

Matthew 23:13-39: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 March 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 23 verses 13 to 36. Woe to you blind guides who say, if anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing.

But if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath. You blind fools, for which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?

And you say, if anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing. But if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath. You blind men, for which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?

So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness.

[1 : 31] These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!

For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.

So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!

For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.

[2 : 34] Thus you witness against yourselves that you are the sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents! You brood of vipers!

How are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barakiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. 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 are not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate!

For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Jesus' public ministry began with blessings and the Beatitudes, and in chapter 23 of Matthew it ends with woes.

[3 : 55] These blessings and these woes can also be mapped onto each other, as we will see shortly. Peter Lightheart observes that they can be divided into woes upon the Pharisees for their effect upon others, woes upon them for the handling of God's truth and the law, woes upon them for their neglect of purity of heart, for the purity of the flesh, and then finally woe upon them for the treatment of the prophets.

First of all, their effect upon others. They shut up the kingdom of God against others. Secondly, they prey upon widows. Third, they trap Gentiles as proselytes.

And then their handling of the law. First, they purposefully distort the law and use legalistic circumventions to neglect the intent of the law. Second, they show an utter failure for the deeper purpose of the law and reduce it to detached and nitpicking commandments.

They will tithe the smallest spices, but they forget justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Third, they neglect purity of heart. And under this, Jesus accuses them first of their assumption that mere external cleansing suffices for purity, without dealing with the deep issues of the heart. Second, they are like whitewashed tombs. They look pleasant, but they contain and they convey impurity to others. And the final charge is that their fathers killed the prophets, and that they are continuing in the murderous ways of their fathers.

[5 : 24] And then we should note that these woes can be matched onto the Beatitudes as their counterparts. First, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And that corresponds with the woe upon the Pharisees who shut up the kingdom of heaven in people's faces.

Here on the one hand, you have those who are poor in spirit who are receiving the kingdom of heaven, and the Pharisees who close the kingdom of heaven to other people. Second, blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

And the contrast is with the Pharisees who devour widows' houses. They destroy the mourners. They prey upon the mourners. Whereas those who mourn in the kingdom of God will be comforted. Third, blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. And then they travel on sea and land to make converts, and make them children of hell. They will inherit hell.

And so they're trying to inherit the earth. They're trying to bring in the Gentiles. But they're making them inheritors of hell, not those who will inherit the earth. Fourth, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied.

[6 : 28] And the Pharisees are marked rather by the perversion of all righteousness, the way that they hunger and thirst to find some way out of righteousness, hungering for any way they can circumvent God's purpose.

Fifth, blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. The Pharisees tithe mint and anise and cumin and forget the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

The weightier matters of the law. Those who show mercy shall receive mercy. Those who understand and practice the law in that merciful way will receive the mercy of God.

Sixth, blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. And this contrasts with the Pharisees who cleanse the outside only and don't deal with the heart. They're not pure in heart.

They're just cleansing the surface. Seventh, blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. The Pharisees, on the other hand, appear beautiful on the outside, but full of dead men's bones and uncleanness.

[7 : 36] The sons of God will be raised up on the last day. They will be those who are marked out as the children of the living God. But yet, the Pharisees are characterized by deadness even when they're still living.

Eighth, and finally, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. However, the Pharisees are the sons of those who persecuted the prophets. Jesus talks about the way that those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, those who are persecuted for his namesake, are those who are continuing the ministry of the prophets. And just as they were persecuted by the fathers of the scribes and the Pharisees, so the disciples of Christ will be persecuted by their children.

Various books of the Bible are introduced, concluded, or otherwise framed by contrast between blessings and woes. We might think of Psalm chapter 1, blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners, etc.

Or perhaps we think of Proverbs chapter 9 with the contrast between the appeal of Lady Wisdom and the woman folly. Or in Leviticus chapter 26, the blessings and the curses.

[8 : 47] Or Deuteronomy chapter 27 to 28. Matthew is framed in a similar way. Jesus' ministry begins with blessings and ends with woes. And that bookends the entire teaching between.

And that teaching of the body of the book of Matthew is repeatedly recognisable beneath the surface of this section. Jesus isn't just making some new points here. Behind every one of his statements, we can recognise a specific conversation, teaching or action that Matthew has recorded.

He is summing up his entire public ministry to this point and declaring condemnation. The next few chapters will lay out the sentence. To whom are these woes directed?

They're directed to a specific group of people, to the religious leaders. The blessings of the Beatitudes, on the other hand, are directed to the faithful disciples of Christ. These blessings and woes, then, are not just general blessings and woes, but distinguishing markers placed upon two different groups.

Looking through them, we'll see the way that they refer back to the earlier teaching of Christ. First of all, the effect of the scribes and the Pharisees upon others. They shut up the kingdom of God. They don't open the kingdom of God to others.

[9 : 58] They close people off from it. They enslave them with heavy burdens. The second challenge is that they prey upon widows. In the other synoptic gospels, in Mark and Luke, this is connected with the widow's mite.

And that story, often taken as an example of sacrificial giving to follow, rather it's a story of judgment. It's a story of how people who give everything that they have are being destroyed by this. The false shepherds are fleecing the flock, causing them to invest in something that is going to be torn down as a result of their sin. They trap Gentiles as proselytes.

You can think about Jesus' ministry and the way that he has set forth Gentiles as examples of faith. The Canaanite woman, the centurion, and rather than ministering to Gentiles, as we've seen Jesus do, the scribes and the Pharisees are making them children of hell.

Then, in the challenges to their use of the law, first of all, their use of casuistry and legalistic circumventions to neglect the intent of the law, we can think back to Jesus' conversation concerning the negation of the fifth commandment, the way that they will purposefully circumvent the law through legalistic gerrymandering.

[11 : 08] In challenging next, their utter failure to regard the deep purpose of the law and reducing it to detached and nitpicking commandments, we can think about the conversation concerning the greatest commandment.

The small stuff matters. Tithing those small spices is not something to be neglected, but it only makes sense in the light of the most important things. All of those details must point back to the core reality, the reality of love for God and neighbour, and where those things are forgotten, the little things just become burdens and things that distract and detract from the purpose of the law.

Next, concerning their approaches to purity. First, their assumption that mere external cleansing suffices for purity without dealing with the issues of the heart. Reminds us of the conversation about hand-washing and the way that Jesus challenged them specifically at that point concerning the nature of true purity and also true pollution.

What truly makes a man's heart unclean? It's not external things. It's what comes forth from the heart. That's what really makes people unclean. And then second, they are like whitewashed tombs.

They look pleasant, but they contain and they convey impurity to others. And there we can see Jesus' teaching in the background avoid the leaven of the Pharisees, the hypocrisy that characterises their teaching.

[12 : 28] And that leaven is that hidden thing at the heart. It's that thing that's introduced to the new batch that causes it to rise. It's that thing that's passed on from generation to generation, a poisonous tradition, a tradition that destroys people, that has that internal impurity as a transmission from one generation to another.

And they must avoid the leaven of the Pharisees. They must recognise the death that exists at the heart of that religious system that they represent, that legalistic approach that they are taking.

And finally, their fathers killed the prophets and the way that they are continuing in their ways, all while covering this up by decorating the prophets' tombs. Jesus then goes on to develop this point further, as he does in the Sermon on the Mount, where he directly connects his disciples with the prophets as those persecuted for righteousness' sake.

He's taught concerning this in the story of the wicked vinedressers, the wicked tenants. All these servants that are sent, that are killed, can think also of the way that the servants are treated in the story of the wedding feast.

Again, these are the prophets that are sent. And now the son has come, and he is going to be killed too. The Pharisees will prove themselves to be the sons of the murderers of the prophets by continuing in their actions as they murder the emissaries of Christ.

[13 : 48] They will murder the disciples. They will crucify the disciples. They will cast them out of synagogues. And the entire blood of the martyrs, the whole history of the martyrs, from Abel's blood that called out from the ground at the beginning of Genesis, to the blood of Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24, is going to come on that generation.

In Genesis chapter 15, God declared that the sin of the Amorites was not yet complete, with the assumption that when it was complete, Israel would enter into the land.

God gave Canaan into the hands of the Israelites when the sin of the Amorites was filled up. And now the leaders of the Jews are filling up the measure of their wrath, and their city is about to be destroyed.

The kingdom is about to be given into the hands of other parties. Of tenants who will give the fruits of the land to the Lord. To the disciples who will sit on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel. Jesus here is a new Jeremiah. He declares judgment upon the house. He declares that there is no peace when others are saying, peace, peace. And he finally, he laments over Jerusalem.

[14 : 57] And in that lamentation, we can hear the voice of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, the one who stands over Jerusalem and sees it in its destruction.

Jesus anticipates the destruction of Jerusalem and weeps over it, just as Jeremiah does. Peter Lighthouse has observed the way that the story of Matthew follows a pattern.

It begins with themes of Genesis, the genealogy, the Genesis of Jesus Christ, and then giving his connection with Abraham. A Joseph who's the son of Jacob who leads his people into Egypt after having dreams.

And then people being led out of Egypt. The themes of the Exodus coming at various points in those earlier chapters, particularly in Jesus' baptism and his time in the wilderness for 40 days. And then in chapters 5 to 7, all these themes on the Sermon on the Mount that point to the law being given connect us with the story of Sinai and the revelation there.

[15 : 55] A new law being given, a new understanding of the law. And then the disciples are sent out. There's the mission of the 12, a preparation for conquest, a spying out of the land, an entrance into the land as they are sent to the cities and the cities will be judged according to the way that they respond.

And then there's the parables of the kingdom, the wisdom of Solomon in chapter 13. And then as we've moved through, we've seen all these different themes tracing through Israel's history until we arrive at this point.

And there's the expectation of the end of Judah and Babylonian exile. There's the statements of Jeremiah. There's Ezekiel coming to the foreground at various points as well.

There's Babylonian exile. And then as we end the book, it will end on the theme that is the theme of the final verse of the Old Testament in the Hebrew ordering. It will end with 2 Chronicles chapter 36 and the decree of Cyrus re-entering the land, building the temple and God's presence being with his people.

Now what's the point of all of this? Christ is playing out the history of Israel. Christ is the son of Abraham. Abraham played out the history of Israel in advance. Christ is playing out the history of Israel as its Messiah, the one who sums it up in himself.

[17 : 13] He is the one who brings it to its destiny. And as we follow the story even further, we'll see what shape this takes. A question to consider.

One of the problems for many people's understanding of Christ, as they see him in the Gospels and in his teaching and in his practice, is that the Jesus they believe in is not crucifiable.

Yet the Jesus that we see in these chapters would seem to be crucifiable. Looking at the conflict between Jesus and the religious and political leaders in the last few chapters, summed up in this final chapter of condemnation, how can we better understand the motivations that people might have for crucifying this man?

