

THE NEED FOR HUMBLE FAITH

Matthew 23:29-39

We come to the final woe of Matthew 23. The Lord Jesus set His eyes on the scribes and Pharisees and identified a number of their sins. We don't need to pretend that this is an exhaustive judgment; that would wait for the great white throne. But it is a lengthy list of indictments against them. I'm glad we've gone through them patiently, but I'm also ready to move on.

I wonder why Jesus would have gone on and on and on, making the same basic point over and over, pounding it home like a blacksmith shaping iron on an anvil. You know, it might be as simple as that's how long it takes for us to grasp certain hard truths. We might be tempted to gloss over a single verse, but when they come again and again, we start to not only see the truth but feel it in our bones.

In a way, this final woe encapsulates all the rest. In this woe, we see that the scribes and Pharisees were the same as their fathers who murdered the prophets and are facing the same judgment. They thought they were better than their fathers when in fact, they blame their fathers for the sins that they themselves not only commit but defend.

THE SIN OF THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES

Matthew 23 29-30

29 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
 For you build the tombs of the prophets
 and adorn the monuments of the righteous,
30 and say, ‘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 23:29–30, 2022 LSB)

It's Wednesday of Passion Week. Jesus is speaking in the Temple. From the eastern edge of the Temple Mount they could see what we could see if we were there right now: the Kidron Valley down below, and a ridge called the Mount of Olives across the valley.

Down in the Kidron Valley were hundreds of tombs and a number of large monuments. At least three of those monuments were built sometime between 31 A.D. and 68 A.D, so it's quite possible that they were carving them into the rock even while Jesus spoke.

These monuments are not plain tombs. For instance, the Tomb of Absalom, which has nothing to do with the historic Absalom, stands about 66 high. It's actually the funeral monument for a nine-room cave system called the Tomb of Jehoshaphat, which has nothing to do with the historic Jehoshaphat. About 200 feet south south is the Tomb of Zechariah, which has nothing to do with the prophet Zechariah. Do you sense a pattern here? These men and those like them were obsessed with honoring the prophets of the past.

AN UNINTENTIONAL CONFESSION

Jesus' accusation – “for you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous” – was not a figure of speech. He was describing their actual behavior.

But notice the disconnect.

29 For you build the tombs of the prophets
and adorn the monuments of the righteous,
30 and say,
“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 23:29–30, 2022 LSB)**

It is a historical fact that their fathers, their ancestors, murdered the prophets. But, they insist, THEY would not have murdered them; THEY would have stopped their fathers and listened to the prophets. That’s the claim; does it hold up?

No, it doesn’t. God sent prophets to their fathers; their fathers murdered those men. Then God the Father sent John the Baptist; did the scribes and Pharisees listen to him? No. And, of course, the Father sent His Son, Jesus Christ; did the scribes and Pharisees listen to Him? No.

Apart from a very small number of men like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, the scribes and Pharisees completely rejected the Prophet that Yahweh told Moses would come:

**18 I will raise up a prophet from among their brothers like you,
and I will put My words in his mouth,
and he shall speak to them all that I command him.**

**19 And it will be that whoever will not listen to My words
which he shall speak in My name,**

I Myself will require it of him. (Deuteronomy 18:18–19, 2022 LSB)

They have refused to listen to the words of Jesus, and, as Jesus declares in Matthew 23, God is requiring it of them. The amazing thing is that Jesus doesn’t have to look beyond their own words to convict them:

**31 “So you bear witness against yourselves,
that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.”
(Matthew 23:31, 2022 LSB)**

Sons who carry on their father's work. Sons who receive the same judgment that fell on their fathers.

GIVEN OVER TO THEIR SIN

32 “Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers.”
(Matthew 23:32, 2022 LSB)

The Lord Jesus Christ alone could step between them and the judgment to come. He did that for Nicodemus. He did that for the Pharisee Saul, from the city of Tarsus.

But not here. These men are not delivered from their sin but given over to it.

Please be very clear about this. God isn't *making* them sin. He isn't *tempting* them to sin, either.

To the contrary; God actively restrains every sinner to one degree or another. These men are simply being allowed to do what they want. They are being permitted to give a fuller expression to their hatred and rage. The handcuffs are being removed; the straightjacket is being unbuckled.

Now, my friends, many want to say that people are basically good. If that is true, if people are, say, 95% good on average, and just make occasional mistakes, then the Lord's decision to give them over would not have much effect, would it? I mean, if only five deeds out of 100 are bad, then the odds of their *next* deed being bad is fairly low.

But people are not basically good. We are thoroughly sinful by nature. That's why we don't need a second chance, or a good example of how to live right, but new birth and new life.

The result of these men being given over to their sin will be the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus, and the violent, hateful persecution of Jesus' apostles in the years to come.

SHARING THE FATHERS' JUDGMENT

Matthew 23:33

33 “You serpents, you brood of vipers,
how will you escape the sentence of hell?”
(Matthew 23:33, 2022 LSB)

Their fathers were murderous, and so are they. Only God's restraining hand has kept them from violence. They are part of a spiritual line of hostility that reaches back to Cain when he murdered Abel for the sole reason that Abel's deeds were righteous (First John 3:12). The fathers were condemned by God as murderers of the prophets. The scribes and Pharisees are under the same judgment.

Jesus' question is rhetorical. There is no escaping hell for these men. There are no steps they can take to avoid the judgment of God.

Here's the wonderful thing! The Gospel speaks to this exact situation. There is no way for the sinner to escape hell; there is no way for the sinner to avoid the judgment of God. But God, the Righteous Judge who condemns sinners to hell, has made a promise. Believe in Jesus Christ according to the Gospel. Look to Jesus Christ on the cross, dying in your place. Cast yourself at the foot of the cross that should have been yours and call upon Jesus' name. Repent of your sin; that doesn't mean doing good works of penance, as the Roman Catholic Church teaches, but turning your heart and mind away from your sin and toward Christ. And God promises to save you. All who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

And how are sinners to know to do this? Look at what Jesus says.

THE KINDNESS OF GOD

Matthew 23:34

34 “On account of this, behold,
I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes ...”
(**Matthew 23:34, 2022 LSB**)

Even with the pronouncement of judgment, the love of God shines through. Jesus – the One they hate so deeply, the One whom they will put to death in less than two days – is going to send prophets, wise men, and scribes to them.

Prophets who will preach that Jesus Christ was crucified for sinners.

Wise men who will counsel them from Scripture to repent of their sins and call on Jesus Christ.

Scribes will teach them from the Scriptures so that they may know the Eternal God.

All of them will be ambassadors, as Paul describes Christians:

20 So then, we are ambassadors for Christ,
as God is pleading through us.
We beg you on behalf of Christ,
be reconciled to God.
(**2 Corinthians 5:20, 2022 LSB**)

We know that every person who hears the Gospel with faith and turns to Jesus Christ to save them will be saved. They cannot escape the sentence of hell, but Jesus Christ can deliver them from hell. He will transform them into lovers of God, lovers

of His people, faithful disciples, followers of Jesus Christ. They will be joined as living stones into the holy house of God, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, become part of the Bride of Christ, share in the Royal Priesthood, and be a people for God's own possession!

Can you imagine the Lord Jesus Himself, His eyes filled with both holy strength and tender mercy, telling you that you cannot escape hell on your own but promising to send preachers who will tell you the way? How could their hearts be so hard as to dismiss His love? How could they be so wicked as to hate His mercy?

Now, let me say that when we share the Gospel with someone, we virtually never see an immediate result. I'll tell you something: every instant result I've ever seen proved to be a false conversion. That man or woman wanted something from me and thought that pretending to believe in Jesus was the way to get it. Our job is to plant the seed of the Gospel or water the seed that has been planted by someone else. God must give the growth, which happens in His time, not ours. Only time will tell whether that person has been converted or not.

But Jesus has no need to wait. He is God in human flesh, and He already knows the destiny of these men. Yes, He is going to send them prophets and wise men and scribes. And how will they respond?

Jesus says,

34 "... some of them you will kill and crucify,
and some of them you will flog in your synagogues,
and persecute from city to city,
35 **so that upon you may fall**
the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth,
from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of
Berechiah,
whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar."

(Matthew 23:34–35, 2022 LSB)

Jesus didn't have to wait. He already knew what they would do. He knew how they would treat His own disciples (the first prophets, wise men, and scribes of the church). He knew how they and their offspring, their brood, would treat His children throughout the remainder of human history.

Just like the false teachers described by Jude, they were “long beforehand marked out for this condemnation.” (Jude 1:4). Their offspring still fill the world, and their history is still unfolding. Jesus continues to send preachers and teachers to the world. And the offspring of the scribes and Pharisees continue to kill, crucify, flog, and persecute them.

COUNTDOWN TO JUDGMENT

Matthew 23:36

36 “Truly I say to you,
all these things *will* come upon this generation.”
(Matthew 23:36, 2022 LSB)

As Jesus spoke those words, a countdown clock began ticking. That very generation would experience this judgment He promised.

In 66 A.D., the Jews began a revolt against Rome. Tensions had simmered for a long time due to the oppressive rule of the Romans, the huge gap between the wealthy and the poor, religious tensions, and increasing taxation. Then a Roman governor stole money from the Temple treasury and arrested a number of Jewish leaders. In response, the Jews captured the Roman garrison in Jerusalem. The Syrian Legion invaded Israel and was massacred not far from Jerusalem; more than 6,000 Roman soldiers were killed. Emperor Nero assigned the Roman general Vespasian four legions of troops and gave him the task of crushing the rebellion. A couple of

years later, Vespasian was recalled to Rome and made Emperor. Titus took his place and laid siege to Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Seven months later, the Romans succeeded in breaching the Jewish defenses, and Jerusalem and the Temple were utterly destroyed.

Jesus is not speaking of a spiritual or allegorical fulfillment of His prophecy. His words literally came to pass.

We might be tempted to think that throughout this chapter Jesus has been speaking with anger and vengeance, but remarkably, He seems to mourn:

37 “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 did not want it.

38 Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!

39 For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say,
‘**BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!**’”

(Matthew 23:37–39, 2022 LSB)

BRINGING IT HOME

It’s been a tough slog through these woes. You’ve felt it; so have I.

The most obvious application we can make is to emphasize the need for humble faith. The scribes and Pharisees were so proud of their traditions and themselves that they rejected the gracious Son of God. Pride and unbelief are two sides of the same coin. If you are going to defend something, then let it be the Word of God. If you are going to boast, then boast in Jesus Christ.

Let’s remember a couple of other points as well.

First and foremost, God is love, and God is holy.

The world wants God to be love, at least how they define love, but they want nothing to do with the holiness of God. We must be careful to reject the world's thinking. I know self-proclaimed Christians who love the idea of the love of God, as they define love, but who truly hate the justice of God. I'm not overstating it. They claim to be Christians who love Jesus, but they despise the justice of God that is coming upon the wicked.

God is not who we want Him to be. God is not who we vote Him to be. There is no check-and-balance on God's Lordship. God is love, and God is holy. We must never separate them.

Second, it is always bad when God lets us have our way. Always.

Sin has so thoroughly corrupted our hearts and minds that we need to be told what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong, what is love and what is hate, what is just and what is unjust, what glorifies God and what blasphemes God, even what is good for us and what is bad for us.

Until we have been made entirely like Christ, we will lack the ability to perfectly know the will of God.

So don't pray that God would give you your freedom; you don't want it! Before Christ, we are slaves of sin. After coming to Christ, we are to be slaves of righteousness. The Law was a tutor to bring us to faith in Christ. The Scriptures continue to teach us how to live as Jesus wants us to live.

Third, we must build our faith.

Building our faith is not so much a matter of time as miles. There are many who are old in the faith in years but who have not traveled any great distance with Christ. Whenever the road gets bumpy, dark, or difficult, they sit down. They avoid the

Word of God. They avoid prayer. They avoid fellowship. Time continues to pass for them, but they only take a few steps every now and then.

Now, genuine faith is genuine, whether it has been thickened by the miles traveled with Christ or remains thin. That's true. But it is also true that faith thickens with our travels with the Lord, like callouses on our feet. I while back I saw a video of three men walking from Jericho to Jerusalem. One of them had gone decades without wearing shoes unless it was required by a restaurant or store. He walked that road *barefoot*. He was able to do that because of the many miles he had already walked. Thin faith that is genuine is genuine faith; the world won't destroy it just because it's thin. But thin faith cannot cushion you from the jolts of the road. Those whose faith is paper thin feel every discomfort, every misery, every disappointment, to a far greater degree than those whose faith has been thickened by use.

How do we thicken our faith? We get on the road with Jesus every day. We get into His Word, we pray, and then we go out and live His Word, teach His Word, share His Word, and defend His Word. Beloved, the thicker your faith, the deeper it is, the stronger it is, the less power the world has to overwhelm you and disquiet you.