow from a transformed soul?
- Don't presume on God's grace, he longs to save you, but you will face judgment if you reject him. A day will come when it will be too late. Don't neglect his warning.