Jesus’ Warning against Hypocrisy

Matthew 23:1-39

Key Verse: 23:23b,c “…But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.”

Today’s passage covers Jesus’ warning against the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and Jesus’ lamentation over Jerusalem. The word “hypocrisy” means “pretense of having virtues such as goodness, holiness, and righteousness, but that one does not really have.” Jesus rebukes the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in several ways, and we call it “Jesus’ seven woes.” Jesus’ warning against hypocrisy is not only for the Pharisees, but also for us, for you and me, especially for those who think that they are leaders. No one can be free from the sin of hypocrisy because there is no one righteous, not even one before the Holy God. Let’s learn what Jesus teaches us about how we can live before God with honesty and sincerity.

First, practice what we teach (1-4) Look at verses 1-4. “***Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them***.” Here, the teachers of the law were experts in the law among the Pharisees. In the synagogues they sat in Moses’ seat, which is the symbol of authority and taught the Scriptures to their people. A synagogue is a Jewish church in modern terms. Three times a year Jews visited Jerusalem to celebrate the festivals. For daily meetings and weekly worship Jews met at a synagogue. A synagogue is the center of Jewish life. The word ‘synagogue’ means “assembly” or “gathering,” the same meaning as the word ‘church’ for Christians. The teachers of the law were called ‘Rabbi’ which means ‘teacher’. Jesus told the crowds and his disciples to do everything the teachers of the law taught, but not to do what they did because the teachers of the law did not practice what they preached. Of course, on this earth there is no one perfect, and there is no one who practices 100 percent of what they preach. The problem is that the teachers of the law pretended to do everything they taught. They did not repent of their own sins. They liked to teach others, but didn’t teach themselves. What made them worse is their authoritative and legalistic attitude toward their people. They put many difficult and heavy rules on others, and they refused to help those who collapsed under their heavy rules.

If we do not practice what we teach, we become hypocrites. If we teach our children to be faithful, but we are not faithful, we are hypocrites. If we teach our students to study hard, but we become lazy, we commit the sin of hypocrisy. Some parents discipline their children with authority. But children usually follow what their parents do more than what they teach. A parent’s life is the living Bible for their children. This is the reason why parents must be careful to do everything what they teach. I pray that all parents here may become a good example for their children in their speech, love, faith, purity, and life. Amen!

Second, recognized by God alone. (5-10) Look at verses 5-7. “***Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others***.” Those who are authoritative are usually sensitive to other’s recognition and respect. They are happy when they are recognized by others, and they are grumpy when they are not recognized by others. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees wore traditional garments which look separate from others. They made their phylacteries wider and the tassels longer than the required sizes. Phylacteries are small leather boxes, containing a piece of vellum inscribed with four Bible verses; Exodus 13:2-10, 11-16, Deut 6:4-9; 11:13-21) They were worn on the arm or tied to the forehead according to Exodus 13:9,16, and Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18. The purpose of wearing phylacteries was to remember God’s grace and to keep God’s word in the center of their lives. But the teachers of the law made their phylacteries big and wide and the tassels long at the corner of their garments so that they could show their piety to the world. Seeking a reputation for their piety, they like to sit on the most important seats in the synagogue, called “Moses’ seat”. Moses’ seats are stone benches in front, next to the ark which contains the scroll of the Scriptures. The teachers of the law and Pharisees loved to sit on Moses’ seats where everybody could see them. By sitting near the ark, they wanted to be recognized as holy, devout, and pious Rabbis of their people. They loved to be greeted with respect and to be called “*Rabbi*” which means ‘teacher’. Jesus pointed out their problem that everything they do is done for people to see. They were not truth-seekers, but self-glory-seekers.

If we do the work of God in order to gain recognition from people, we lose the heavenly reward and God’s recognition. Of course we need proper respect and recognition when we achieve something great, especially when we teach the Bible, or bring someone to church, or donate some considerable money to church or relief organizations. But all things we do should be done for God’s glory. God should be exalted and glorified through our works and lives. Jesus said on his Sermon on the Mount, “*Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven….Your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*” (Mt 6:1,4) God himself is our great reward. When the teachers of the law and the Pharisees were looking for people’s recognition, their lives were tired and miserable because their happiness depended on people’s response and recognition. Those who live before God enjoy real freedom and joy and receive the heavenly reward. Amen!

Third, God exalts the humble. (11-12) Look at verses 11,12. “***The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted***.” In these verses Jesus taught his disciples what they have to do in order to become great in the sight of God. Jesus taught them to be humble. Humbleness or humility does not necessarily mean to put ourselves lower than others, but to think ourselves less than others. Humbleness is to consider others more than ourselves. Humbleness comes from deep understanding of other’s situations, needs, and interests. Jesus taught us how to be truly humble in Mark 10:45. He said, “*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many*.” Jesus humbled himself and came to this world as a man like one of us, even though he is God in his very nature. If he thought about himself, he would not suffer and die on the cross. Yet he didn’t think of himself, but of the suffering people who live cursed lives under the power of sin and death. In order to save them from their sins, Jesus took the cross and shed his blood. Jesus made himself nothing to save us. When Jesus humbled himself and obeyed God’s will by taking up the cross, God raised Jesus to the highest place and made all peoples of all nations confess that Jesus is Christ and the Lord. (Php 6:5-11) God exalted the name of Jesus highly above all names of the earth.

If we consider ourselves more than others, we cannot become humble. Without making ourselves nothing for others, we cannot follow Jesus. Without considering others better than ourselves, we cannot learn from Jesus. Jesus said, “*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many*.” This is the secret of being truly great in the sight of God. Those who say ‘I am sorry’ first are humble men. Those who forgive other’s sin as God forgave us are truly great men. May God help us to be humble so that we may grow in the divine image and character of Christ! Amen.

Fourth, seven woes on the teachers of the law and the Pharisees (13-39) In these verses Jesus called them in several different ways: ‘hypocrites’ 6 times, ‘blind men’ 5 times, ‘the whitewashed tomb,’ ‘snakes’, and ‘brood of vipers’. Jesus’ rebukes on them became more harsh and intense. This is because their hypocrisy became more destructive and harmful than they expected to the work of God and to their people. These seven woes have a chiastic pattern such as ABBA. In the first (v.13) and the seventh woe (v.29-32) Jesus rebukes their failure to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. In the second (v.16-22) and the sixth woe (v. 27-28) Jesus rebukes of their becoming superficially zealous, but of doing more harm than good. In the third (v.16-22) and the fifth woe (v. 25-26) Jesus rebukes their misguided use of the Scripture. And in the fourth woe (v. 23-24) Jesus rebukes their fundamental failure to discern the thrust of Scripture. Look at verse 13. “***Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to***.” The door for the kingdom of heaven is faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus said that he himself is the way and the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through him. (Jn 14:6) Many people who heard his teaching and saw his miraculous signs believed in Jesus. But the teachers of the law and Pharisees who had claimed to teach the way of God refused to believe in Jesus. They also hindered people from believing in him.

According to the historians, the Pharisees traveled around in order to convert pagans to Judaism. But in reality they tried to convert them not into Judaism, but into Pharisaism. When they won a single convert, they made him twice as much as a child of hell as they are. Their zeal without accepting the gospel made themselves more harmful than useful. In his third woe based on verses 16-22 Jesus called them ‘blind guides’ (16), ‘blind fools’ (17), and ‘You blind men’ (19) Jesus rebuked their mishandling the Scriptures. People made an oath or vow as the expression of their devotion to God. Some swore an oath by the gold of the temple or the gift on the altar. The problem is their evasive and thoughtless oaths which they cannot keep. When the teachers of the law and the Pharisees took an oath, they differentiated between what was binding and what was not. This allowed for evasive oath-taking. Jesus rejected all such subtleties by showing how foolish they were and by insisting that people simply tell the truth. (5:33-37)

Look at verses 23,24. “***Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices-mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law- justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.***” This is the fourth woe. These days we offer tithing with money, but in Jesus’ day greens and garden herbs were allowed for tithing. Tithing is a designated offering from a tenth of our income as the expression of our faith, gratitude, and love for God. The Pharisees fasted twice a week and gave tithing. But they neglected the more important matters of the law such as justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Jesus said that we should practice the spirit of the law without neglecting offering tithing. Justice, mercy, and faithfulness should be practiced in our daily lives. Justice should be practiced according to God’s righteousness. According to the Apostle Paul, Jesus is the righteousness of God. (Ro 1:17) This means that Jesus satisfied the requirements of God’s righteousness through his obedient death on the cross. Mercy should be practiced according to God’s forgiving love. God showed his mercy through Jesus Christ. God forgave sinners and gave right to become children of God to those who believe in Jesus his Son. God showed his faithfulness by sending Jesus Christ as the Promised Messiah. God is faithful to keep his promise. Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promises and prophecies. Therefore, when we believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, we satisfy the spirit of the law, which is love. The teachers of the law and Pharisees diligently offered tithing. They also should practice the love of God and his mercy by bringing people to Christ Jesus, who is the fulfillment of the law and the embodiment of God’s love.

In verse 24 Jesus rebukes them, “***You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.***” The strict Pharisees would carefully strain their drinking water through a cloth to be sure they did not swallow a gnat, which is the smallest of ceremonially unclean animals. But, figuratively, they would swallow a camel, which is one of the largest animals in the Middle East. This means that they violated the greatest commandments of God in order to keep their trivial oral regulations. The greatest commandment of God is to love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. (22:37-39)

In the fifth woe Jesus asked them to repent of their sin of hypocrisy. Look at verses 25,26. “***Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisees! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean***.” Here, the outside of the cup and the dish is the metaphor of their religious observance as seen by people, and the inside of the cup and dish is the metaphor of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Though their religious forms and observances looked pious and holy, their insides was full of greed and self-indulgence. They should repent of their hypocrisy. We have to clean our dish and cup both inside and outside. We must repent of our sins. Jesus said that when the inside of the cup and dish are clean, then the outside also will be clean. Our exclusive and mindless religious activities cannot change this world. Rather, when we cry out for one lost soul with tears of God’s mercy and love, this world will be changed.

In the sixth woe Jesus called the hypocritical religious leaders as whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of bones of the dead and everything unclean. (27,28) In the seventh woe Jesus condemned them as the descendants of the wicked people who had killed the prophets and the servants of God (29-32) Jesus continued their guilt in verses 33-36, revealing the connotation that they would soon kill him on the cross as their ancestors had murdered the prophets and servants of God. In verse 36 Jesus said, “***Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.”***

Thus far we have studied Jesus’ seven woes against the Pharisees’ hypocrisy. His woes on them did not come from his hatred, but from his compassion. Jesus lamented for those who did not repent but go to hell. In verse 37 Jesus lamented over Jerusalem, which is the symbol of Israel. Look at verses 37-38. “***Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gather her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate.”*** Jerusalem is the city of David, the city of the holy temple. But it became the city of murder, conspiracy, and corruption. God sent many prophets to turn their hearts to the Lord as a hen tries to gather her chicks under her wings. But the Israelites refused to repent. In verse 37 ‘your house’ indicates Jerusalem or Israel. Jerusalem was abandoned desolate due to the consequences of their sins.

This verse reminds us of God’s lamentation over lost sinners. God calls sinners for repentance so that they may become children of God. For God so loved the world that he gave even his One and Only Son Jesus, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (Jn 3:16) But sinners refuse to come home. Today Jesus laments over those who are lost and who wanders away in darkness of sin. God’s favor for salvation is time-limited. It will be too late to repent after Jesus comes again to judge this world. Jesus said in verse 39. “***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 died for our sins and rose again from the dead for our eternal life. Jesus will come again to judge this world. May God help us to repent of our hypocrisy and practice God’s justice, mercy, and faithfulness by loving and caring even one lost soul. Amen.