

Matthew 23: The Seven Woes, Introduction

As we begin tonight, let me correct something from last week. Also, let me point out that part of last week's lesson included comments about how well we receive corrections when someone lovingly points out our fault. That's what happened to me in this case. I'm not sure if I misread something or just transposed the word incorrectly in my notes, but regardless of the reason, I made a statement concerning the custom used by the Sadducee's in their attempt to trap Jesus that was not correct. I stated that the custom where the brother of a deceased man was required to marry the widowed woman, was normally reserved for the Levitical line. What I should have said was that this custom was a customary practice of the Israelites as a whole and is known as Levirate, which is taken from the Latin, "*Levir*", which means "husband's brother".

Vss. 1-12

In this message to the people gathered around Jesus, we find Him explaining why their religious leaders were desperately trying to lay claim that He was not the true Messiah. Jesus was pointing out to the crowd that these leaders were really the ones to be in question. Listed here we see the things Jesus had issues with when it came to the Scribes and Pharisees.

- They were hypocritical in nature because they didn't practice what they preached.
- They didn't offer help of any kind to those who were in need. Instead, they placed unattainable religious requirements on them. Many of which they themselves didn't follow.
- They did things designed to draw attention to "how faithful and true they were to God." They wanted all the attention they could get. The Phylacteries were based on literal interpretations of Exodus 13:9, 16 and Deuteronomy 6:8. During prayer, the teachers of the law would wear these leather boxes; one on the forehead and one on the left arm just above the elbow. Contained in these boxes was a piece of paper with the Scripture found in **Exodus 13:1-16** and **Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21**. Read these passages for more depth of understanding. What do you think was meant by the broadened their phylacteries? It was to make them more prominent. The fancier and broader the better. Likewise, they would lengthen the tassels of their outer garments to make themselves appear more religious and more spiritual. What was the significance of the tassels in the first place? They were there as a reminder to obey God's commandments.
- They were filled with pride and wanted to be held with the highest regard. They enjoyed their self-proclaimed elevated status.

Jesus also took the opportunity to warn the people not to follow their actions, but to make sure they only followed what they taught, which was directly from God, through the Law.

Jesus also provided some corrective teaching for the Scribes and Pharisees. I'm sure they took His words well, aren't you?

- See others as equals and do not put one higher than another. There is only one true Rabbi. (Jesus)
- Likewise, there is only one true Father. (God)
- He tells them to only consider Jesus as teacher. No one else is qualified.
- He reminds them that they are to be servants and not lifted high, as they liked.
- He also taught them a lesson about humility. Those who think too highly of themselves will eventually be brought down to earth. Those who remain humble will be the ones eventually exalted.

Should these instructions apply today? Is it ok to call me "pastor" or is "preacher" a better greeting? Is Jesus more concerned with their titles or with their pretense of pride?

Vss. 13-32

Throughout these verses, Jesus carries His teaching to a higher, deeper level and pronounces 7 "Woes" on the Scribes and Pharisees. "Woe" is difficult to understand because it's not a particularly good translation for the original Greek, which is *ouai*, and means an expression of grief and denunciation which involves God's wrath and immense sorrow. Jesus is pronouncing prophetic judgement on the Scribes and Pharisees as a final warning concerning their dangerous teaching and actions. These religious leaders put more faith in their own righteousness and were filthy in God's eyes.

Why 7 woes? Seven is God's number for completion or perfection. In this sense, Jesus is indicating that God's judgement on them is complete and perfectly just. They stand as dire warnings to the Scribes and Pharisees against, obviously, hypocrisy and other sins which refute the true commands of the Law. As Christians, we are called to live lives which seek true godliness through an authentic relationship with Jesus. We are called to a faith which will endure time and suffering. We are called to love in the manner that Jesus loves. If we function as the religious leaders of Jesus' day and seek the affections of men and the glories of man, then we too will be considered hypocritical and will also face similar woes as we stand trial before a Just God.