

Jesus Warned the Pharisees of Seven Woes – Part 1

In our last topic, we saw that we want to lead our physical and spiritual children by our example. We are to invite our children to imitate us just as we imitate Christ. In order to lead in that way, we must make it our goal to imitate Christ. The Pharisees certainly did not lead that way. Instead, they drove the people by the use of fear. In this topic and the next, we will look at seven woes Jesus gave to the Pharisees.

Jesus said that the scribes and Pharisees tried to keep people from entering the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 23:13-14 says, “‘But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in *yourselves*, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.’” The word translated “woe” is an exclamation of grief. As a result, each time it is used in this chapter, it is a warning that great grief is coming to the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus also said that they were “hypocrites”. The word was used to speak of actors who used different masks to speak the parts of different characters. In this chapter, we will see that the scribes and Pharisees said one thing, but their actions were very different. They told others what to do, but they did not do those things themselves.

First, Jesus said that they shut up the kingdom of heaven against men. The scribes and Pharisees were depending on their own works to try to earn their way to heaven. We saw in the previous topic that they did these works to be seen by people because of their pride. At the same time, they rejected the righteousness of God and refused to come to Jesus in repentance and faith. As a result, Jesus made it clear, here, that they would not enter into the kingdom of heaven. In addition, Jesus said that they tried to prevent other people from entering into the kingdom. Luke 11:46 says, “And He said, ‘Woe to you also, lawyers! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.’” The scribes, Pharisees and lawyers also gave the people all kinds of rules and traditions that they were to obey. However, these men did not even follow the rules that they gave to others. Instead, they used those rules to drive the people by fear and prevent them from coming to God in faith.

Jesus also said that there would be great grief to the scribes and Pharisees because they devoured the houses of widows. The scribes often offered to help widows learn how to manage their money after the husbands had died. Instead of helping the widows, they would convince the widows they should give their money to the scribe to help pay him for his work of copying books. At other times, they would convince them that they should give most or all of their money to the temple for the work of God. However, they also received personal benefit from that money because they were paid for making copies of various books of the Old Testament. Either way, the scribes received much of the money for their personal use. Here, we see that Jesus made it clear that they were really stealing the money from the widows and that they would receive greater judgment as

a result. The Pharisees tried to cover their sins by publicly praying long prayers in places where they could be seen by the people to make them think that they were very spiritual. Jesus said that they would have greater judgment for their sin and deceit.

Matthew 23:15-22 says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. Woe to you, blind guides, who say, “Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged *to perform it.*” Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And, “Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged *to perform it.*” Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it.” Here, we see some more reasons the Pharisees would have great grief.

We see that the scribes and Pharisees would travel great distances both by land and by sea to convince a Gentile to become a proselyte. A proselyte was a Gentile who became a convert to Judaism. The religious leaders recognized two types of proselytes. Proselytes of the gate were Gentiles who remained uncircumcised but promised to avoid seven sins: idolatry, blasphemy against God, murder, immorality, stealing, rebellion against the religious rulers and eating flesh with the blood still in it. A proselyte of righteousness was one who chose to be circumcised and then kept the whole Mosaic law, including all of the feasts and ceremonies. These individuals would also be required to keep all of the traditions of the Pharisees, even though the Pharisees were not keeping those traditions. That is why Jesus said that they made this second group of proselytes twice as much a son of hell as themselves. The Pharisees taught a religion of works.

The scribes and Pharisees would also swear by certain things as a way to convince others that they would keep a promise. Many times, they would swear by the temple, the altar or even the throne of God. Jesus said that these men were blind guides, which meant that they did not know where they were going, so they certainly could not lead any others. The scribes and Pharisees would swear by these things, but they would require other people to swear by the gold in the temple or the sacrifices offered on the altar.

Jesus used two words to describe the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus said that they were “fools” and “blind”. Psalm 14:1 says, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘*There is no God.*’ They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none who does good.” In this verse, we see that a fool is a person who leaves God out of his thinking. The result is that the actions of a fool are corrupt. The works of a fool are so evil that they are totally hated by God. No person can do what is good in his own strength. However, the fool has no desire to please God and chooses to do works that are corrupt and hated by God. Jesus said that to swear by the temple was also to swear by the gold that was in it. To swear by the altar was to swear by the altar and all of the sacrifices that were offered on it. To swear by the throne of God was to swear by the throne and also by God who sits on that throne. Jesus said the scribes and Pharisees were also deceived by their own blindness.

Jesus went on to say in Matthew 23:23-26, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier *matters* of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.” The scribes and Pharisees also showed they were hypocrites by the way that they gave to God. Leviticus 27:30 says, ““And all the tithe of the land, *whether* of the seed of the land *or* of the fruit of the tree, *is* the LORD’s. It *is* holy to the LORD.”” Here, we see that the Jews were to give a tithe of all that grew in their fields and all that grew on their fruit trees to the Lord. In contrast, the spices like mint, anise and cummin were grown in small pots at their homes. The Pharisees carefully weighed their mint, anise and cummin and gave one-tenth of those spices to God, instead of their crops in the fields.

However, as they gave their tithe of these spices, they totally ignored the key teachings of the law like justice, mercy and faith. “Justice” means *doing the things that are right in the sight of God*. “Mercy” means *to show kindness to the needy and afflicted*. “Faith” means *repenting and turning from the sin of unbelief*, believing that Jesus is the Messiah and coming to God through Christ as a result of believing in His death and resurrection. Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees that these were the things that they should do without leaving the smaller things undone. That is why Jesus called them blind guides. Leviticus 11:4 says, ““But all *other* flying insects which have four feet *shall be* an abomination to you.”” The gnat was the smallest unclean insect of these flying insects. In contrast, the camel was the largest of the unclean animals. The Pharisees would pour the things that they drank through a fine piece of cloth to remove any gnats while they neglected things like justice, mercy and faith.

Jesus went on to describe the actions of the scribes and Pharisees in another way. They carefully washed their cups and plates according to their traditions so that they would not eat or take anything into their bodies that was unclean. At the same time, their hearts were full of extortion and indulgence. “Extortion” is the act of plundering or robbery. The word translated “indulgence” means *to commit various sins because of a total lack of self-control*. Jesus went on to say in Matthew 23:27, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead *men’s* bones and all uncleanness.” We will study this verse in more detail in the next topic. Here, we will just summarize it. Jesus said the scribes and Pharisees did everything possible to look good on the outside. However, on the inside their hearts were full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.

We want to help our physical and spiritual children understand and learn to explain why Jesus pronounced these warnings of great grief and sorrow to the scribes and Pharisees. We are going to see that Jesus had great sorrow as He thought about the judgment that would come on them because of their unbelief and rejection. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children learn to explain these things.