

May 26th, 2024

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Sermon Title: The Verdict is In

Sermon Text: Matthew 23:13-36

Matt. 23:13 ¶ “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.

Matt. 23:15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

Matt. 23:16 ¶ “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.’

Matt. 23:17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?

Matt. 23:18 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.’

Matt. 23:19 You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?

Matt. 23:20 So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.

Matt. 23:21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it.

Matt. 23:22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

Matt. 23:23 ¶ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

Matt. 23:24 You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

Matt. 23:25 ¶ “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.

Matt. 23:26 You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

Matt. 23:27 ¶ “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.

Matt. 23:28 So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Matt. 23:29 ¶ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous,

Matt. 23:30 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.’

Matt. 23:31 Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.

Matt. 23:32 Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.

Matt. 23:33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?

Matt. 23:34 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,

Matt. 23:35 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 Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

Matt. 23:36 Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon *this generation*.

Main Point: Jesus is a gracious Savior, who rescues all who call upon him, but judges those who oppose him and destroy souls.

Outline:

1. Guilty of Destroying Souls (23:15, 16, 24, 27-28)
2. Guilty of Blood (23:29-36)
3. Guilty of Opposing the Gospel (23:13)

Introduction

I never really know where people need to be pressed and challenged. On the one hand, some people fear that God is this perpetually unhappy being who is disgusted with them. They hear the gospel, but they still have trouble believing that even in Christ God would love them. That's the kind of person who, to my mind, needs to see the beauty of the gospel, and probably doesn't need to keep being reminded of God's judgment.

On the other hand, you have sort of your average modern person who barely even thinks that God is holy. This is the person who really needs to be reminded that God is serious and punishes sin. And so when I get a passage like this today, I feel a bit torn: who needs to hear this more? What should I emphasize and focus on?

In the end, as I studied this passage I realized that this particular text sort of forces me to say something to both. If you have a lackadaisical view of God and his holiness, this passage speaks to you today. If you have a harsh and oppressive view of God, this passage also speaks to you today.

When you read the major prophets in the Old Testament, sometimes people will complain that it feels so... *bleak*. A less than careful reading of the Old Testament could leave you feeling like it's just judgment after judgment so that eventually the reader becomes almost numbed to these pronouncements by the prophets.

There was an ancient heretic named Marcion who looked at the Old and New Testaments this way, mistakenly believing that the God of the Old Testament is inferior – a god of petty and bitter judgment, and the God of the New Testament as superior – a god of grace and mercy.

Perhaps there aren't many followers of Marcion today (certainly not many who are aware of it anyway), but many people find the New Testament to be a very different picture of God. They see the New Testament and the ministry of Jesus as the arrival of the kindness of God, and the mercy of God *finally*.

I want to say a couple of things to that. For one, yes, the judgment that happens in the Old Testament is bleak. But it's not just judgment for sin, it's judgment for sustained unrepentance. What you actually see throughout books like Isaiah and Jeremiah, for instance is this constant call by God, "Return to me. Come back to me." "You can come back home."

In Jeremiah 5:3 the problem is not only sin, it's that – to quote the prophet – "they have refused to repent."

In Ezekiel the call is, "Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin."

So in the Old Testament, the message is not, "You're going to be crushed because you sinned." The message is, "You're going to be crushed if you don't repent."

What you start to see in the Old Testament is not actually a two dimensional God who is just impatient and ready to strike... but rather a gracious God who holds out the constant call: "return to me. Repent. I will wash you. I will cleanse you." When you start looking for it, you *start* to see the mercy of God all over the Old Testament prophets. It's woven into the fabric of everything.

And he's not just potentially merciful and gracious, but is actually merciful and gracious all the way through. His kindness is all *over* the books of the Old

Testament – every page, actually. And a healthy attention to the Old Testament would help set that right.

Not only is God in the Old Testament full of grace far more than you realize, but also when you read the New Testament carefully you start to see an awful lot more *judgment* than you might realize.

The bloodiest moment in all of the Bible is in the book Revelation when Jesus himself stomps a winepress full of those who have rejected him. Jesus has fury and wrath for those who reject him. Just like the God of the *Old* Testament is not two-dimensional, so the same God in the *New* Testament is not two dimensional.

And we're about to spend multiple chapters in Matthew seeing precisely this judgment from Jesus. Let me give you a road map of what's ahead for us. Today's passage is like the indictment of Jesus against the Jewish leadership. Not only is it his indictment, but it's the charges and verdict all rolled into one. And it's a guilty verdict.

Next week's passage in Matthew 24 is going to be the sentence for this guilt. Because this generation in Jesus' time is guilty of blood, of killing the prophets, of all those things we're going to look at this week, what is going to happen to this generation? What is going to be the judgment for all of this? And Jesus' answer as we'll see is the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of this precious temple and all this gold that they love so much. The next week I will be at General Assembly and we'll take a convenient break right in the middle of this, and Matthew will preach.

Then the week after that in Matthew 25, Jesus is going to then pronounce something even greater: a judgment, not just of Jerusalem this time, but of the whole world that is also one day coming (though the day and hour are unknown), which he will also preside over. This is a judgment that still has not yet happened, but that he is preparing us for.

He uses this word "woe" to describe the status of these people. A "woe" is a pronouncement of divine judgment and shame. This happens all throughout the

scriptures. Sometimes people pronounce woes on themselves, but usually it is God pronouncing a woe on others.

What I'd like to do this week is look very broadly at the charges Jesus makes here against the Jewish leadership, so that we can understand why ultimately God has decided to totally destroy the city and flatten the temple so that there is not one stone left on top of the other. Why would he do this?

And to do that I want to summarize the charges Jesus makes under three points: Jesus says they are guilty. Guilty first, of destroy souls. Second, guilty of blood. Then Third, guilty of opposing the gospel.

As we look at these pronouncements of guilt, just keep in mind: you really cannot get more serious and more destructive than the things Jesus is finding them guilty of today.

1. Guilty of Destroying Souls (23:15, 16, 24, 27-28)

First, Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees are guilty of destroying souls.

The Scribes and Pharisees are the teachers of Israel. Your average person in Israel depended upon these teachers. And this means that the teachers were, in some ways, the bottleneck of truth for your average Israelite in Jesus' day. They depended on the rabbis.

I don't think I'm being over dramatic when I say the Pharisees are "soul destroying." Look how Jesus accuses them:

Verse 15: "You shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces."

Verse 16: "You make them twice as much a child of hell as you are."

Verse 24: "You blind guides."

Verse 27: "You are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness."

Verse 28: "Within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

And the charge Jesus makes is that not only are they themselves like this, but they teach everyone else to be like this, too! Their falsehood spreads like gangrene

throughout Israel. Their poison is everywhere because they are the teachers of *Israel*.

By Jesus' own judgment here their own souls are dead, hypocritical, lawless, and hellish. And they are teaching the exact same destructive lessons to everyone in Israel.

Their teachings are "shutting the kingdom of heaven in people's faces." We often underestimate the impact that we have on other people and their own spiritual lives. In his book *The Confessions*, St. Augustine speaks of his incredible regrets from the time when he was not walking with the Lord. And perhaps his greatest regret was the people he misled and lied to. And in one case he speaks of a man who believed what Augustine taught hook line and sinker, and then died at a young age, as a pagan, far from God. The falsehood that Augustine taught weighed on him, and he rightly had a sense that he was in some way responsible for what happened to this young man's soul.

Those who teach... those who instruct others... those whom others depend on have an incredible responsibility to rightly handle the truth. Paul tells Timothy as a minister, "do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

Preachers do carry this burden. But others in the church carry a responsibility to minister to each other as well. We are connected. We need each other. We have the power to bless or to curse each other by living these things out, or even by failing to live these things out.

But in the case of these leaders, Jesus pronounces a woe on them. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Blind guides! Hypocrites!" Why? Because they are guilty of destroying souls! What more horrible charge could possibly be laid at the feet of someone?

2. Guilty of Blood (23:29-36)

The second pronouncement Jesus makes is that these leaders are guilty of blood.

Toward the end of the passage especially beginning in verse 29, Jesus speaks a specific woe. He says, “You build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous.” In other words, after righteous men and prophets are killed, these *present*-day leaders remember those prophets fondly and speak as if they would have been on their side. They throw their ancestors under the bus.

“We would have stood up to those who killed these righteous men.”

“We aren’t the kind of people who would have thrown Jeremiah in the cistern.”

“We would have listened to God when he spoke through those prophets.”

They kid themselves, of course.

And we do, as well.

We always do this with the Pharisees. We think, “Oh, they’re so blind. If we’d been in their shoes we wouldn’t have done this stuff.”

Sometimes we do this when we think about Adam and Eve. We see *their* sin in the Garden of Eden and we think in retrospect, “Well *I* wouldn’t have done it. This is really quite unfair. I wouldn’t have taken the fruit. I would have listened to God.”

It's easy to be an after-the-fact quarterback. It’s harder to listen to God right now as he’s speaking. It’s much harder, especially when his word has hard things to say to us *now*. It’s harder when he calls us to repent. Repentance is painful because it means saying that we are wrong, it involves turning from our path and following the Lord and not our own way. That’s why so many don’t do it.

We should repent. Repent of overestimating ourselves.

We should humble ourselves and not assume that we would be the good guys of history. No. We’re made of the same stuff as the villains. And if we don’t act it out, it’s because God has been gracious, not because we are superior.

This is the problem Jesus has: not necessarily that their fathers *did* what they did, but with their unrepentance combined with the revisionary history that comes

later: “We never would have done *that*.” Right? That’s what he puts in their mouths in verse 30:

“If we had lived in the days of the fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.”

Jesus says, “Not so fast.” “Know yourselves.” “Tell the truth.” Jeremiah 17:9:

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”

Tell the truth: I overestimate myself. I won’t even admit that I’m capable of the sins that have happened in the past. I tell a false story about myself.

Jesus says that if they can’t reckon with the past, they can’t find peace with God, and they actually continue the same cycle.

So notice the blood guilt. He says in verse 31,

“Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.”

Then the conclusion comes in verse 34,

“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.”

He is holding them guilty of the sins that came *before* because they are unwilling to repent of the very things they keep participating in. And he’s predicting that they’ll keep it up during the era of the Apostles, too. The fruit of their unrepentance will be seen because they will keep going. They won’t turn.

We start to see the sentence Jesus then pronounces in verse 36. Because after he says they are guilty of the blood of righteous men and mentions names like Abel and Zechariah, and he tells them they’ll keep doing it to his Apostles, he concludes with these ominous words:

“Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon *this generation*.”

Next week we'll move right into the next verse and see exactly what "these things" are that were about to come upon "this generation."

For now, know that he is telling his listeners that they are guilty of blood, and that they will have to answer for it.

3. Guilty of Opposing the Gospel (23:13)

Third, Jesus pronounces them guilty of opposing the Gospel. He does this in verse 13.

The gospel is the good news that by trusting in Christ – by resting in him and receiving him by faith, we can be forgiven, our sin can be put away, we can be brought into the kingdom, and we can have peace with God.

The accusation is that because of those he is talking to, people are actually prevented from experiencing this gospel.

He uses a few phrases to describe this. He says "you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces."

He says, "You neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in."

How does this happen? How does someone oppose the gospel? In these leaders' case, they disguised and hid the Messiah from people when they should have proclaimed him. In a few chapters, they will have him put to death. They will try to silence the proclamation of peace.

Here is how St. Jerome described them keeping people out of the Kingdom. This is Jerome writing in 350 AD:

"The scribes and Pharisees have the knowledge of the prophets and of the law. They know that Christ is the Son of God. They are not ignorant that he was born of the Virgin. Yet they did not seek to serve the people to whom they were accountable. They themselves were not entering the kingdom of heaven, nor did they permit others who were able to do so."

We've seen this already – over and over again, the Scribes and Pharisees who know the scriptures but deny what they say.

Jesus disappoints them. He challenges them. He threatens their position and authority. They would rather the Messiah die than that he be like *Jesus*.

Jesus is constantly identifying himself as the Savior. He calls people to come to him. He says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He beckons all of us to come even now. He beckons you to come, to believe in him, to receive and rest in him.

But you could be like the Scribes and Pharisees. Like them, you know he was born of a virgin. You know he is the way the truth and the life. You're not ignorant.

And yet, if you're honest, your problem is not knowledge, it's love. You've known of him, you've been taught about him, but you don't treasure him. You don't love him. You know about him, but you don't readily come to him or follow him. Just recognize that you have this in common with the Pharisees: they too knew him, and wouldn't come to him. The right response is to come.

Actually repent. Actually follow Jesus. Be his disciple. And he will welcome you. You can always come home.

And so can the Scribes and Pharisees at this point.

They've ignore God's word, but they can still come to him. They've hidden God's word but they can still come to him. They've disobeyed God's word, but they can still come to him.

But can such a nation that is supposed to be under the blessings and cursings of the law expect to live forever? No. A reckoning is coming and *has* been coming, says Jesus. And we'll see what that reckoning looks like next week.

Conclusion

When I started out today I wanted you to see, in a sense that there's more judgment in the New Testament than you might think. But now that you've seen it, I feel like you need to also be reminded that God is still infinitely more gracious and merciful than you think.

Think of this: Even as Jesus speaks these words today, we know that the end *hasn't* come yet. When God sent the prophets to warn Israel, it was *always* an act of kindness, even when their message was hard to hear. And the same is true of Jesus here. He sounds like the Old Testament prophets here for good reason: because God's judgment is real. How much would he have to hate them to keep that to himself?

Yes, the city is judged. However, the grace is still being held out.

In the next section next week, Jesus will be expressing opportunities *even now* for them to *escape* that judgment. Even with wicked leadership, there is grace being held out. Jesus says, "This is serious. Listen to me, and you can escape the coming judgment. Refuse to listen to me, and you will have to face what is coming." This is true in the short term with the destruction of Jerusalem, but even more, it's true for *all* of us regarding the final judgment.

When we see judgment being predicted, we should see it for what it is: grace. Warning. A call to turn.

You may not like the fact that the Bible has words of judgment and warning. It's not my favorite subject, if I can be really honest. But if we love God, then we should truly love the holiness of God, the purity of God.

In reality, God is holy. It's in his nature to be good and righteous, and to take sin seriously without winking at it.

But if we love his mercy, we should also love his judgment, because that's what the cross is: it is his mercy meeting with his judgment. The cross is God taking sin seriously, and punishing it as it deserves, but also broadcasting his grace as loud as can be.

When we see that God takes sin seriously, it should steer us toward *repentance*, not hopelessness. The whole point of the warning is for us to *respond* to those warnings. Let's do that today and turn to Jesus – whether for the first time, or the thousandth time.

Let's pray.