Denouncing Our Hypocrisy - 1
Matthew 23:13-14
XXVI. Jesus Deals with Us

The phrase "the wrath of the *Lamb*," found in Rev 6:16, presents us with a striking incongruity. "Lamb" and "wrath" are words we ordinarily don't associate with each other. Lambs are cute and cuddly. Lambs flee trouble. Lambs are defenseless and vulnerable. Lambs don't show wrath. Yet this lamb does. The Jesus of the gospels is the "lamb of God" (Jn 1:29). The apostle Paul entreats us "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (2 Cor 10:1). Repeatedly we have seen Him demonstrating kindness, gentleness, and patience in His interactions with the whole spectrum of types of persons. This was the characteristic of His earthly ministry.

However, Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father and sat down on the seat of judgment. He continues to intercede sympathetically for us. Yet there is a day coming when unrepentant sinners will call upon mountains and rocks to fall on then and hide them from "the *wrath* of the Lamb"(Rev. 6:16); when they will be *tormented* "in the presence of the Lamb" (Rev. 14:10). The Lamb will conquer all His enemies and destroy them (Rev 17:14). The Lamb who was slain is also "the *Lion* of the tribe of Judah" (Rev 5:5). Christ the Lamb will return as judge. A day is coming

> *when the Lord Jesus (will be) revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.* (1 Thes 1:7-9)

The denunciations of Matthew 23:13-36 are a foretaste of that wrath and judgment. Eight powerful broadsides are fired against His enemies in these verses. What He *exposed* in verses 1-12 He *denounces* in verses 13-36. Eight times (or seven, depending upon how one handles verse 14) Jesus pronounces "woe." Eight times He calls them "hypocrites." Five times He calls them "blind." He calls them "fools," "serpents," "whitewashed tombs," and a "brood of vipers." He denounces them in "unsparing terms," says J. C. Ryle. "Let us mark that language well," Ryle continues; "it teaches a solemn lesson."[1] Matthew Henry refers to Jesus' denunciations as "claps of thunder, or flashes of lightening, from Mount Sinai."[2] A. T. Robertson (1863-1934) hears "the rolling thunder of Christ's wrath."[3]

How important is religious integrity and how terrible are the effects of hypocrisy? They draw this frightening language from the One who is love, who is "gentle and humble of heart" (Matthew 11:29), who gave to the church His "new commandment" that we should love one another (John 13:34,35), who took small children in His arms and blessed them (Mark 10:16), and who said (do note!), "judge not, lest you be judged" (Matthew 7:1). "These woes are the more remarkable," says Matthew Henry, "not only because of the authority, but because of the meekness and gentleness of Him that denounced them."[4]

"Woe" means trouble. A terrible future awaits those upon whom a woe is pronounced. A divine woe means divine judgment. "On you," on those targeted by His woes,

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[1] Ryle, *Matthew*, 301-302.
[2] Henry, *Exposition*, V:333.
[3] Cited in Barclay, *Matthew*, 318; Trapp: "How terribly doth he here thunderstrike these stupid Pharisees" (*Commentary*, V:240).
[4] Henry, *Exposition*, V:333.

> [35]*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.* (Mt 23:35)

Yet, according to the commentators, "woe" also should be understood as "an expression of both compassion and regret," as Leon Morris points out, "a verdict as well as an expression of sorrow."[5] Jesus deeply laments the unbelief of Israel as He completes His woes, crying out,

> [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!* (Mt 23:37)

"Woe" is contemplated not with relish, but with regret and sorrow, and may even imply an appeal that they should turn from their evil and be spared. Nevertheless, "a woe from Christ," says Henry, "is a remediless woe."[6]

Henry sees the eight "woes" "in opposition to the eight Beatitudes."[7] The label "hypocrites" provides the explanation, the basis for the denunciations. "Hypocrite" is the regular and normal Greek word for actor. It came to refer to one who wears a mask, who hides his true motives and intentions. Hypocrisy is the defining sin of the religious community of Jesus' day. His religious contemporaries were not vulgar, dirty, degraded

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[5] Morris, *Matthew*, 578, 462; also D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, 477.
[6] Henry, *Exposition*, V:333.
[7] Henry, *Exposition*, V:333; As the Beatitudes "set out the true way to please God, so the woes describe the wrong way, and pronounce judgment on those who follow and teach it" (France, *Matthew*, 32).

sinners. They behaved properly. They kept up appearances. They visibly conformed with the religious and moral standards of the day. However, they were insincere. They were frauds, two-faced, phonies. They played a role. They lived life on stage. They pretended to be something they were not. What they did in religion was "for its effect on those who observe them, not because deep down they think of it as right," Morris explains.[8] Their religion was practiced with a hidden agenda, with false motives, with ulterior goals. As Jesus said already, they seek religious honor and recognition while they evade religious obligations (23:5-12).[9]

"Hypocrite" still today is among the worst labels one can place upon a person. The secular world can hardly hide its glee when a high-profile religious leader succumbs to a sin he regularly has denounced. A preacher who condemns adultery, yet whose adulterous affairs are exposed, is rightly ridiculed and scorned. Disdain for religious pretenders, for moral frauds, exceeds that even for murderers, surpassed perhaps only by that reserved for racists, rapists, and pedophiles.

The eight "woes" are pronounced and the label "hypocrite" is applied to seven practices or characteristics which were points of religious pride among the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus exposes and denounces the inadequacy of their religion. The overarching message is that true religion and God-pleasing piety are not merely matters of external disciplines like prayer, fasting, public rituals, and tithing, but also the internal disposition of the heart. No amount of religiosity can overcome

[8] Morris, *Matthew*, 579; "Woe," says D. A. Carson, is a condemnation that "neither vindictive nor spiteful so much as judicial" (*Matthew*, 477).
[9] France sees the emphasis as being more on inconsistency than insincerity; Carson adds this perspective: "What stands out is the centrality of rightly understanding the Scriptures– a theme that is reflected in all the preceding controversies and is no less related to Jesus' rejection of the claims of the teachers of the law" (*Matthew*, 477).

a deficit there. Nothing can be *right* if the heart is *wrong*. Jesus challenges each aspect of their religious practice demonstrating their insincerity and hypocrisy. Each challenge raises a question: were they *this* or *that*?; or did they do *this* or *that*?

- Guardians of the truth or biased against it? (verse 13)
- Devoted to prayer or committed to self? (verse 14)
- Zealous for souls or sectarian success? (verse 15)
- Ethically precise or morally evasive? (verses 16-22)
- Meticulously obedient or selectively compliant? (verses 23,24)
- Externally correct or morally corrupt? (verses 25-28)
- Honor righteous ancestors or betray their cause? (verses 29-33)

We will take these items in the order in which Jesus condemns them.

Guardians of the truth or biased against it?

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

Zeal for the truth is a good thing. We have been "entrusted with the oracles of God," as were the ancient Jews (Rom 3:2). Jesus says that we can know *the truth*, and knowing *the truth* will set us free (Jn 8:32). Jesus says He is *the truth* (Jn 14:6). Pursuit of the truth is to be commended. However, zeal for the truth must above all be zeal for God's truth, not ours. It was at this point that their fervor went bad. Their zeal was for *their* truth, not *God's* truth. The first woe is directed, says Ryle, against their

"systematic opposition . . . to the progress of the Gospel." [10] They "shut off the kingdom of heaven," language used of a closed or even a locked door.

The phrase "kingdom of heaven" is a summary of the message that Jesus preached.[11] His parables were the parables of the kingdom (eg. Mt 13), His healings were signs of the kingdom (Mt 12:28; Lk 11:20), and His ethics were the virtues of the kingdom (Mt 5-7; Lk 6:17-49; 12:22-34). In Jesus, the kingdom or reign of God is present. He is the Messiah who brings the *rule* of God and its *realm*. He opens the doors of that realm to those who believe (Jn 10:7-9). The kingdom has come and the opportunity to enter is present. Yet they were firmly opposed to Jesus' message and mission. Thereby they "shut" the kingdom, refused to heed His message, and so did not enter in themselves. Worse, they didn't "allow" those who did receive Jesus' message to enter. How? "Through their deceptive teaching," says Hilary of Poitiers.[12] "You have taken away the key of knowledge" (Lk 11:52).

The scribes and Pharisees opposed everything that Jesus did. They criticized and attacked Him when He taught, when He healed (Mt 12:1:13, 22-31), when He showed kindness to outsiders (Lk 7:39), when He received hospitality from sinners (Lk 19:1-10). Those who dared to confess that Jesus was the Messiah were excommunicated (Jn 9:22, 34). Henry summarizes:

> They perverted his doctrine, confounded his miracles, quarreled with his disciples, and represented him, and his institutes and economy, to

[10] Ryle, *Matthew*, 302.
[11] France describes it as a phrase used "to describe a saving relationship with God" (cf 5:20, 7:21, 18:3, 19:23-24) [Matthew, 327]).
[12] Cited in *ACCS*, *NT*, Ib:171.

> the people in the most disingenuous manner imaginable; they thundered out their excommunications against those that confessed him, and used all their wit and power to serve their malice against him; and thus they *shut up the kingdom of heaven*.[13]

Nothing would satisfy Jesus' religious contemporaries. As Jesus said,

> *"For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"* (Mt 11:18-19)

Many people heard Jesus "gladly" and were ready to believe Him (Mk 12:37). However, when the Pharisees tried to discredit Jesus, many people backed away. This was the Pharisees' intent. They turned the crowds against Him as they demanded His execution (Mt 27:20; Mk 15:11). They sought to block the doors to Jesus' kingdom.

Why did the religious leaders oppose Jesus?

Bias

First, they opposed Jesus' gospel kingdom because of *bias.* They knew the Bible. They "searched" the Scripture, Jesus said. They were students of the Bible. However, they failed to see that the Old Testament Scripture points to the very Jesus who stood before them.

> *"You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that*

[13] Henry, *Exposition*, V:334.

> *bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life."* (John 5:39,40)

Again Jesus said,

> *"For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me."* (John 5:46)

"Every word of divinely inspired Scripture looks to him and refers to him," says the ancient church father Cyril of Alexandria.[14] It is not enough to read the Bible and know its contents. One can know exhaustively the *contents* of the Bible and yet fail to understand its *message*. One can miss *the* point. The scribes and Pharisees had done that. They read the Bible with a prejudicial eye. As the apostle Paul said, they had a "zeal for God but not in accordance with knowledge" (Romans 10:2, NASB). They brought to Scripture their bias, preconceptions, and self-interest to the task of interpretation. The gospels tell us that they delivered up Jesus for crucifixion "out of envy" (Mt 27:18; Mk 15:15). They were jealous of His popularity. He represented a threat to their positions of preeminence and power. So they failed to interpret it correctly or to let it shape their thoughts and practices. Their hearts, in other words, were not open. Consequently, they failed to see the image of Christ in the shadow of the Law. Rather than being *guardians* of the truth, they were its *distorters*.

We feature a prayer of "illumination" every week in our morning and evening services because we realize the dangers of imposing our own bias upon Holy Scripture. We pray in this prayer that God will open our hearts and that we will hear His voice and receive *His* message.

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[14] Cited in *ACCS*, *NT*, III:202.

Pride

Second, they opposed Jesus' gospel kingdom because of *spiritual pride and self-righteousness*. "Knowledge puffs up," says the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 8:1; cf 1 Corinthians 13:2). They were proud and unteachable. Recall the attempts by the religious leaders to entrap Jesus just prior to these denunciations. They interrogated Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar (Mt 22:15-22), about the resurrection of the dead (Mt 22:23-33), and about which was the greatest commandment (Mt 22:34-40). They questioned Him not in pursuit of the truth, but "to *entangle* him in his words" (Mt 22:15). They "*pretended* to be sincere, that they might *catch* him in something he said" (Lk 20:20). They believed they had nothing to learn from the greatest teacher who ever lived. As Job said of his friends,

> [2]*No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you.* (Job 12:2)

Jesus' religious contemporaries, like Job's, were not open to the truth.

George Marsden, in his magisterial biography of Jonathan Edwards, traces American civilization to two sources which represent two Americas, both of whom were born in the first decade of the 18th century: Benjamin Franklin (1706) and Jonathan Edwards (1703). [15] Edwards represents the Puritan-originating, Bible-believing, gospel-preaching, commandment-keeping American majority. Franklin represents the Enlightenment-influenced, Bible-rejecting, rationalistic, secular, and highly influential minority. This latter group sees the former as a threat to its power and influence. They see themselves as the guardians of the righteousness of the secular order. They are not open to the truth.

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[15] George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (London:Yale University Press, 2003), 9-10.

What about us? Are we who are part of the religious community open to the truth? Truly open? Regardless of what it requires regarding our lifestyless, priorities, and outlook? A man once said to me, " I don't think the Holy Spirit is leading me to break off this (illicit) relationship." He said this after I had reviewed with him text after text which condemned every aspect of his relationship with a woman who was not his wife. He said he was praying and reading Scripture and seeking guidance. Yet he wasn't open and submissive to the leading of the Holy Spirit through the word. His personal bias distorted his understanding.

How does Jesus deal with us? If one is playing at religion, pretending to be devoted to biblical authority while one defies God and justifies one's carnality, He deals with us with suitable harshness. We can study the Bible and yet be hypocrites. Jesus calls this hypocrisy because it appears as zeal for truth when it isn't. Zeal for truth, when authentic, results in fervent listening, self-examination, and humble submission to God's word. It results in reevaluation of one's lifestyle, priorities, outlook, and commitments, and an openness to change.

Devotion to prayer or committed to self?

> *[14]Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers; therefore ye shall receive the greater condemnation. (Mt 23:14)*

Verse 14 is disputed. Most modern scholars see it as a later addition copied from Mark 12:40 or Luke 20:47.[16] Whether we should accept it as original (which I think we ought) or (for our purposes) draw it into our study from Mark and Luke, we should understand it as being "directed against the covetousness and self-aggrandizing spirit of the scribes and Pharisees," as

[16] One can find v14 in the margins of the ESV and NIV, and in brackets in the NASB (1977).

Ryle says.[17] Jesus describes the scribes and Pharisees as making "long prayers." This is admirable. It is good to be devoted to prayer (Colossians 4:2). However, is it always the case that much time devoted to prayer is a sign of spiritual authenticity? Those who labor long in prayer are surely real believers, we might think. No, Jesus says, not if they offer those long prayers for the wrong reasons. Jesus says the scribes and Pharisees did so "for a pretense," for ulterior motives. They did so to cultivate an image.

The motive behind their long prayers was to provide cover for their covetousness. Long prayers were regarded as a sign of a truly godly man. Of course, a godly man would not unjustly deprive a widow of her wealth. These devout scribes, these holy Pharisees would never, ever be dishonest, it was assumed. "By this means," by means of ostentatious prayer, "people were made to believe it was not possible that such men as they should cheat them," Henry explains.[18]

Widows are of special concern to God. He is their defender (Proverbs 15:23; Exodus 22:22,23, etc.). Many widows were eager to have the most pious Pharisees be the trustees of their estates. They trusted them. What Jesus seems to be alluding to is the religious leaders' practice of ingratiating themselves to property-owning widows through extravagant displays of piety, and then abusing the trust and influence for the sake of their own material gain and the disadvantage of the widows. Perhaps they promised prayers on their behalf in exchange for financial gifts. Or perhaps they promised the blessing of God in exchange for their offerings. It may be that some scribes "encouraged (i.e. pressured) impressionable widows to make gifts beyond their means," Morris suggests.[19] We have seen this sort of thing in

[17] Ryle, *Matthew*, 302.
[18] Henry, *Exposition*, V:334.
[19] Morris, *Luke*, 294.

the same television and megachurch pastors who have gotten rich making similar kinds of promises, fleecing their audiences, draining funds and even impoverishing elderly widows. Matthew Poole calls this sort of commercializing of prayer, and of religion more broadly "an abomination to God."[20] "It is no new thing," wrote Henry 400 years ago, "for the show and form of godliness to be a cloak to the greatest enormities."[21] They "devour" (*katesthiō*) the widows' houses, a word taken from the world of blood thirsty animals. However, "many devour that on earth that they must digest in hell," as John Trapp warns.[22]

This is a classic case of things not being what they appear to be. Jesus spent all night in prayer (Luke 6:12). Psalm 119 is a very long sung prayer of 176 verses. Jesus does not object to long devotional exercises. Offered with the right motives, they could be considered a sign of true devotion to God. As Henry summarizes,

> Where there are many sins to be confessed, and many wants to pray for the supply of, and many mercies to give thanks for, there is occasion for long prayers.[23]

However, what Jesus describes here is the worst sort of hypocrisy. The scribes and Pharisees played at prayer in order to plunder widows! They stood on street corners when they prayed so that they might be seen (Matthew 6:5; 23:5). Prayer for them had become a means by which they carefully cultivated an image that they believed would promote their temporal well-being. Their actual devotion was to themselves. Their commitment was not to prayer but to self.

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[20] Poole, *Commentary*, III:109.
[21] Henry, *Exposition*, V:335.
[22] Trapp, *Commentary*, V:240.
[23] Henry, *Exposition*, V:335.

God is concerned not with the length of our prayers but integrity and fervor with which they are offered. Trapp explains:

> He respecteth not the arithmetic of our prayers, how many they are, nor the rhetoric of our prayers, how eloquent they are; nor the geometry of our prayers, how long they are; nor the music of our prayers, the sweetness of our voice, nor the logic of our prayers, or the method of them but the divinity of our prayers is that which he so much esteemeeth.[24]

It would be wise to keep all matters of "religion" and financial gain completely separate. Don't go to church of the sake of business connections. Don't exploit one's identity as a Christian in the marketplace. Some pursue godliness as a means to manipulate God and produce "worldly gain," a strategy denounced by the apostle Paul (1 Tim 6:3-5). Prayer, for the unscrupulous, becomes "a device for filthy profiteering," as Calvin warns.[25]

How does Jesus deal with us? If we see prayer specifically and "religion" more generally as a means of worldly prosperity, He deals with us with suitable harshness. If I pray to prosper, give to gain, worship for wealth, serve for success, and attend for image enhancement, I am a woeful hypocrite.

The disciples of Christ must be a people of prayer. They must ask, seek, and knock. Jesus commands persistence in prayer (Matthew 7:7-11; Luke 11:5-8; 18:1-8). However, they must pray with the right motives: to please God and love their neighbor.

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[24] Trapp, *Commentary*, V:240.
[25] Calvin, *Harmony*, III:54.