Exposing Our Legalism – 2
Matthew 23:29-33
XXIX. Jesus Deals with Us

Most of us will have encountered someone who is all grace and smiles face to face, yet holds daggers behind our backs. "Hi," they will say with consummate sweetness. "How are you?" they will ask, feigning interest. Yet beneath the veneer is venom. They are not real. They are not true. Their words are not genuine. They are frauds, fakes, phonies. They are pretending to be one thing when in truth they are something else altogether. They are hypocrites.

So it is for many in their relationship with God. They are all grace and smiles externally, formally, superficially. However, their hearts are far from God. Their main concern is appearances. Inwardly they are full of greed, self-indulgence, and wickedness. They neglect justice, mercy, faithfulness, and love. Outwardly, they appear beautifully devout; inwardly they are full of dead men's bones, all uncleanness, hypocrisy, and lawlessness. Their hypocrisy displeases God even as their two-facedness displeases us.

We have arrived at the climactic point in Jesus' confronting, denouncing, and exposing hypocrisy and legalism of Israel's most religious and observant community, the scribes and Pharisees. They settled for correct external performance of religious duties while narrowing the scope of their application and ignoring internal heart reasons and motives for those duties. Thus, Jesus declared seven "woes' on the scribes and Pharisees. He denounced them as spiritually blind hypocrites. We have urged that our understanding of the true Jesus must accommodate and even embrace this manifestation of His righteousness, indignation and judgment. This same Jesus is angered by the hardness of heart of those who would prohibit a healing based on a legalistic extra-biblical interpretation of the

law of God (Mk 3:5). This same Jesus drives the money-changers from the temple with a whip (Mk 11:15-19; Jn 2:13-17). Indeed, Jesus' actions here anticipate the final judgment of which He warns (vv34-36).

We can summarize the errors of legalists and hypocrites essentially as this: they think of God as one whom we can placate by doing the right things even for the wrong reasons. The basic error is theological, a faulty doctrine of God. We are vulnerable to the same error in a variety of ways. We can obey and serve God *correctly* yet *reluctantly*, *resentfully* or angrily, viewing God as a task-master, demanding more and more of us, imposing His agenda on us while prohibiting us from pursuing our own. We can serve God *defensively*, out of *servile fear*, obeying as a matter of self-defense, so that bad things won't happen to us, thinking "He's going to get me if I don't," viewing God as an ogre and tyrant. We can obey and serve God *selfishly*, thinking that by doing so we may promote our own self-interest or group-interest, serving "to be seen by others" (23:5-12, 15), viewing God transactionally, even mechanically, as One to whom we may punch in the code and out comes a product, place an order and the item arrives on our doorstep. We can serve God *selectively*, tithing our spices while failing to comply with the "weightier matters," the more difficult requirements of justice, mercy, and faithfulness (23:16-24).

For these reasons (and others), we multiply *our rules* at the same time that we limit the requirements of *God's rules* so as to convince ourselves that we are good, compliant, observant servants of God (23:3-4, 13). Meanwhile, our hearts are full of damnable lusts and idols; meanwhile, we *unjustly* deny people what they are due from us, merciless to those who are needy and suffering, and *faithless*, failing to follow through on our commitments and obligation. Hypocrisy is a terrible sin. What is the seventh hypocrisy which Jesus denounces? Did they…

Honor righteous ancestors or betray their cause?

> *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous,* (Matthew 23:29)

The scribes and Pharisees honored God's servants, the prophets, and other religious worthies. This was a fine thing they did. They built "tombs" for the prophets and "monuments" for the righteous. R. T. France notes that during the 1st century A.D. there was "a great emphasis on building splendid tombs, including some for long dead worthies."[1] By this activity the current generation hoped to make up for what their ancestors failed to do, or even show themselves "morally and spiritually above their forefathers who had persecuted the prophets whose monuments they were building," D. A. Carson explains.[2] Jesus speaks both of the "prophets," who were the mouthpiece of God, and the "righteous" who in their day rendered wholehearted service to God but who were not agents of divine revelation. The aim of the scribes and Pharisees was to honor the servants of God from previous generations. This was a good thing. We should do the same, remembering and honoring the lives of the devoted servants of God across the centuries. However, it is hypocritical to honor their *memory* while ignoring their *message.* Matthew Henry points out that carnal people only honor the memories of faithful ministers that are long dead "because they do not reprove them or disturb them in their sins."[3] It is hypocrisy to build the prophets' *tombs* but hate the prophets' *doctrine*. J. C. Ryle speaks of their "affected veneration." Their lives were proof "that they liked dead saints better than living ones." Ryle continues, "The very men that pretended to honour dead prophets, could see no beauty in a

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[1] France, *Matthew*, 329.
[2] Carson, *Matthew*, 483.
[3] Henry, *Exposition*, V:339.

living Christ."[4] How was this possible? How could they be so mistaken? What was their true condition?

Self-deceived

First, they were *self-deceived*. Here is what the scribes and Pharisees claimed:

> *If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.* (Matthew 23:30)

The scribes and Pharisees *said* the right things about the prophets and righteous men of the past. Having the "advantage of hindsight," as we say, they could see that the martyring of the prophets was evil. Moreover, they might even admire those "worthies" at a distance, now that they were silent and no longer a threat to them. The building of monuments would seem to indicate a superior insight to that of their ancestors. However, they failed to understand the truth about themselves. "Self-ignorance," says Henry, "is the most shameful and hurtful ignorance."[5] Leon Morris thoughtfully observes,

> Now that the prophets were safely out of the way and they could no longer hear the thunderbolts those great men hurled at conventional religiosity, they could safely applaud all that the prophets had said, quite oblivious of the fact that their lives gave daily evidence that the kind of thing the prophets denounced lived on."[6]

They could applaud the prophets and distinguish themselves from their prosecuting ancestors. Yet all the while, they

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[4] Ryle, *Matthew*, 304.
[5] Henry, *Exposition*, V:338.
[6] Morris, *Matthew*, 586.

attacked Jesus and His disciples, those who embodied the tradition of the prophets and to whom the prophets bore witness.

> *Consequently you bear witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.* (Matthew 23:31)

Jesus is saying something like our expression, "like father, like son." They identified the killers of the prophets as their "fathers" (v30). If so, Jesus says, then "you are (their) sons." The fathers *killed* the prophets, the sons *buried* them. They will kill not just the prophets but *the* Prophet. They will kill not just the prophets but the spokesmen of *the* Prophet, such as Stephen, James, and others. "You inherit the same spirit, and are full of the same malice and rancour," says Matthew Poole of Jesus' meaning.[7] They are heirs of the same "truth-hating, prophet-killing spirit of (their) fathers," adds David Brown.[8] In Luke's account Jesus puts it like this:

> *47 Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. 48 So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs.* (Luke 11:47-48)

The scribes and Pharisees thought of themselves as *physical* descendants of their fathers; Jesus identifies them as *spiritual* descendants as well. They were their fathers' sons "by spirit and disposition," says Henry.[9] They loved the ancient prophets. However, they didn't listen to them. "The only prophets they admired were dead prophets; when they met a living one they

[7] Poole, *Commentary*, III:111.
[8] Brown, *Four Gospels*, 111.
[9] Henry, *Exposition*, V:340.

tried to kill him," says William Barclay.[10] David Gooding likewise says, "The way to honour a dead prophet and to derive spiritual benefit from him is to carry out his message."[11] Consequently, by building the tombs of the prophets they were cooperating with their fathers in the task of destroying them. They killed them, you build their tombs. Sons were united with the ancient fathers in killing and burying the prophets. Consequently, "For such men to venerate the relics of the dead prophets," says Gooding, "was nothing but superstition."[12] It was no mark of piety at all.

The honoring of the *memory* of the dead while ignoring their *message* is a common error of the living. We see this phenomenon each time there is a split Supreme Court decision. Typically, the losing side will claim that the majority are violating what the *founders* intended and the *Constitution* requires. However, the reality often is that the losing side is honoring the *memory* of founders while rejecting their *message*. Not infrequently one or both sides are guilty of disregarding the intentions of the founders as evident in the *Constitution* which they wrote, while claiming to revere their work.

There are those who honor the lives of the early Christian martyrs, yet will not duplicate their *commitments*. There are those who honor the lives of the Reformers, yet do not believe their *doctrines*. There are those who honor the lives of the former pastors of churches who would have resisted or even attacked them in person. There is a "joke" told among preachers. Who is the greatest minister there ever has been? The guy who just left. He wasn't seen as such when he was here. He wasn't appreciated. His life was made miserable by his critics. However, now that he is gone? Now that he no longer causes

[10] Barclay, *Luke*, 162.
[11] Gooding, *Luke*, 235.
[12] Gooding, *Luke*, 235.

me discomfort? He's the best there ever was. This is self-deception. At times it may approach ancestral worship. "This is the way of hypocrites," says Calvin, "to honour God's holy ministers and true-living teachers after they have died, but in their lives to abhor them." They are guilty, he says, of "trying to appear devoutly respectful to the dead at the same time as they are working to silence the living."[13]

One may walk onto Harvard University's campus and be greeted by a statue of John Harvard (1607-1638), young Puritan minister who died at the age of 30 and for whom the university is named. It was erected over 240 years after his death (in 1884). He was a graduate of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, a hot bed of Puritanism. In 1637 he emigrated to New England to be a part of the Puritan project of building a Christian civilization. Sadly, he died a little over a year later of tuberculosis in 1638, bequeathing his 400-volume library, a large sum of money, and his name to the college established in 1636 for the education of the colony's future ministers. A stained-glass window (1884) at Emmanuel College honors John Harvard as well as a memorial plaque. Increase Mather, Cotton's father, was Harvard's sixth president (1692-1701). Its motto then was *Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae*, "Truth for Christ and the Church," reduced now to *Veritas*. Still today we honor the memory of the prophets whose message we despise.

One may visit Alexander Hall at Princeton Theological Seminary (built in 1814), named for Archibald Alexander (1772-1850), the first professor of the seminary for whom the building was named. One may also visit Hodge Hall, named for Charles Hodge, who taught at the seminary for over 50 years. One may find beautiful oil paintings on campus of Alexander, Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and others. Princeton *Seminary*, of course, was from 1812-1929 the bastion of conservative

[13] Calvin, *Harmony*, III:61, 62.

Presbyterianism. The *university* itself has its roots in the "Log College" founded by William Tennent (1673-1746) in 1727 in order to educate evangelistic preachers, including his sons Gilbert (1703-1764) and William, Jr. (1705-1777). Still today there is a William Tennant High School and a Log College Middle School in New Jersey. These men were the champions of evangelical and Presbyterian orthodoxy.

My early years in Savannah I was able to point out to those resisting gospel truths that no fewer than seven of our previous ministers had graduated from Princeton College or Princeton Seminary. Back then we observed a "KBA Sunday," named for ministers Kollock, Baker, and Axson, the first two Princeton graduates and the last a sound, orthodox Southern Presbyterian man. We observed Georgia Heritage Sunday and Scottish Heritage Sunday. All this was packed into the first half of the year and cherished by many who in truth honored the *memory* of the past while they rejected the *message* "I believe and preach what these men believed and preached," I accurately could claim. Since 1755, we have been a faithful church.

Still today one may find professors at Princeton Seminary who hold such positions as the Charles Hodge professor of Systematic Theology, the Francis Landey Patton Professor of Homiletics. One may find a plaque honoring Warfield in the Miller Chapel (named for Princeton's second professor, Samuel Miller). The biography of the current occupant of the Hodge chair refers to "*their* recent promotion to full professor," meaning *his*, the plural pronoun a result of deference to transgender ideology, one assumes. Still today we build monuments to the prophets whose message we despise.

Yale University, founded in 1703 by devout Puritans who believed Harvard had become less than fully orthodox, still today features "The Jonathan Edwards Center" devoted to the study of Jonathan Edward's works, a 1720 Yale alumnus. It has

published annotated versions of his writings in 26 beautifully bound large volumes. This project was undertaken by scholars interested in Edwards for historical reasons, who admire his extraordinary intellect, who honor his *memory* yet who reject the *message* of Edwards and Yale's founders. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Edwards' most famous sermon, is regarded with unveiled contempt by those who champion his memory.

One can repeat this pattern in literally hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the formerly Christian world where they continue to "build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous" while killing their teaching and murdering their doctrines.

Unaware of their peril

Second, the scribes and Pharisees were blind to consequences of their hypocrisy. They were unaware of their peril, oblivious of their danger. Time would prove the truth of what Jesus said. "Time will tell," as we say.

> [32] *Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.*
> (Matthew 23:32)

France describes this as an "ironic imperative."[14] Jesus is asserting that Jewish rebellion against God's true messengers reaches its climax in His own generation. This is the beginning of His lament that culminates in v37: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem." "Go on, then, and finish what your ancestors started," the Good News Bible renders v32. "Go on then, if you must, if you insist, to your own destruction." The idea behind the expression, "fill up, then, the measure," "is that God can only tolerate so much sin; and then, when the measure is 'full,' he must respond in wrath (cf Genesis 15:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16)," Carson

[14] France, *Matthew*, 330.

explains.[15] "Fill up" the "measure" of your sins and brace yourselves for the wrath to follow. The nation of Israel is close to this point. The time is approaching.

> *You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?* (Matthew 23:33)

"These are strange words to come from the mouth of Christ, into whose lips grace was poured," Henry acknowledges.[16] Here Jesus sums up the seven woes. You "serpents" or "snakes," Jesus calls them. The whole expression could be rendered, "you snakes and sons of snakes."[17] John the Baptist had called the religious leaders a "brood of vipers" and urged them to flee the wrath to come (Matthew 3:7). They were, says Henry of Jesus' meaning, "a generation of envenomed, enraged, spiteful adversaries to Christ and His gospel."[18] Their practice of religion is a total failure, and they are destined to be cast into hell.

So what is the answer to the persistent hypocrisy within the believing community? Listen to God as He speaks to us in His word. This is the key to everything. Listen not resentfully, or defensively, or selfishly, or selectively. Don't pick and choose as suits your personal lifestyle preference. Don't narrow the scope of Scripture's application. Don't emphasize or ignore as promotes your temporal well-being. Listen! It is exactly to this need that Jesus points as he laments,

> *[34] Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify,*

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[15] Carson, *Matthew*, 484.
[16] Henry, *Exposition*, V:340.
[17] Morris, *Matthew*, 587.
[18] Henry, *Exposition*, V:341.

and some you will flog in your synagogues
and persecute from town to town. (Matthew 23:34)

"I send you," Jesus says, as He sends us, His spokesmen and interpreters. "Prophets" are those who pronounce, "Thus saith the Lord." "Wise men" are those who carefully study Scripture and embrace its message. They might be likened to preachers and writers of today who correctly interpret and apply the given biblical revelation to the present generation. Similarly, "scribes" are writers and teachers who are able to communicate authoritatively God's word through careful study of the given biblical revelation. Luke adds to this list "apostles" (Luke 11:49). All these must be heard and heeded if one is to escape "being sentenced to hell" (v33). Instead, they were all rejected. Some were "killed and crucified," some "scourged." "Synagogues" were not only places of worship but also centers of the community. The persecution shall be *official*. It shall continue from "town to town" indicating it shall be *persistent*. The consequence for rejecting Christ is devastating:

[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. (Matthew 23:35)

That the "guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth" should "fall" on Jesus' contemporaries means that the rejection of Jesus and His apostles is the worst of all sins (23:36). "Abel" and "Zechariah" are the first and last of the Old Testament martyrs. Zechariah may be counted as the last because 2 Chronicles was the last book of the Hebrew canon, his murder being recorded in 2 Chronicles 24:20-22. In both cases, Abel and Zechariah, there is an explicit call for vengeance (Genesis 4:10; 2 Chronicles 24:22). Jesus says of Zechariah's death, "Whom you murdered." Jesus unites His contemporary

opponents with the killers of the servants of God all through the ages, with whom we also are united when we reject Christ.

It is good to honor our religious past. We should honor the *memory* of the generations that have gone before us. We even have t-shirts and coffee mugs with pictures and quotations from Christian heroes from the past. I have my own John Owen mug, and I once had a George Whitefield t-shirt with a picture of the great evangelist in his characteristic pose with the quotation "God is able to save to the uttermost" (from Heb 7:25 [KJV]). We should hang their pictures, read their books, and publish their histories. Yet it is hypocritical to do so if we fail to honor their *message* as well. We kill, crucify, flog, persecute, and murder God's spokesmen when we close our ears to the prophets and apostles' writings which we call the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. It is the height of hypocrisy to pretend to honor their *memory* in the *past* if we dishonor their *message* in the *present.* The scribes and Pharisees were *self-deceived* and *unaware of their peril*, but they were soon to be exposed.

The searing denunciations of 23:1-36 are followed in verses 37-39 with a sad lament for Jerusalem and for what might have been. Jesus not only summarizes the sins that have provoked His righteous *wrath* (verses 1-36), but highlights their missed opportunities which have aroused His *grief* (verses 37-39). *If only* they had been willing. *If only* they had believed Him. When the faithless remain obstinately rebellious and unbelieving, it stirs up not only the *anger* of Christ, but His *sorrow* as well.

> *O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.* (Matthew 23:37)

Jesus employs the simile of the hen and her chicks, a particularly vivid way of communicating affection, care, provision, and protection. "How often I wanted," He says. Jerusalem's "children" are her citizens. It is a term of affection. Jesus wanted to gather them to protect and provide for them. He speaks tenderly, longingly of what He would have done but they would not have it.

The metaphor of the hen and her chicks was used frequently in the Old Testament.[19] It includes the ideas of the vulnerability and helplessness of the chicks and their safety under the hen's wings. It speaks of Jesus' deep affection for the city and for His desire to place it under His care. They could have found safety under His wings, but they would not.

"The note of sorrowful disappointment in this lament is an important counterbalance to the violence of some of the denunciations in verses 1-36; it gave Jesus no pleasure to pronounce judgment on those whom he came to offer salvation," says France.[20] "How often," Jesus says. This offer of care was made not once or twice, but frequently. Repeatedly they spurned His offer to gather them under the protection of His wings. They "would not" have it. "I wanted… you were unwilling" (NASB).

> *"Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!"*
> (Matthew 23:38)

Further compassion is indicated in Jesus' lament as the pronouns shift from the singular in verse 37 to the plural in verse 38. Carson sees this as a shift from "the abstraction of the city to the concrete reality of people," underscoring further as it

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[19] See Deuteronomy 32:11; Psalms 17:8; 36:7; 91:4; Isaiah 31:5; Jeremiah 48:46.
[20] France, *Matthew*, 332.

does "the reality of divine love."[21] The "house" "has a family ring about it," says Morris.[22] He is speaking of the city as a family with a heavenly Father. The unfolding tragedy is palpable.

Is there a common thread that runs through the seven woes? Is there a central defect? Yes, there is. The source of the problem in each of the seven woes is the heart. Their practice of religion and pursuit of God was poisoned by corrupt motives, misdirected intentions, and poisoned attitudes.

They were zealous for *doctrine,* but not open to the truth; they prayed long *prayers,* but were motivated by greed, not love for God; they were zealous for *outreach,* but were motivated by a party spirit, not a concern for souls; they were *ethically precise,* but for the purpose of evading compliance; they were *meticulous tithers*, but ignored the "weightier matters" of "justice and mercy and faithfulness"; they were *ceremonially* and *behaviorally correct,* but inside they were full of corruption; they honored the *memory* of righteous ancestors, but joined in killing those then alive who preached their ancestors' *message*; they were motivated by the desire to be "noticed by men," and thus they practiced religion as a "pretense," that they might "outwardly appear righteous to men" (verses 5, 14, 28; cf Matthew 6:1); they sought to have the earthly honor, power, and wealth that a religious society would give to religious men.

Hypocrisy is present when the *motives* for religious activities are *corrupt*, when the *attitudes* are contrary, when the *heart* is wrong while the external *behavior*, the outside *action*, the observable conduct, the ceremonial *techniques* are correct. No amount of religious service, no matter how vast, how costly, how correct, can be anything but unacceptable and displeasing

[21] Carson, *Matthew*, 486.
[22] Morris, *Matthew*, 591.

to God if the heart is not right. Only if one's service of God is sincere, earnest, aims to glorify God, intends to honor God, and is motivated by the love of God and the desire to please Him will He find it acceptable. All else is hypocrisy.

Take stock. Why do I come to church? Why do I identify myself as a Christian? If I do so either for *ulterior motive,* that is, because of some benefit I gain from my association with a religious organization, then I am a hypocrite. Or if I do so with a *contrary attitude* (wishing I were somewhere else, resenting the whole business), maintaining external correctness (I'm on time, in my pew, bowing for prayers, repeating the Creed, eyes forward and listening to the sermon, etc.), I am a hypocrite, and I too fall under Jesus' condemnation.

What is the proper motive behind religious service observance? *Love* for God. What is the proper attitude? Desire to *please* God. What is the proper aim? The intention to *glorify* God. The apostle Paul in a jail cell understands the purpose of his life. It is that "Christ will be honored in my body whether by life or my death" (Phil 1:20). Even more succinctly he says, "To live is Christ" (Phil 1:21). This is what life is all about. Of course, we have multiple duties and responsibilities. Yet all we do ultimately comes down to this: "to live is Christ." One cannot go beyond this. If I serve God for any other reason I need to repent, confess my double-mindedness, and plead for a pure heart. The gospel of Christ saves not only degraded sinners, but also those who are religious but hypocrites. We need only recognize our hypocrisy, the very thing the scribes and Pharisees were unable to do, repudiate it, and seek the cleansing of our hearts, its motives and attitudes, by the work of the Holy Spirit.