

BEWARE OF BEING A DANGER TO OTHERS
(SUNDAY, MARCH 20, 2011)

SCRIPTURE READING: ISAIAH 5:8-25; MATTHEW 23:13-30

INTRODUCTION

Listen to **1 Peter 2:1-3**:

1 Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, **2** as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, **3** if indeed you have tasted that the Lord *is* gracious.

It is interesting to consider how these verses from 1 Peter 2 deal with the same sins that Jesus harshly condemned in Matthew 23. The sin of hypocrisy, which Jesus so brilliantly exposed in the Pharisees, is a sin that Christians must also confess and repent.

You are probably familiar with the origin of the word hypocrite. In Greek the word hypocrite can have the meaning of being an actor in a play. The word is used metaphorically in the Bible and today to refer to those who say one thing but then do another, or they act one way in public but in a much different way in private.¹

R. T. France in his commentary on Matthew points out that the word hypocrite doesn't just refer to those who are pretenders. In Matthew the word hypocrite is also used for those who are self-deceived. Those who are hypocrites are self-deceived and so they cannot see things as God sees them.² It is one thing to deceive others. It is another thing to be self-deceived.

Last week as we looked at the first 12 verses of Matthew 23, I emphasized the danger of man-centered religion. Beware of man-centered religion. From our text this week from Matthew 23, I believe the call of the text is this. **Make sure you are not a danger to other people.** I see three related dangers from our text – the danger of false teaching, the danger of dishonesty, and the danger of hypocrisy. These sins do not just affect the person who practices them – they are of great danger to other people. Make sure, then, you are not a danger to others.

As we look at Matthew 23:13-30, we will first briefly consider the structure of this passage. Then in three parts we will look at the three main dangers presented in this text – false teaching, dishonesty, and hypocrisy.

1. STRUCTURE OF MATTHEW 23:13-30

¹ BDAG, s.v. “ὑποκριτής,” 1038. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2001), s.v. Matthew 23:13.

² France, 236-237. Hagner disagrees with France concerning the issue of self-deception.

The word **woe** is one of the key words of Matthew 23. This is a very interesting, little word in Scripture. Depending on the context, the word can be an expression of sorrow or as it is used here an expression of **displeasure** and **judgment**. Our OT reading from Isaiah 5 compares very well with this chapter. We have already noted that there are many connections between the books of Matthew and Isaiah.

How many woes are in this section of Matthew 23? The answer in part depends on what translation of the Bible you are using. Most commentators state that there are **seven** woes. And even if you are using a NKJV version, you will note that starting with verse 13 there are seven paragraph divisions. And yet in the NKJV and KJV there is an **eighth** woe found in verse 14. This verse is not found in some Greek manuscripts,³ and in the majority of Greek manuscripts verses 13 and 14 are switched. **The words of verse 14 are found in Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47.** There is no dispute that Jesus said these words; the question is whether Matthew placed them in his gospel. This issue need not trouble us at this point.

How many Beatitudes are found in Matthew 5? The answer is either 8 or 9 depending on how you want to count them. The 9th beatitude is an expansion of the 8th beatitude. Should we see a connection then between the Beatitudes and the woes of Matthew 23? There is a connection in the sense that the **woes are the opposite of the Beatitudes.**⁴ Those who through faith believe and trust in Jesus as the Messiah are given the blessings presented in the Beatitudes as well as the challenge to live according to them. Those who are living in rebellion to Jesus Christ, despite what they may even claim, can only expect the judgment that Jesus pronounces in this chapter.

Do you see the very strong language Jesus used in this chapter? Besides the repeated use of the word woe, Jesus used in reference to the scribes and Pharisees the following words and phrases: child of hell, blind guides, blind fools, blind men, blind Pharisee, snakes, brood of vipers. R. T. France in his commentary writes of other commentators who are troubled by the strong language Jesus used in this chapter. How is this an expression of loving your enemies they say?

But consider how very appropriate is the strong language Jesus used in this chapter. Jesus spoke words that really are very loving. Sometimes loving words are strong or harsh. When a person is in great danger because of sin, sometimes strong warnings are very much needed. It is not loving to always be “loving.”

John Calvin and other reformers were sometimes questioned over the very strong language that they used. Listen to the words of John Calvin in answer this objection.

Hence we may infer how cruel is the mildness of those who dislike our vehemence. They are displeased to see harshness and severity used towards the wolves, which are constantly, with open mouth, tearing and devouring the sheep; and yet they see the poor sheep deceived by a vain disguise, freely throwing

³ ⋈ B D L Z Θ f1 33 892* *pc* and several versional witnesses.

⁴ Hagner, 668.

themselves into the jaws of the wolves, unless the pastor who desires to save them, and endeavors to rescue them from destruction, drive them away with a loud voice. We must therefore follow out the design of Christ, by copying out his example in severe threatenings against wicked despisers, and in boldly exclaiming against them, that those who are capable of being cured may be led by the fear of destruction to withdraw from them.⁵

Yes, it is easy to use strong words when they are not appropriate. A soft answer turns away wrath as we see in Proverbs. Don't let the sun go down on your anger, Paul states. Vengeance belongs unto the Lord we read in Romans. But there is a legitimate place for strong and forceful language when giving warning and rebuke. May the Lord guard your tongue but also strengthen your tongue when such language is needed. May your words be directed as you follow the example of Jesus Christ.

2. DANGER OF FALSE TEACHING, vv. 13-15

Commentators have different ways of grouping the woes of this chapter. While I don't think it is necessary that you have to come up with some pattern or grouping, for the sake of this sermon I would like us to consider the seven woes in three groups. In verses 13-15 we see the danger of false teaching and misdirected zeal.

Jesus used the perfect descriptions for the dangerous actions of the scribes and Pharisees, didn't He? Verse 13 could be translated, **for you shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in the face of men.** How did the scribes and Pharisees shut the door of the kingdom of heaven? We have already seen Jesus in Matthew rebuke the Pharisees for breaking the commandment of God through their traditions. The greatest way that the scribes and Pharisees were shutting the door of the kingdom of heaven was through their rejection of the one who was establishing the kingdom of heaven. The Pharisees as I have noted were very influential not so much through political power but through their teaching and religious influence. As such they were very dangerous!

Verse 14 further shows the danger of the Pharisees. Through their actions they devoured widows' houses. We are not told exactly how they accomplished this. They no doubt had their means. And they covered their dangerous actions by outward piety as Jesus also rebuked them for doing in Matthew 6.

Verse 15 is an interesting verse because it seemingly refers to missionary efforts on the part of the scribes and Pharisees. There has been a great deal of scholarly debate on this verse. Did the Pharisees go on mission trips to win new converts? I don't think we have to interpret the verse in such a literal fashion especially in considering the nature of this passage. Verse 15 may be better understood as referring to the zeal of the Pharisees in convincing either fellow Jews or Gentiles who had become proselytes to fully follow their

⁵ John Calvin, s.v. Matthew 23:13.

traditions.⁶ There would have been great zeal to see this take place. And yet Jesus said their actions made the proselyte twice as much a son of hell as they were.

Again it is important to realize that the Pharisees in many ways would have taught that which was true. They were not directly teaching the worship of false gods. As I have noted in other sermons and Sunday Schools, the origin of the Pharisees came in a time when Jews were under great pressures to turn away from the true God and His Law. The Pharisees helped preserve the truth from being swallowed by error and heresy.

And so the most direct application of this passage today is to Christians who are in orthodox churches. The greatest false teaching today is that which turns people away either directly or indirectly from Jesus Christ and the gospel message.

The greatest danger for a Christian is to in any way turn away from the truth regarding the message of the gospel and the person of Christ. And this then becomes of great danger for other people. Throughout the NT there are the two themes presented often together – the danger of false teaching and then the need to keep one’s focus clearly on Jesus Christ, trusting in His finished work as the only hope for salvation. This is not at all simplistic. The Apostle Paul was not simplistic and yet he could say as we find in Phil. 3:14, “I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” And this wasn’t just Paul’s personal testimony but what he wanted all the believers in Philippi to identify this as their central goal and focus. **Can you say today that this also is your chief goal? Is their clear evidence in your life that you truly believe the message of the gospel and then also live the message of the gospel?**

What will keep you from being dangerous to others is that you consciously and consistently seek to live as a follower of Jesus Christ.

3. THE DANGER OF DISHONESTY, vv. 16-22

Looking at Matthew 23 you should see that verse 16 doesn’t follow the exact pattern that we find in the rest of the chapter. Verse 16 begins with woe but it doesn’t contain the rebuke hypocrites or directly mention the scribes and Pharisees. I don’t think we need to find some reason for this. It simply is an observation.

What did Jesus say about the use of oaths in Matthew 5? Jesus stated that you should not swear or take oaths with respect to heaven, earth, or Jerusalem. You should also not swear by your head. Rather Jesus stated, “let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.”

Jesus’ words here should not be understood as banning oaths in their entirety. The Westminster Confession of Faith states that there is a rightful place for oaths when it is

⁶ Hagner, 668. Here Hagner cites the work of Scott McKnight. See also Eckhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 164-165.

called for by a legitimate authority.⁷ In Matthew 5, Jesus was rebuking the careless use of oaths. Here Jesus further exposed the deception that was practiced in some cases by the Pharisees through different tricks or schemes that they constructed.

It is amazing to consider from verses 16-19 that the Pharisees believed that you could swear by the temple and break your vow or oath and yet if you were to swear by the gold of the temple, you were obligated to keep your oath. If you swore just by the altar, there was a way out, but not if you swore by the gift on the altar. From the Talmud we can see that Jesus was not exaggerating in His rebuke of these practices.⁸ The words of Jesus here are very valuable for learning more about the actual beliefs and practices of the Pharisees during the time of Jesus.

What did Jesus show in His rebuke of the Pharisees? First, He showed how foolish were their distinctions between the temple and the gold of the temple and the altar and the gift of the altar. Such distinctions are foolish in terms of establishing truth. Second, He showed that all oaths really must be seen as being made in the presence of the Almighty God. And this is why in most situations of life there is no need to swear or take an oath, because you should see all of your life as being lived in the presence of God. There is no part of life that can be separated from the authority of God.

Oh, what a precious gift truth is. What a danger comes to the Christian who starts down the path of deception or dishonesty in any way.

Eph. 4:25 Therefore, putting away lying, *“Let each one of you speak **truth** with his neighbor,”* for we are members of one another.

1 John 3:18 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in **truth**. **19** And by this we know that we are of the **truth**, and shall assure our hearts before Him.

What other applications may be seen from Jesus’ strong words of rebuke to the Pharisees?

You might not be making oaths like the Pharisees did and breaking some of them through word games, but are you playing games as it were with the truth in relationship to God and to other men? Do you escape obligations through excuses or do you as Psalm 15 states, swear to your own hurt and not change from what you said you will do?

And as 1 John 3:18 states, make sure that your love for others in this church is not just a love in word or in tongue but in deed and in truth.

The man who speaks the truth is always at ease.⁹

⁷ WCF 22.2.

⁸ France, 870.

⁹ Anonymous. John Blanchard, eds. *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), n.p.

4. THE DANGER OF HYPOCRISY, vv. 23-30

Throughout verses 13-30, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. Perhaps, though, in verses 23-30 we see their hypocrisy in ways that we can more readily identify, and so I am summarizing this section as the danger of hypocrisy.

In verse 23 Jesus called to task the scribes and Pharisees for paying the tithe on tiny seeds and spices while neglecting the weightier matters of the law – justice, mercy, and faith.

The picture presented in verse 23 is quite amusing. Imagine collecting the tiny seeds from mint, dill, and cummin plants and carefully dividing from the piles 10% or more to be offered as part of the tithe.

One commentator has written of the story found in the Talmud of a Rabbi who trained his donkey so well that it would refuse to eat corn unless a tithe was first taken from the corn.¹⁰

Notice that Jesus did not rebuke them simply for being careful concerning the matter of the tithe. It is not Phariseeism to be concerned with God's Law and its details. What is the sin of the Pharisees is to be content and filled with pride because one follows some of the details of God's Law and yet at the same time to be ignorant of the larger matters God's Law demands – justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Jesus therefore stated, these you ought to have done, that is justice, mercy, and faithfulness, without leaving the others undone, that is the giving of the tithe.

In verse 24 Jesus gave a great example of the folly of the Pharisees. They would strain out from their soup or water a tiny insect and yet were so blind and stupid that they would swallow a camel. Assuming that Jesus spoke in Aramaic we can see what He chose the example of a gnat and a camel, since these words rhyme with each other in the language of Aramaic.¹¹

In verse 25 Jesus used another powerful illustration. The Pharisees were careful to clean the outside of their cups and dishes but they would put them back on the shelf with the food left in them, as it were. Picture eating a very thick and cheesy soup. After finishing the soup, you simply wiped off the outside of the cup leaving behind the residue of the soup and then put the dirty cup back into your cabinets. Would you call that clean?

In a similar way the Pharisees looked very good on the outside, but on the inside they were full of extortion¹² and self-indulgence. Again we learn much more about the Pharisees from this verse than we would otherwise know from other sources. Not that all Pharisees were guilty of all of these sins, but the Pharisees despite their outward piety and holiness were guilty of violent and serious sins.

¹⁰ A. T. Robertson took this from Vincent. No reference was given. Robertson, s.v. Matthew 23:23.

¹¹ France, 847.

¹² Or that which they had stolen or plundered.

In verse 27 Jesus used yet another word picture. The scribes and Pharisees were like whitewashed tombs, looking beautiful from the outside, and yet the tombs inside were full of dead men's bones and uncleanness.

You have to keep in mind that people were not buried in well-marked cemeteries like today. I don't think today you ever have to worry about accidentally running into someone's tomb. But this was not the case back in the time of Jesus. Especially before the Passover feast it was common that tombs were whitewashed, washed with lime, so that they would be more easily identified and avoided.¹³

Touching a dead body or even a grave was a serious ceremonial offense according to God's Law. You could not eat of the Passover meal while being ceremonially unclean.

Num. 19:16 Whoever in the open field touches one who is slain by a sword or who has died, or a bone of a man, **or a grave**, shall be unclean seven days.

The Pharisees like these tombs were kept clean on the outside and yet inside the Pharisees were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

The final woe and the final charge of hypocrisy is found starting in verse 29. The scribes and Pharisees took pride in honoring the graves of prophets and the great saints of the OT. During the first century, a Jewish book entitled, the Lives of the Prophets, was written which discussed the location of the tombs of each of the prophets, except for Elijah.¹⁴ Why isn't Elijah's tomb discussed in this work?

The scribes and Pharisees believed they would have not been a part of the murder of the prophets that their fathers were guilty of committing. But Jesus called them the sons of those who murdered the prophets. As we will see more next week, Jesus told them rhetorically to fill up the measure of their father's guilt.

Consider from this portion two applications.

First, it is very easy for Christians to fall into the sin of ignoring the weightier matters of the law that Jesus mentioned here and justify it because you perhaps are faithful in other duties and commands. Perhaps you are faithful in reading your Bible regularly. This is certainly a good thing. Perhaps you are careful with your money and in giving of the tithe. Be sure that your performance of these important duties is never used as a justification for the failure to act justly or with mercy toward others. God doesn't work on a point system. But in our fallen state it is very easy to construct a scheme where we start to feel good about ourselves even when breaking the weightier matters of God's Law.

Second, in a similar way it is easy to put on a show of outward holiness and be covering over very serious and perhaps private sins. Only God can truly search the hearts of His people. I do not know if anyone here is engaging in serious sin and is attempting to cover

¹³ France, 876.

¹⁴ France, 876.

it. The the warning of Scripture should be heard today by any here who might be engaging in horrific sins which are being covered over by outward displays of obedience.

Gal. 6:7 Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. **8** For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

5. CONCLUSION

What is of greatest danger, dishonesty, and hypocrisy? The most dangerous place for yourself and for others, the most dishonest and hypocritical situation is to claim to be a true follower of Jesus Christ when you are still in rebellion to Him. What made the sin of the Pharisees so dangerous and detestable is that they believed that they were truly following God and yet were in serious rebellion to Him.

Sometimes people who are strict can be identified as Pharisees. We certainly don't want to be in a position of making man-made laws that we expect others to follow. This was one of the errors of the Pharisees certainly. But this text shows another side of the Pharisees. It is possible to reject the label of being a Pharisee and yet share the rebellion of the Pharisees.

Never as a church have we had an altar call. We never will ask people to raise their hand if they want to ask Jesus into their heart. I don't think we have ever held a revival service nor are there plans to ever hold a revival service.

Only God can give a sinner saving faith to trust in Jesus Christ and in His work on the cross for salvation.

I know it is also very possible to grow up in a good church and in a good family and yet not know Jesus Christ in a saving way. So it is good and right that the call to faith and repentance are regularly heard.

Are you trusting in Jesus Christ alone for salvation this day? Do you recognize your sin, your failure to obey God's Law in perfection? Have you confessed your sin and cried out to God for His mercy?

For those who been brought through God's sovereign work to salvation in Jesus Christ, the warnings of this passage still must be carefully considered.

I opened the sermon by reading from 1 Peter 2. Peter warned the believers to which he was writing about the sins of malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and evil speaking. These are all very serious sins which Peter knew are present in all congregations. What was Peter's counsel?

Desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby. In verse 4 Peter also spoke of coming to Christ as the living stone, rejected by men, but chosen by God and precious.

The only way to keep from being a hypocrite is by desiring and consuming the milk of the word and by drawing near to Jesus Christ.

1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

Closing Hymn: 297

Benediction – 1 Peter 5:8-11

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.