

Matthew 23 Commentary-C H Spurgeon

PREVIOUS

NEXT

MATTHEW 23:1-12 THE KING'S WARNING AGAINST FALSE TEACHERS

Matthew 23:1-3. THEN spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not

Then spake Jesus to the multitude: the King commenced his final address to the people. He was soon to withdraw himself from them; but first he would put them on their guard against their false teachers. They had heard what he had said to the scribes and Pharisees; now they would hear what he said of them. And to his disciples: according to Luke, Jesus spoke to his disciples "in the audience of all the people." His theme was one that concerned the whole population as well as his own disciples. He knew that he would shortly be taken away from them; therefore he warned them against those who would seek their ruin: "Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do." It was the duty of Moses to expound to the people the Law of God. The scribes and Pharisees occupied his place; but alas! the Spirit that guided him was not in them. They spoke as from the chair of Moses, ex cathedra, as we say; and as far as they really filled his seat, and followed his sayings, their words were to be obeyed. Our Savior could not have intended the people to heed their false comments and foolish glosses upon the Law of Moses; for he had already declared that by their traditions they had transgressed the commandment of God, and made it of none effect.

At this time, however, our Lord was speaking of another grievous fault in the scribes and Pharisees; namely, that they said one thing and did another: "But do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not." Sad indeed is the state of that religious teacher of whom the Searcher of hearts has to say, "Do as he says, and not as he does." Many such are with us still, preaching one thing, and practicing another. May the Lord preserve the people from following their evil example!

Matthew 23:4. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.

The contrast between the true Teacher and the false ones is clearly brought out by this verse: "They bind heavy burdens to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders." Their regulations as to moral and ceremonial observances were like huge faggots or crushing burdens bound together, and made into a weight intolerable for any man to carry. Many of these rules by themselves were grievous enough; but all together they formed a yoke that neither the people nor their fathers could bear. The scribes and Pharisees piled the great load upon them; but neither helped them; to sustain it, nor offered to relieve them of any portion of it: "they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers." How different was Christ's teaching: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest!" Taking their burdens of sin and sorrow and care upon his own shoulders, he exchanges them for his easy yoke, which itself gives rest to all who wear it.

Matthew 23:5-7. But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, and love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogue, and greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.

This was the fatal flaw in their character: "But all their works they do for to be seen of men." So long as they stood well in the sight of their fellow-creatures, they cared little or nothing how they appeared to the eye of God. They were very particular about the literal observance of certain Mosaic injunctions, although they completely missed the spiritual meaning of them: "They make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments." Four passages from the Law, Exodus 3:3-10, 11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21, were written on strips of parchment, and worn on the forehead and the hand or arm as amulets, or preservatives.

These the scribes and Pharisees made especially prominent, yet all the while the Word of the Lord was not hidden in their hearts, nor obeyed in their lives. The Lord commanded the children of Israel to make fringes in the borders of their garments, and upon the fringe a ribband or thread of blue, that they might look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them

(Numbers 15:38,39). These ritualists of our Savior's day were very scrupulous about having deep fringes or large tassels to their garments; but they remembered not the commandments of the Lord to do them. Many keep the laws of God to the eye, but violate them in the heart From such deceit may the Spirit of truth preserve us!

Jesus next put together four things that the scribes and Pharisees loved: "the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi. " Whether they met with their fellow-men for feasting, for worship, for business, or for instruction, they loved to be first and foremost. This is a common sin, and one into which we may easily fall. Our Lord felt it necessary to warn even his disciples against that evil, for his next words were evidently spoken specially to them.

Matthew 23:8-10. But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man you father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ.

In the Church of Christ, all titles and honors which exalt men and give occasion for pride are here forbidden. In the Christian commonwealth we should seek to realize a truer "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity," than that for which the world clamors in vain. He who is called "Rabbi " robs Christ of his honor as the only Master or Teacher of his disciples: "for one is your Master, even, Christ. " He also takes from his fellow-Christians the privilege that they share equally with him: "and all ye are brethren. " Those who use such titles as "Holy Father "and "Right Reverend Father in God "would have a difficulty in explaining any our Savior's words: "Call, no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. " In the tenth verse, our Lord's words might be rendered: "Neither be ye called leaders (guides, instructors): for one is your Leader (Guide, Instructor), even the Christ (the Messiah). " If we follow him, we cannot go wrong.

Matthew 23:11, 12. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.

This is nearly the same lesson that is recorded in Mt 20:27. Our Lord had to repeat many times this law of his kingdom: "He that is greatest among you shall be your servant. " You are all equal; but if there is one amongst you who claims to be the greatest, he shall be the servant of all. Where our King rules, any one of his disciples who exalts himself shall be abased; while, on the other hand, the one who humbles himself shall be exalted. The way to rise is to sink self; the lower we fall in our own esteem, the higher shall we rise in our Master's estimation.

MATTHEW 23:13-33 THE KING PRONOUNCING WOES

Matthew 23:13. But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.

While our Savior was speaking to the people and his disciples, the scribes and Pharisees may have again drawn near. At any rate, his next words were addressed to them: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees , hypocrites! " This is the first of eight "woes", in which the Lord Jesus both foretells the doom of the hypocrites gathered before him, and reveals the depth of his pity even for them. In seven of the eight "woes" he calls them "hypocrites", in one he addresses them as "blind guides." This first "woe" was pronounced against them because, as far as they could, they "shut up the kingdom of heaven against men. " This was a terrible charge to be brought against them by him who could read their hearts, and who could truthfully say to them, "for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in ." They ought to have helped men into the kingdom; instead of doing so, they hindered those who were entering. Are there not false teachers, nowadays, who put stumbling-stones instead of stepping-stones in the way of those who are entering the kingdom of heaven?

Matthew 23:14. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.

The second “woe” was supported by two most serious accusations, which our Lord would not have uttered if they had not been true: “ye devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayer.” Either of these sins by itself would have been very grievous; the two together were sufficient to sink those who were guilty of them to the lowest hell. The men who had defrauded widows would have to answer for their misdeeds to the widows’ “Judge” (Psalm 68:5). Those who had sought to cover their crimes with the cloak of superior sanctity deserved to be stripped before the people they had deceived, and to hear the King’s righteous sentence: “Therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.” These words prove that there are degrees of punishment, as there are gradations in glory. All the ungodly will be judged and condemned by the Righteous Judge, but “the greater condemnation” will be reserved for the hypocrites who have “for a pretense” made “long prayers” while, behind the mask, they have been devouring the property of widows and the fatherless.

Matthew 23:15. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.

The third “woe” related to the unholy zeal of the scribes and Pharisees in gaining adherents to Judaism and their own party, and by the process making them even worse than themselves. They freely gave time and trouble to the work with the prospect of a very slight return: “Ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte.” They would, as it were, drag the Great Sea with a seine net in the hope of entangling one proselyte in its meshes; or they would go over all the land in order to persuade one Gentile to be circumcised so as to become “a Jew outwardly.” The result to the proselyte was only evil: “When he is made, ye make him two fold: more the child of hell than yourselves.” Perverts usually become bigots. The proselyte would naturally imitate the vices of his hypocritical teachers, without having that knowledge of the Scriptures which might to some extent exercise a wholesome restraint upon them. The circumcised heathen would be a Judas rather than a Jew, a veritable “son of perdition.”

Matthew 23:16-19. Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?

The form of the fourth “woe” differs from all the rest; in the other seven, our Savior said, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! In this case, his words were, “Woe unto you, ye blind guides! ” They were nominally the religious guides of the Jews; but they were really “blind guides.” Sin, prejudice, bigotry, and hypocrisy had blinded their eyes. They reckoned themselves to be the wise men of the nation; but Jesus addressed them as both “fools and blind.” There are none so stupid as those who will not learn, and none so blind as those who will not see. This was the case with the scribes and Pharisees; they were willfully foolish and willingly blind.

Our Lord here condemned their misleading teaching concerning oaths.

They actually taught that, if a man swore “by the temple”, his oath was not binding; but that, if he swore “by the gold of the temple”, he was bound by his oath; and, in like manner, they declared that an oath “by the altar” was not binding; but that, if a man swore “by the gift that is upon the altar”, he was bound by his oath! We marvel not at our Savior’s indignant exclamation: “Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold?.. the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?” The sanctity lay in the temple and the altar, not in the gold or the gift.

Jesus had forbidden all swearing (chapter 5., verses 34-36); so that he was not exalting one form of oath over another, but rather pointing out the folly and blindness of the scribes and Pharisees in reversing the right order of things. If any swearing, had been permissible, an oath “by the temple” must have been more binding than one “by the gold of the temple” yet these false teachers said, “It is nothing.” When men once quit the plain teaching of Christ, it is easy for them to go into all manner of heresies and absurdities. 20-22. Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein. And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon”.

The Jews invented fantastic forms of swearing in order to evade the use of the divine name. Our Lord therefore next proved the utter failure of all their attempts. Swearing “by the altar” was swearing “by all things thereon.” An oath “by the temple” was really “by him that dwelleth therein.” The binding force of the oath could not lie in the mere building; but in the most High God, who condescended

to dwell therein. Many Jews would swear “by hea ven ”, although they would not call God to be a witness to their adjuration; but Jesus showed that they were doing the very thing they tried to avoid: “He that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon. ” The only right course for us is to obey our Lord’s command, “I say unto you, swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne: nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.”

Matthew 23:23, 24. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.

In this fifth “woe” our Lord called the scribes and Pharisees both “hypocrites” and “blind guides.” They were “hypocrites” as to their own character and conduct, and “blind guides” as the religious leaders of the nation. Jesus first spoke of their scrupulous attention to certain minor matters: “Ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin.” Some of them were so punctilious about paying tithes that they even gave to the temple service the tenth of the herbs they bought in the market, as well as of those they grew in their gardens. Although they were so particular about things that were of secondary importance, they “omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment (or, justice) mercy, and faith.” Their hearts were not right in the sight of God, therefore their minds were unbalanced; they counted the lesser requirements of the Law as of the first importance, while they “omitted the weightier matters” altogether. Our Lord did not blame them for paying the tithes; but he showed that they ought first to have exercised “justice, mercy and faith”: “these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.” No commandment of God is non-essential; but that which relates to the condition of the heart and the life in the sight of the Lord Jehovah must receive our first and best attention.

Jesus used a very expressive simile to set forth the inconsistency of the scribes and Pharisees: “Ye blind guides, which strain at (or, out) a gnat, and swallow a camel.” They rewarded trifles as if they were of first importance, and so, as it were, strained out gnats from their wine, lest they should be choked; but they committed great sins without any compunctions of conscience, and thus, in effect, swallowed a camel, an unclean animal, equal in size to an almost innumerable quantity of gnats. There are gnat-strainers among us still, who apparently have no difficulty in swallowing a camel, “hump and all.”

Matthew 23:25, 26. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.

The sixth “woe” is uttered against the scribes and Pharisees with regard to their eating and drinking: “Ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.” They had frequent washings, both of themselves and of their vessels for eating and drinking. They did well to “make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter”; the evil consisted in the method of filling and emptying the vessels. They were filled by “extortion”, and used for “excess”; therefore all the outside washing was of no avail. Singling out one of the evildoers, our Lord said, “Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, get rid of “extortion”, in gathering and “excess” in consuming; then the clean cup and platter will be in harmony with that which is within them.

Matthew 23:27, 28. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

The reason given for the seventh “woe” reveals what the scribes and Pharisees really were like in Christ’s sight: “Ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness.” The annual whitewashing of the sepulchres had recently taken place, so the burial-places looked at their best; but inside the tombs corruption was doing its deadly work. They were whitewashed, not only for sanitary purposes, but mainly to keep people away from them, lest they should become defiled. Our Lord certainly did not flatter the scribes and Pharisees by this comparison; but the more closely it is examined, the more appropriate to their abominable character will it be proved to be. However much they might “outwardly appear righteous unto men”, “within” they were “full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” Well might the holy Jesus cry “Woe!” unto

such foul sinners.

Matthew 23:29-31. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophet, and garnish the sepulchers of the righteous and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets.

The eighth “woe” referred to their false professions of reverence for “the goodly fellowship of the prophets” and “the noble army of martyrs”: “Ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchers of the righteous.” They pretended to have such regard for the holy men of the past that, being unable to honor them in person, they would set up monuments to their memory, and adorn their restingplaces with tokens of respect. They also testified as to what they would have done if they had lived in the days of their fathers: “we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophet.” What bitter irony there was in such language from the lips of men who were even then plotting the death of the Lord of the prophets and of the righteous of all ages! Thus do men still speak with seeming horror of the dark deeds of past persecutors, whose linear descendants they are, not only according to the flesh, but also after the spirit.

Out of their own mouth our Lord condemned the hypocrites: “Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets.” In effect, Jesus said to them, “You confess that you are the sons of the murderers of the prophets. That admission carries with it far more than you imagine. You are their sons, not only by birth, but also by resemblance; you are veritable children of them which killed the prophets. If you had lived in their day you would have committed the crimes you pretend to condemn.”

Matthew 23:32. Fill ye up then the treasure of your fathers.

This is one of the most terrible sentences that ever fell from Christ’s lips. It is like his message to Judas, “That thou doest, do quickly.” The “measure” of Israel’s iniquity was almost full. The Savior knew that the scribes and Pharisees were determined to put him to death, and so to complete their own condemnation. This crowning sin would fill up the measure of their fathers’ guilt, and bring down upon them the righteous judgment of God.

Matthew 23:33. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?

Our Lord spoke very severely, but faithfulness required such language as this. A good surgeon cuts deep; so did Jesus. Our modern preachers would not talk like this, even to scribes and Pharisees who were crucifying Christ afresh, and putting him to an open shame. He is not the most loving who speaks the smoothest words; true love often compels an honest man to say that which pains him far more than it affects his callous hearers.

MATTHEW 23:34-39 THE KING’S FAREWELL TO HIS CAPITAL

Matthew 23:34-36 Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation

Our great King knew that his earthly life was soon to end; he was, in fact, about to utter his final farewell to the people gathered in the temple. But, before leaving them, he delivered a royal and prophetic message: “Behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes.” None but the King of kings could speak thus without blasphemy. These “prophets, and wise men, and scribes” would be Christ’s ascension gifts to the Church and the world. He foretold what kind of reception his servants would have

from the Jews: "And some of then ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them I shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city." All this was literally fulfilled.

The object of the King in sending his last representatives was that the guilty city should be left for ever without excuse when its measure of iniquity should be full, and its awful doom be sealed. "That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed? upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar." The destruction of Jerusalem was more terrible than anything that the world has ever witnessed, either before or since. Even Titus seemed to see in his cruel work the hand of an avenging God. Truly, the blood of the martyrs slain in Jerusalem was amply avenged when the whole city became veritable Aceldama, or field of blood.

The Kingly Prophet foretold the time of the end: "Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation." It was before that generation had passed away that Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed.

There was a sufficient interval for the full proclamation of the gospel by the apostles and evangelists of the early Christian Church, and for the gathering out of those who recognized the crucified Christ as their true Messiah. Then came the awful end, which the Savior foresaw and foretold, and the prospect of which wrung from his lips and heart the sorrowful lament that followed his prophecy of the doom awaiting his guilty capital.

Matthew 23:37. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!

What a picture of pity and disappointed love the King's face must have presented when, with flowing tears, he uttered these words! What an exquisite emblem he gave of the way in which he had sought to woo the Jews to himself: "How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings" "What familiar tenderness! What a warm Elysium of rest! What nourishment for the feeble! What protection for the weak! Yet it was all provided in vain: "How often would I have gathered thy children together.... and ye would not!" Oh, the awful perversity of man's rebellious will! Let all the readers of these lines beware lest the King should ever have to utter such a lament as this over them.

Matthew 23:38, 39. Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the lord.

Nothing remained for the King but to pronounce the solemn sentence of death upon those who would not come unto him that they might have life: "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate." The whole "house" of the Jews was left desolate when Jesus departed from them; and the temple, the holy and beautiful "house", became a spiritual desolation when Christ finally left it. Jerusalem was too far gone to be rescued from its self-sought doom.

Amid all this gloom there was one gleam of light: "For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." After his death and resurrection, the Lord Jesus, appeared many times to his disciples, but not once to the unbelieving Jews.

His personal ministry to them was at an end; but it would be renewed when he should come to them a second time, without a sin-offering, unto salvation, and then they would say, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." Long ages have passed since the King went away into the far country. The signs of the times all tell us that his coming draweth nigh. Oh, that Christians and Jews alike were on the look-out for the true Messiah, whose message to all is, "Behold, I am coming quickly!"