

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*... Edmund... Lucy... Susan... and Peter had just arrived in Narnia... when they met Mr. and Mrs Beaver... Mr. and Mrs. Beaver told the four children that Aslan (the Christ-figure) is a lion... Susan replies... *“Ooh! ... Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”*

“That you will, dearie, and make no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver; *“if there is anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”*

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mrs. Beaver ... *“Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”*

In those few lines C.S. Lewis hits on a theme that is (sadly) far from the church’s thought today. ... As Evangelicals... we have done an excellent job among ourselves of emphasizing the truth about the goodness of Jesus—*“He’s good”* ... We believe in the Lordship of Jesus—*“He’s the king, I tell you.”* ... But how do you think we are doing... with having it in our heads (and hearts)... that a **“good king”** doesn’t always mean a **“safe king.”** [... ..]

Maybe... just maybe... we dangerously see Jesus as safe. ... Is this a problem...? ... Are we vulnerable to any peril... if we try to remember the last time we came before Jesus in private prayer... with our knees knocking – and there is not a single time that we can recall this as ever happening?

[... ..]

Well... if there is ever a text to get our knees knocking before the fearful but gentle presence of King Jesus - it is our passage for today (Matthew 23:13-36.) ... A. T. Robertson called this passage: “the rolling thunder of Christ’s wrath.”

Jesus gives seven denunciations which all begin with '*Woe to you...*'. Each of these statements is condemning in itself... with the culminative effect causing Him to conclude, '*You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape from being condemned to hell?*' ... This is extremely strong and frightening language... especially when we know that it is directed at those who ***thought*** that they were doing the will of God. ... They are... however... says Jesus... preparing themselves for hell!

“Woe to you!” is the phrase that the prophets in the Old Testament frequently used to warn Israel of divine judgment through an impending doom. It means “warning!” “Beware!” Prophets like Isaiah... Amos... Habakkuk... and Zechariah... would (in a single sermon) string out a series of “Woe to you”(s). Here Jesus proclaims a string of seven... and I cannot help but remark that seven in the Bible usually represents completion... finality.

These are dire warnings... but not just to Jesus’ 1st Century audience of Jewish religious leaders. ... They are warnings to you and I... and they probably should make our knees knock. (*“if there is anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”*)

I have grouped the seven woes in our passage today under four general warnings that you and I are particularly susceptible to... **The first warning is against our having a zeal without knowledge.**

The Apostle Paul recognized the importance of having a proper knowledge – and not just zealousness. ... Look how he prayed for the Philippians...

Philippians 1:9 (ESV)

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment,

We see Christ's warning against having a zeal without knowledge in verses 13-15...

Matthew 23:13-15

Because of their religious zeal and their devotion to an environment of "works-righteousness"... they were actually slamming the door to heaven in people's faces. ... Envision this door. It is the door to the kingdom of heaven. The scribes and Pharisees stand at this door. They themselves won't go through.

What is worse... is that when people are about to walk through it... these self-appointed doormen zealously close the door in people's faces. They do this because they *think* they are achieving something good. Without knowledge... they think that they are protecting wandering souls from this would-be Messiah... Jesus of Nazareth.

But in Jesus' second woe... their zeal without knowledge is really exposed. Instead of entering into the kingdom and opening wider the door to *Heaven* for *all the people* to enter in... they "travel across sea and land to make a *single* proselyte"... and they make this one convert "twice as much a child

of *hell*” as they are. ... They not only shut people out of Heaven... they open a trapdoor to Hell. Their followers double the zeal and thus double the lack of true knowledge.

In Hosea 4:6 the Lord says... “*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.*”

(In contrast to Hosea’s message)... coming out of the Jesus movement of the 1970’s the church in America went through an anti-doctrine phase which still exists today. Doctrine and theology were portrayed as divisive and unnecessary. “*We are done with Christian denominations fighting one another! Can’t we all just get along. Lay aside your doctrine and simply love one another...*” Christian zeal was the ticket! A very emotional love was seen as a Christian’s sincerity.

But listen to what Hosea had to say... and what Jesus is saying in today’s passage. **Don’t underestimate the importance of right knowledge in the church. ... Don’t underestimate the danger of uniformed enthusiasm.** ... If we do... then we are in danger of falling into the same pit as the scribes and Pharisees did.

How zealous are Muslim jihadists? ... How zealous are Mormon missionaries? ... Religious zeal is not an indication of truth. ... Woe to us if we have zeal without knowledge. ... (But let me also say this)... Woe also to us if we have knowledge without zealous activity. We need both. We are about to see this in the next set of verses ...

The second warning... or the second grouping of woes that I’ve made a general summarization of... is found in verse 16-24. ... **The second**

warning is against majoring on the minors. (...Or keeping the main thing... the main thing.)

Matthew 23:16-24

Four times in these nine verses... Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees "blind." ... Twice (once at the beginning and then at the end)... He calls them "**blind guides.**" Jesus employs a little humor here.

If you paid to go on a sightseeing tour... walking down a steep trail into the Grand Canyon... and your tour guide showed up as a blind man... you might begin to wonder about yours and his safety. Blind guides can be dangerous. ... Don't follow them.

Jews were not allowed to pronounce the sacred name of God out loud. So they developed a system of using lesser oaths... hoping to convey sincerity... without evoking the consequences of saying God's name. Over time... more and more things became substitutes for the divine name... and eventually they began ranking the items according to how sincere or truthful the oath was.

If a man swore an oath by the temple... the Pharisees said, "It is nothing". The oath was not binding. But if he swore by the gold of the temple... the Pharisees said, "He is obligated." (He was required to keep his oath.) The presumption was that it was a religious oath. ... Similarly it meant nothing to swear by the altar... but everything to swear by the sacrifice on the altar.

The Pharisees graded oaths according to such foolish and artificial distinctions. If a man swore by something they graded as less sacred... he was not considered guilty of oath-breaking if he failed to keep his pledge.

All of this has me ask three questions...

First... **Do we justify sin according to our traditions or do we flee sin according to God's truth?** Jesus refers to rules that had been concocted to allow people to swear by certain things and not be bound... or swear by other items and be bound. ... However... Jesus made it clear that **any oath** makes one accountable to God.

These man-made rules about oaths were... quite simply... an attempt to justify sin. The same thing can happen in our lives when we think, "*I suppose that's technically a sin, but everyone does it, and it doesn't seem like a big deal, so I'm okay.*" ... Sins like gossip... gluttony... small "white" lies... and materialism might fit in that category for us. ... We adjust to sin because it's common to us... instead of fleeing sin because it's repulsive to God.

This issue of justifying sin leads to what is perhaps one of the most convicting questions... So... the second question is... **Do we pride ourselves on following convenient laws or do we spend ourselves expressing costly love?**

Jesus mentions the law of the tithe in verse 23, and He talks about the scrupulous... careful ways the scribes and Pharisees had sought to obey that law. ... However... in the process they ignored "justice... mercy... and faith."

This is an allusion to Micah 6:8, where God calls His people "to act justly, to love faithfulness, and to walk humbly with your God." ... God's people had failed to give justice to the poor and express kindness to the needy. These things are the overflow of walking humbly with God, but they weren't characteristic of Israel's leadership in Jesus' day.

Take another look at verse 23...

Matthew 23:23

Are we more concerned with biblical minutiae than we are with practical ministry? ... Now we have to be careful here... This question is liable to be misunderstood... as if there were anything unimportant in the Bible. ... To be clear... everything in the Bible is important... because it is God's Word. ... But the Lord seems to indicate that there are "more important matters." ... Jesus reminds us that we need to avoid the danger of focusing on lighter things... while ignoring weightier things.

The Pharisees obeyed God's directive found in Leviticus 27:30: "*One-tenth of what comes from the land, whether grain or fruit, is holy and belongs to the Lord.*" ... The Pharisees observed this ordinance down to the smallest seeds in their gardens... those spices that they used to flavor their food. Although these items are never mentioned in the law... the rules that had developed over the centuries required attention to this smallest detail.

Just imagine going home and opening your spice cabinet... and counting every single seed... pod... and granule of sugar and salt... to make sure you gave God exactly 10% of it.

The Lord upheld the law of tithing... but took His scalpel to the Pharisees' satisfaction with outward compliance with the law. "*What about the weightier matters of the law?*" He demanded in effect. "*What about judgment, mercy, and faith?*"

In a world where nearly half of the population lives on less than **two dollars a day**... and approximately a billion people live in desperate poverty... it doesn't make sense to spend our lives priding ourselves on obeying convenient laws that are easy for us to do... or debating all the finer points of our theology... to the exclusion of the great need for justice and mercy in our own city and across the globe. ... Again... it's not that proper knowledge and Biblical understanding is **un**important. ... We just saw that it **is** important. ... But... according to Jesus "These things should have been done."

Weightier - is the need to express the mercy and justice of God... to the poor and needy... ... and **that** is costly love. ... The question for us... is whether or not we are willing to go out of our comfort zones... and to get our hands dirty in practical ministry. Or are we content to spend our lives mining through biblical details and doing that which we find relatively easy?

For the last couple of weeks... I have been announcing to you that there is a growing sense in our church right now... that this needs to be made into a greater priority. Well... here is just one of many proof texts for it. I believe God is speaking to us. ... Stay tuned... and keep praying for our eyes and ears and hearts to remain open.

“You blind guides”... Jesus says in verse 24 as He summarizes verses 16-23... “straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” ... Both a gnat (a small insect) and a camel (a large animal) were considered unclean. ... So... as William Barclay explains... “In order to avoid the risk of drinking anything unclean, wine was strained through muslin gauze so that any possible impurity might be strained out of it.”

The picture that Jesus gives is these blind... unfocused religious leaders... are one moment straining their wine through a thin cloth to avoid swallowing a microscopic bug... and the next moment they are grabbing a camel and swallowing that big unclean beast whole. It's a picture of people who have “completely lost their sense of proportion” and priority for the important.

As the church... we are to major in the majors... without neglecting the minors. Truth-talking matters. ... But what matters even more is “the weightier matters of “justice and mercy and faithfulness” to the poor and the needy.

Our first warning was against having a zeal without knowledge. The second warning was against majoring on the minors. It is time now for the third warning. **The third warning is against outward appearances.**

Matthew 23:25-28

Jesus gives two images of their outward “righteousness” but inward rot.

The first image is their spotless outer dinnerware. On the outside they eat only from clean cups and plates. These religious fanatics are meticulous in

keeping the ritual purity laws. But they neglect ever cleaning up what's inside these vessels. For example, they spend half the afternoon cleaning the outside of their soup bowl, and then they sit down for dinner and spoon out a fresh spoonful of soup that has been sitting atop month-old oatmeal. It is a grotesque picture... one that is designed to repulse us.

What might also make us sick to the stomach is the second image Jesus gives. They are "like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness."

In the springtime before the Passover... it was the custom to whitewash the roadside tombstones so no pilgrim to Jerusalem would mistakenly touch a tomb and thus be rendered unclean for the seven days of the feast. The scribes and Pharisees looked like those tombs. Outwardly they looked so beautifully clean. Inwardly they were unclean—dead, decaying, putrid.

The point of both images is obvious. As Jesus summarizes in verse 28... they "*outwardly appear righteous to others... but within [they] are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*" They put on a fabulous façade!

The warning to us should be as obvious as the images: watch out for keeping up outward appearances and yet neglecting inward holiness. It's not that our outward appearance doesn't matter. It's that it matters less than ***inward*** holiness. ... Jesus reminds them through this fierce denunciation that **purity always begins in the heart.**

All followers of Christ need to be reminded that religious activity can be a subtly dangerous cover-up for spiritual deadness. ... We go to church... we attend small group... we read the Bible, we go through the motions... we

check off the boxes... But if we're not careful... we can miss the point altogether. In all our efforts at moral renewal... we only cover up the curse of sin that lies at the core of who we are. That's why we must ask ourselves some probing questions:

- Is there life inside me?
- Is there inner transformation?
- Is my heart being changed so that I desire Christ more than I desire the things of this world?
- Is there love and affection for Christ at the root of my obedience?
- Is Christianity a matter of duty for me or is it a matter of delight?
- Is holiness being joyfully cultivated in my heart?

The answer to these questions was a clear "no" in the case of the scribes and Pharisees.

The fourth warning is against the indefensible excuse... of unbelief.

Matthew 23:29-33

Another practice the religious leadership diligently embraced... was the decoration of the tombs of the prophets... and the building of large memorials for them. ... Some researchers believe that the tomb of the prophet Zechariah at the base of the Mount of Olives... was being built during Christ's earthly ministry. ... The leaders felt that they should honor the Lord's prophet (Zechariah)... by building a monument to his memory. David's tomb (we do know)... was being maintained during Jesus day... as a memorial to Israel's greatest King. Jesus affirmed that these prophets "had God's approval."

By building these monuments to these men... the Pharisees were stating their acceptance of their ministries. Prophets and kings were their heroes.

Knowing the Scriptures... they also acknowledged that their ancestors did not treat the prophets very well. ... They had persecuted them... ridiculed them...and many times killed them. In self-affirming pride... the Pharisees claimed that they would **not** have acted as their ancestors did. (They would have seen that the prophets' authority came from God. They would have supported the prophets call for repentance.)

But the truth that Jesus exposed was that they were not at all this sort of a believing people. In fact... they disdained the prophets' message... by rejecting the Messiah (and His servants who will be serving Him)... and did not deserve any accolades for their hypocrisy.

Verse 34...

Matthew 23:34

God's word through Jeremiah... during the decline and fall of the southern kingdom (in 586 B.C.)... was very similar to this prophecy that Jesus issued to the Pharisees and scribes of his day.

Jeremiah 7:25-29 (ESV)

From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day. Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers. "So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. And you shall say to them, 'This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the LORD their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off

from their lips. “Cut off your hair and cast it away; raise a lamentation on the bare heights, for the LORD has rejected and forsaken the generation of his wrath.’

Jesus... God in the flesh... continued the ancient story of Israel's history. Little had changed over the centuries. History here was repeating itself. What their ancestors did to the prophets these men would continue to do. They were typical sons of their rebellious fathers. Jesus thus exposed the depth of their depravity and the extent of their separation from God. These self-righteous... self-indulgent men would kill the ones that Jesus would send to them. There would (seemingly)... be no end to their passionate hatred.

It is remarkable how literally this prophecy was fulfilled. The book of Acts testifies to this fact. The Jews were always on the heels of the Christian missionaries. Jesus' disciples were among those who gave up their lives for the sake of Christ's message. The Jews never tired of pursuing Christ's followers: at Pisidian Antioch... Iconium... Lystra... Thessalonica... Berea... Corinth... Jerusalem... and Caesarea.

Matthew 23:35

Because of their repeated rejection of God's emissaries (both in the past and the present)... God would hold them accountable for the murder of these men. ... Jesus' words swept through the entire history of His creation... from its beginnings... long before God had even called these people to be a nation... to the present... and even into the future... when they would destroy his messengers in the same way. ... A river of innocent

blood flowed through the pages of Israel's history from the time of Abel to Zechariah.

Matthew 23:36

While the river of innocent blood had not yet ceased... (in a few days they would murder the Promised Messiah)... neither had God's wrath. ... These evil men were going to pay a terrible price for their stiffnecked rebellion.

.....

As we review these tragic woes from the lips of our Lord... we can see why the Pharisees were His enemies. He emphasized the inner man; they were concerned with externals. He taught a spiritual life based on principles... while the Pharisees majored on rules and regulations. Jesus measured spirituality in terms of character... while the Pharisees measured it in terms of religious activities and conformity to external laws. Jesus taught humility and sacrificial service... but the Pharisees were proud and used people to accomplish their own purposes. The holy life of Jesus exposed their artificial piety and shallow religion. Instead of coming out of the darkness... the Pharisees tried to put out the Light... and they failed.

We stand before God... every one of us... entirely responsible for our response to the revelation we have been given of Jesus Christ and the truth of God which centers in Him.

Is he safe? Who said anything about safe? Of course He isn't safe. But He's good. Therefore:

- Do not have a zeal without knowledge.

- Do not major on the minors. (Make showing justice mercy and faithfulness to the need the priority.)
- Do not focus on the outward. (Inward purity... and true holiness... are needed.)
- Do not have an unbelieving faith.