

Matthew 23B

- It's customary to offer a condemned criminal a chance to say his final words before he dies
 - And in Chapter 23 of Matthew we are studying Jesus' final public words before He dies
 - He hasn't been condemned yet, but that's only 36 hours away, and by that point Jesus will be done speaking
 - He goes silently to the cross in fulfillment of Scripture, so He chose to deliver His final statement on His own terms
 - He delivers it in the temple, on the day before His arrest, surrounded by crowds, and directed at the religious leaders
 - Jesus uses His final words to condemn the nation's leaders for having confused and abused that generation of Israel
 - Jesus said they were hypocrites and that their corrupt leadership was the cause for Israel missing their Messiah
 - Had these men done their job and told Israel Jesus was Messiah as they should have done, the people would have received Him
 - So in this chapter, Jesus reveals their corruption to the people and pronounces woes upon them all
 - This chapter is important for us both from a historical and contemporary point of view
 - Historically, we need to understand the role the religious leaders played in driving Jesus to the cross and Israel into exile
 - After all, their conspiracy led to the Gentile church coming into being, Israel's rejection of Jesus became our opportunity
 - But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, we need to understand Jesus' teaching in Chapter 23 from a contemporary point of view
 - These men were the false teachers of that day, but there are false teachers in every age and we have our share today
 - So as Jesus exposes the methods and motivations of those men, He is also teaching us how to recognize today's false teachers

- Last week we studied their methods...how these men used their positions of authority to turn worship into wealth
 - It started with creating endless rules and restrictions for Israel, which burdened the people and left them feeling discouraged
 - The Pharisee's Mishnah was a new law on top of the Law, which robbed Israel of joy and peace in their relationship with God
 - It invoked fear of being judged by God for failing to keep it, and it misled the people about how to find true righteousness
 - Next, the leaders made a public show of keeping their rules perfectly, though in reality they ignored the rules when it suited them
 - By cultivating a reputation for religious perfection, the religious became known as experts and guides to pleasing God
 - This led people to turn to these men for spiritual direction seeking their assurance that God would show favor upon them
 - Finally, when the people turned to them for guidance, the religious leaders leveraged their positions of authority for personal gain
 - They requested favors from businessmen or the wealthy seeking their counsel or blessing
 - They required bribes before granting divorces or rendering favorable judgments in matters of law
 - They lived a lavish lifestyle funded by the poor and desperate who were told their contributions were necessary to obey God
- That three-step process allowed them to turn worship into wealth, and the scam ensured the money flowed in one direction: toward the Pharisees
 - In Mark's Gospel we gain confirmation:

Mark 12:38 In His teaching He was saying: "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places, **Mark 12:39** and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, **Mark 12:40** who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation."

- Mark 12 is the same moment as the one we're studying here in Chapter 23 of Matthew

- Notice Mark says in v.40 that these men liked to devour widow's houses, which speaks to their unbridled greed and cynicism
- They were so determined to gain from their positions they were even willing to take a widow's last possession: her home
- Like the Grinch Who Stole Christmas, they had no conscience
- The Pharisees were false teachers, and the Bible says we will have false teachers in the Church as well
 - But false teachers aren't merely people who teach wrong things...all teachers teach wrong things from time to time
 - Peter describes this process this way:

2Pet. 2:1 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.

2Pet. 2:2 Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned;

- Peter says false teachers are unbelievers who portray themselves as believers yet do not possess what they claim to offer
 - They claim to know the way to Heaven, yet they themselves deny Christ and are destined for Hell
 - They preach a false message that convinces others to follow after their lusts thus bringing condemnation
- The false teachers of our day use a variety of tactics to deceive, but they all share the same hypocritical, greedy desires
 - Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 4 that false teachers are hypocrites and liars with seared consciences
 - They use religion as a means of personal gain, who will take your last penny if you'll give it to them
 - And like Pharisees, they will show no regret when they destroy lives by their lying words
- Jesus warned His disciples to steer clear of these people and to avoid adopting their methods, starting with declining powerful titles

- That's where we left off in Chapter 23, so let's rejoin the text there

[Matt. 23:8](#) "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers.

[Matt. 23:9](#) "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven.

[Matt. 23:10](#) "Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ.

[Matt. 23:11](#) "But the greatest among you shall be your servant.

[Matt. 23:12](#) "Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.

- The hypocrisy and greed of the Pharisees and other religious leaders were most easily witnessed in their desire for impressive titles
 - As I said last week, titles aren't wrong by themselves, but the problem comes when we seek for titles out of selfish sinful motives
 - If we demand people address us in certain ways to gain undue honor or attention for ourselves, then we are wrong
 - Or we use titles to control others so we can acquire privilege and wealth for ourselves, then we are wrong
 - And even when we possess no title, we may still be guilty of coveting the honor and power that a title affords
 - And when we do these things, we are walking in the footsteps of the Pharisees, operating in selfish pride instead of godly humility
 - Pride is an ever-present danger in serving God, and giving in to pride is perhaps the fastest way to lose everything
 - Pride can take you from hero to zero in a heartbeat, and it starts with something as simple as seeking a lofty title
- Jesus flatly tells us to avoid the whole mess...don't seek for titles or the recognition and privilege they may bring
 - Instead, Jesus says in v.11 that the one who wants to be greatest among us will be the one who serves us
 - Jesus taught this same principle back in Chapter 18, and we covered it extensively at that time

- So to summarize, honor and reward in the Kingdom will be assigned to us based on our humility and sacrifice now
- And Jesus' grading curve is very simple...the more humility now, the more honor later; the more sacrifice now, the more reward later
 - Or as Jesus puts it here in v.12, exalt yourself now and you will be humbled later
 - The Greek word for *exalt* literally translates as to lift up, as in to gain attention or receive praise
- Jesus is talking about someone who wants to use ministry to stand out so everyone knows he or she is important and special
 - Someone who craves the limelight and takes credit for the work of others
 - Someone who craves an impressive title, demands a reserved parking space or a big office, wants his or her face on a billboard
- Jesus says those who work to lift themselves up now will one day be humbled, which means the table will be turned in the Kingdom
 - They will find that they emphasized the wrong thing...they should have prioritized lifting up others instead
 - And if we exalt others now, Jesus said we will be exalted by God in the Kingdom
 - Our selflessness will be remembered and rewarded, and our humility will be celebrated and honored there
 - As Jesus said back in Mathew 20, the first shall be last and the last shall be first
- I see this struggle at work right now in our present circumstances as many churches fight to get back to weekly in-person worship services
 - I think the Church may be missing an opportunity to grow spiritually because we're too busy trying re-establish what God took away
 - True worship isn't merely the act of meeting in a building and singing, praying and the like
 - Paul says in Romans 12 that our true spiritual service of worship is making our lives a living sacrifice

- He's speaking about Jesus' call for His followers to adopt a humble, selfless lifestyle of devotion to others
- I wonder as we push to restart church meetings and open schools and businesses, are we overlooking God's spiritual purposes in the crisis?
 - Maybe during this time apart, the Lord is giving us opportunity to practice what we study about every week in this room?
 - An opportunity for us to learn and practice humility and self-sacrificial service to others?
- Could this time be designed by God for each of us to change our daily patterns so we might become more devoted to the needs of others?
 - Maybe it's parents spending more time training up their children to be respectful, patient and loving?
 - Maybe it's Christian spouses spending more time together investing in their marriages?
 - Maybe it's believers making sacrifices to share resources with families out of work or donating to ministries or agencies on the front lines?
 - Maybe it's the Church showing the love of Christ by mowing the lawn of overworked first responders or caring for sick family?
 - Maybe it's all of us spending more time in God's word, in prayer and in solitude, becoming still and knowing that He is Lord
- There is something God is working to accomplish in your life through this time, and if we only think about getting back to normal, we'll miss it
 - Let's take full advantage of our present situation to gain more humility and to learn greater self-sacrifice
 - Because that's the path to greater honor where it really counts: in the Kingdom
- But humility and sacrifice wasn't the Pharisees' priority...they talked about the Kingdom often but they lived for this world
 - And their greed has left Israel desolate, so now Jesus pronounces "woe" against these men
 - The word woe is a transliteration of the Greek word *ouai* (ooway) which is simply an expression of grief or condemnation

- But biblically, it has a very specific meaning, especially when spoken by God Himself as Jesus does here
- Woe is a pronouncement of eternal damnation, meaning a future in Hades is assured
- So Jesus pronounces a total of seven woes, the number of completion, to show that this judgment is assured and complete in God's eyes
 - The seven woes are seven areas of religious sin committed by these hypocritical Pharisees
 - But these sins are not unique to Pharisees...they are repeated a million times every day by religious imposters everywhere
 - And even worse, these seven mistakes can also stumble believers who seek for earthly gain instead of serving God
- The woes run from v.13 to v.36, and they are organized as a chiasm, meaning the first and last woe pair up, and the second and sixth pair up, etc.
 - So that the unpaired woe, the fourth woe, becomes the chiasm's turning point emphasizing Jesus' main argument
 - So let's study this religious hall of shame starting with the first woe

Matt. 23:13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

- Jesus' first woe against these religious leaders is rejecting the eternal life of the Kingdom and preventing others from entering it as well
 - The Pharisees talked about entering the Kingdom all the time, but the way they expected to enter it was actually a barrier to eternal life
 - They trusted in their works-based Pharisaic system of laws to approve themselves before God
 - They believed doing works of law brought righteousness, and by earning righteousness in that way, they would merit approval
 - It's called self-righteousness, and it's not a way to Heaven...it's a barrier to Heaven, Jesus says
 - The Bible says we cannot become righteous in that way:

[Rom. 3:20](#) because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

[Rom. 3:21](#) But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,

[Rom. 3:22](#) even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;

[Rom. 3:23](#) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

- The standard for entry into Heaven is the glory of God, meaning perfection, and we all fall short of it
- So works can't make us righteous enough to enter Heaven, because previous sins aren't erased by future good deeds
- But the Pharisees taught that their system of rules was the key to Heaven, so the people worked hard to obey the Mishnah
 - As Jesus says, the Pharisees were cut off from the Kingdom of Heaven because they trusted in works
 - And they barred others from entry also because they convinced them to take the same wrong path
- In other words, there are not many roads that lead to Heaven...there is only one
 - Following any system of works will not please God nor bring us entry into Heaven...not even keeping the Law will bring us into Heaven
 - There is only one way to Heaven, and that way is by receiving God's gift of righteousness by placing faith in His Son Jesus
 - Earlier Jesus said if we want to be exalted in the Kingdom, we must be willing to be humbled
 - And never is that more true than in the matter of our own salvation, as Jesus shows us in Luke's Gospel:

[Luke 18:10](#) "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

[Luke 18:11](#) "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

[Luke 18:12](#) 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

[Luke 18:13](#) “But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’

[Luke 18:14](#) “I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

- Notice the Pharisee is quick to exalt himself and he does so on the basis of his own righteousness
 - He self-righteously declares himself worthy of God’s praise unlike the sinner next to him
 - And notice he prays to himself, which is to say he saw himself as good enough to merit Heaven...he deserved it!
- Meanwhile, that sinner acknowledges his sin humbly and asks for God’s forgiveness
 - Jesus says that man who humbled himself will be exalted, meaning he’ll receive mercy and eternal life unlike the Pharisee
 - This is true salvation...recognizing that apart from God’s grace, we have no hope to reach heaven on our own
- So the lesson of the first woe is beware false teachers who spread a false Gospel of works that cannot save
 - Not all roads lead to Heaven so be sure you follow the right teachers
 - Moving forward, our next verse introduces a little confusion

[Matt. 23:14](#) [“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.]

- In Chapter 23 this is the second occurrence of the word “woe,” but it’s actually part of the first woe
 - Matthew likely didn’t author this verse, because it doesn’t appear in the most reliable manuscripts of his Gospel
 - This verse probably came from Mark’s Gospel and was added to Matthew’s Gospel by copyists trying to align the two accounts

- Since we studied these words earlier, we'll move past this verse and into the second woe in v.15

Matt. 23:15 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

- In His second woe, Jesus says the Pharisees would travel the world to convert a single person – yet they converted people to *the wrong* system
 - They weren't converting people to faith in the coming Messiah; they were winning converts to Pharisaic Judaism
 - They didn't call people to trust in the word of God; they were calling people to trust in their Mishnah
 - They were winning converts to self-righteousness and to their system of religion, not to faith in Messiah
 - Adopting Pharisaic Judaism was like entering a secret society that people felt privileged to join
 - It was hard work, it required high performance and therefore it made its followers feel qualified and even worthy for Heaven
 - But for that same reason, the Pharisaic approach didn't appeal to many, which meant the Pharisees had to recruit new followers
 - As Jesus describes, they had to travel far and wide to find the next generation of Pharisee
 - And as they did, they eventually made the new convert even more zealous for their rules than they were
 - So over time, the movement became more exaggerated and farther from God
 - As Jesus says, the newest members became twice as much sons of hell as they were
- This is a feature of false religion and false movements especially those that find their way into the Church
 - People will come in championing some minor issue or special cause instead of championing Christ

- And as they do, they win converts to their cause or issue, and these converts are often unbelievers
- They become disciples of the cause rather than disciples of Christ, yet they think themselves saved
- They confuse agreeing with the cause with agreeing with the Gospel because they don't know the difference
- The well-known Scottish preacher, Alistair Begg, tells a story about a time he golfed with a pastor shortly after moving to the U.S.
 - As they are waiting to tee off, the U.S. pastor asked Alistair what was his "thing?"
 - Alistair didn't understand the question at first, so he asked his friend what he meant
- The pastor explained that everyone in ministry needed some "thing," some angle or issue or pet cause that defined their ministry
 - Alistair thought about it for a moment and said he didn't have a thing yet...then he asked could the Gospel be his thing?
 - And this pastor said no...it couldn't be the Gospel, it had to be something else or it didn't qualify
- Today you often find people in the Church championing their "thing" – something they are for or against that's all they talk about or care about
 - These causes overshadow the Gospel itself, and it eventually becomes to define their Christian walk
 - We find Christians pushing herbal remedies or special prayers or treatments to cure disease
 - Or Christians trying to convince you to keep the Law or the feasts of Israel
 - Or those who say we must call Jesus by some secret name or meet for church only on a certain day of the week
 - Or we must worship only with hymns or teach only from the King James Bible
- You wonder how many souls might have been saved if these same people worked as hard preaching the Gospel as they did promoting their "thing?"

- That was Jesus' complaint against these men...they became advocates for their religious system instead of for God and His word
 - So if the first woe was believing in a false Gospel, the second woe was preaching that false Gospel to others
 - The first sin was having the wrong content, the second sin was having the wrong objective
 - The first mistake brought individuals under condemnation, while the second mistake meant many more followed
 - So Jesus pronounces woe on the Pharisees for both, because both sins resulted in dooming souls to an eternity of punishment
- Let's recognize the seriousness of what we're about here...church isn't just a social event on our calendar
 - We are about our Father's business, serving the living God in a pursuit of souls
 - Often we only get one chance to influence someone, so be sure you use that opportunity wisely
- You are an ambassador for Christ, so speak of Jesus and Him crucified, as Paul says
 - Don't become advocates for secondary issues, especially false or destructive things that detract from the Gospel
 - Don't be carried away by fads or strange new movements in the church...this isn't a multilevel marketing society
 - We are Christ's Bride, the One placed on earth to show the rest of the world how to enter the Kingdom...that's our mission
- And the content of what we believe matters, and what we share with others matters
 - Believe in the Gospel and do nothing else until that truth is settled in your heart
 - And preach Jesus and nothing more...do not advocate for a thing that distracts people from the truth
 - Let's serve the truth together in humility and self-sacrifice, knowing that in a day to come we will receive our reward

- And in that day, we will be surrounded by our brothers and sisters who believed that message and were saved by it