

Matthew 23 - Sermon Notes - November 21, 2021

DANGERS OF DEAD RELIGION

- this is the final week of Jesus before His crucifixion
- He had presented himself to the nation on Sunday with the Triumphal entry, but was rejected
- upon entering the city of Jerusalem, He infuriated the religious folk by cleaning house in the Temple
- when challenged by the religious leaders about who gave Him the right or authority to do what He had done, Jesus responds by asking them about the ministry of John the Baptist
- they were unable to answer Him for fear of the people
 - like a lot of preachers today who will not stand up and tell the truth because of the fear they have of how their hearers will respond
- Jesus then tells three parables that the Jews understood to be about them
 - The Parable of the Two Sins
 - The Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers
- the religious folks are now angry, and they try to trap Jesus with His words so that they might have reason to arrest Him
- the Pharisees try to trap Him on a politically charged question - "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"
- the Sadducees use a theological approach when they ask a ridiculous question about the Resurrection
- the scribes try the practical approach - "What is the greatest commandment?"
- in each case, Jesus confounds them with His answers, and ends the discussion by asking the religious folk a question that they couldn't answer
- now Jesus turns to the crowd and makes His final public comments, and addresses the dangers of dead religion

1. THE DANGER OF RELIGION

(1-4) DEAD RELIGION LAYS HEAVY BURDENS ON PEOPLE

- now Jesus turns His attention to the crowds and to His disciples and warns them about the hypocrisy of the religious leaders
- the Pharisees and scribes had assumed the position of authority
 - they had usurped the place of Moses even though they were not called to that position by God
 - that is always the case of dead religion - assuming authority and control over people
- when people assume authority that has not been given to them by God, they may say and teach right things, but they don't follow their own teaching
 - good for thee but not for me
- they make heavy requirements of their followers, but exclude themselves
 - this was the argument of the church fathers at the Jerusalem Council when some of the Jews who believed wanted the Gentile believers to follow Judaism too
 - [Acts 15.10](#) - "Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?"

(5-10) DEAD RELIGION SEEKS THE APPROVAL OF MEN INSTEAD OF GOD

- everything these religious people did was done to be seen by men
- phylacteries were leather boxes bound to the head and right hand with leather straps that had strips of Scriptures in them. They based this practice on:
 - [Deuteronomy 6:8](#) - You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.
- because they wanted men to see that they were spiritual, they made their phylacteries big
 - Rich Cathers tells the account of a Texas rancher visiting a rancher in Australia - A Texan farmer goes to Australia for a vacation. There he meets an Aussie farmer and gets talking. The Aussie shows off his big wheat field and the Texan says, "Oh! We have wheat fields that are at least twice as large." Then they walk around the ranch a little, and the Aussie shows off his herd of cattle. The Texan immediately says, "We have longhorns that are at least twice as large as your cows." The conversation has, meanwhile, almost died when the Texan sees a herd of kangaroos hopping through the field. He asks, "And what are those?" The Aussie replies with an incredulous look, "Don't you have any grasshoppers in Texas?"
- some people just like to show off
- these religious leaders loved the special attention and the name recognition
- I find the same thing true today - we are interested in the titles, recognition, and perks that come with the ministry

(11-12) DEAD RELIGION SEEKS TO BE SERVED RATHER THAN TO SERVE

- at this point, Jesus once again points to the path of greatness
 - it is not about self-promotion
 - It's all about being a servant
- Paul said it well in [Philippians 2:3-4](#) - Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. {4} Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

2. JESUS PRONOUNCES WOES

(13) WOE TO THOSE WHO SHUT UP THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

- here begins 8 woes pronounced against the hypocrisy of those who think they are tight with God, but are spiritually dead
- the first woe addresses the pride and arrogance of the religious leaders who were actually keeping other people from entering heaven because of their ridiculous rule and legalism

(14) WOE TO THOSE WHO RIP OFF PEOPLE

- the second woe addresses the pretense of public prayers while at the same time using their position for their own financial gain
- what a tragedy that there are still religious people who want to make merchandise of the people of God
 - these are the ones who are constantly asking for money, yet they themselves live lavish lifestyles

(15) WOE TO THOSE WHO TRY TO GET PEOPLE TO BE JUST LIKE THEM

- there is absolutely nothing wrong with making converts
- the issue is who are we making our converts like, us or Jesus
- when we make a convert through legalism, they usually end up being more zealous for keeping the rules than we are

(16-22) WOE TO THOSE WHO HONOR INSTITUTIONS INSTEAD OF GOD

- words had no meaning, and people became confused by the changing terminology
- Jesus calls that kind of hypocrisy out, calling the religious blind guides and fools
- it's always dangerous to place more emphasis on places and things than we do the person of God
 - the danger of localizing the Presence of God to a particular place or building, like the church
 - the example here in the south of how we honor the Bible, but neglect the God of the Bible

(23-24) WOE TO THOSE WHO NEGLECT THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS

- here woe is pronounced on those who pay very close attention to keeping some religious activity, but neglect the things that are more important

- the example Jesus gives is that of tithing, which is important, and something that should not be neglected
 - [Malachi 3.8-11](#) - "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, 'In what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, For you have robbed Me, [Even] this whole nation. Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, That there may be food in My house, And try Me now in this," Says the LORD of hosts, "If I will not open for you the windows of heaven And pour out for you [such] blessing That [there will] not [be room] enough [to receive it]. "And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, So that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground, Nor shall the vine fail to bear fruit for you in the field," Says the LORD of hosts;

- the idea is that there are some things that we should be doing, without neglecting other things that we should be doing

(25-26) WOE TO THOSE WHO ONLY CARE ABOUT THE EXTERNALS

- there is a big difference between looking righteous and being righteous

(27-28) WOE TO THOSE ONLY APPEAR RIGHTEOUS TO MEN

- David Guzik -It was the custom of the Jews of that time to whitewash the tombs in the city of Jerusalem before Passover so that no one would touch one accidentally, thus making themselves ceremonially unclean. Jesus said these religious leaders were like these whitewashed tombs – pretty on the outside, but dead on the inside.

- Paul called the High Priest a whitewashed wall in [Acts 23:3](#). - Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, [you] whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?"

(29-36) WOE TO THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS GENERATION

- there is always the concern of looking back at the way our ancestors persecuted the real people of God without looking at how we are living today

- there is a danger today of being consumed with a sense of our own self-righteousness

- Jon Courson - "If they had been alive in our day, we wouldn't have killed the prophets," boasted the Pharisees. But their claim was invalidated by the fact that at that very moment they sought to execute the One of whom the prophets spoke. From Abel to Zechariah—from A to Z—they killed the prophets.

3. JESUS LAMENTS OVER JERUSALEM

[\(37-39\)](#) WARNING ABOUT FUTURE DESTRUCTION

- there are only two recorded instances of Jesus weeping - here and at the death of Lazarus

- even though this was a harsh rebuke of the hypocrisy of dead religion, you can sense the broken heart of Jesus as He wanted the people to embrace all God had for them

- even though their rejection of Jesus would lead to the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, there would come a day when Israel will be saved

- notice Jesus does not say "unless" but "until"
- Romans 11.25-26 - For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob;

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