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Sermon Notes

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Christ Exposes Spiritual Hypocrites, Part I

Matthew 23:13-22

Hypocrisy... the wearing of the Spiritual Mask... it starts with pride... a desire to be praised and honored by people; it gives little thought to what God really thinks

Hypocrisy is concerned with external appearances... with a SHOW of righteousness

Hypocrisy wears a mask and a costume: having learned religious jargon, having learned religious facial expressions and tones of voice and body language; it is able to APPEAR to most any audience as righteous...

Hypocrisy gets dressed for church every Sunday and polishes up the image and walks out on stage to put on a show; conversations in the parking lot, in the church foyer, in the coffee and donuts part of Sunday School... all handled with skill, to HIDE the reality

And what is the reality? Spiritual death... spiritual decay... enslavement to sin—to pride and lust and materialism and pleasure

Though the person knows the language of Christ and of the gospel, the reality, the power of godliness is starkly absent

It is one of the most painful works of a pastor to expose a gospel hypocrite, but that is the labor in front of us today

The issue of spiritual hypocrisy is one of the most deadly in the Christian life... it is a COUNTERFEIT righteousness that effectively blocks the sinner from receiving the TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS Christ alone offers

Contrasted with the ACTOR who is a hypocrite is the true Christian... the true Christian cannot stand the sham, but is deeply aware of the sin within and wants the genuine remedy

The true Christian knows that Christianity is a matter of the HEART, and from the HEART flows all the outward deeds of the Christian religion

So the true Christian is spiritually humble... the Beatitudes describe the true Christian perfectly:

Matthew 5:3-8 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

This morning, we are going to take a painful walk through one of the most devastating chapters in the Bible... Christ, the Gentle Savior, launching ICBMs of judgment on the Scribes and Pharisees,

And we hear the repeated refrain:

Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites

The BIGGEST MISTAKE we can possibly make in reading this chapter is to assume Christ is speaking about SOMEONE ELSE and is in no way referring to US

A genuine Christian is DEEPLY CONCERNED about hypocrisy... our pride naturally pushes us to APPEAR more righteous than we really are in front of others

So as we hear Christ verbally UNDRRESS the Scribes and Pharisees and their wretched hypocrisy, if this passage makes us feel smug and righteous, saying "I'm sure glad I'm not a hypocrite like THEM", I do believe you've missed the point

Rather, we should be taking our hearts to Christ and saying, "I want a genuine work of grace in my heart, Lord... CHANGE ME, DEAR JESUS!!!"

I. Blackest Darkness Reserved for Them

A. Satan's Three Deadly Attacks

1. Worldliness

The allure of the world, its temptations to fleshly pleasures—the allure of material prosperity, of positions of power, of sensual pleasures, of sexual excitement, of visual pleasure... the world, Vanity Fair, with its enticing corruptions, has a terribly deadening effect on our souls

2. Persecution

The attack of the world... rejection, insults, missed promotions, gossip, slander, shunning by cliques... all the way up to bitter pounding by hate-filled governments and religious zealots... imprisonments, riots, confiscation of property, torture, death

3. False Teaching

The perversion of right doctrine by a subtle convincing counterfeit... an overemphasis of some truth until it becomes a falsehood... the infiltration of strange ideas, strange worship patterns, counter-biblical conceptions of God... legalism or license

B. The Greatest Danger: False Teaching

1. Of all these three, false teaching is consistently portrayed as the most dangerous
2. Why? Because it alone affects the gospel message itself... and that gospel message is ***“the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes”***

C. The Greatest Condemnation: False Spiritual Leaders

1. Peter

2 Peter 2:17 These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them.

Just pause and consider the import of these words: the greatest possible wrath and punishment and curse from God in hell is reserved for false teachers!! Hell does not have all the same levels of suffering, all the same levels of torment... there are worse levels of punishment than others... and **BLACKEST DARKNESS** is reserved for false teachers

2. Paul

Galatians 1:8-9 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! ⁹ As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

D. Scribes and Pharisees: A Hellish Combination of All Three Attacks

1. Worldliness: They were consumed with materialism, their passion was for worldly power, pleasure, prestige

Matthew 23:25 full of greed and self-indulgence.

Luke 20:46-47 Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁷ They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."

2. Persecution: They attacked true prophets and apostles and teachers... and especially the Christ... and sought to put them to death

Matthew 23:34 I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.

3. False teaching: they taught a false gospel of legalism and self-righteousness, that by following their meticulous interpretation of the Laws of Moses, one could be saved from sins and welcomed into heaven

Matthew 23:15-16 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are. ¹⁶ ¶ "Woe to you, blind guides!

These were the deadliest enemies of the gospel the early church could possibly face

But more than that, Jesus' denunciation of them in Matthew 23 exposes the hypocrisy of our own hearts... our own outward shows of righteousness and inward corruptions

II. Overview of Christ's Condemnation

A. The Bitterest of all Christ's Teachings

1. An extending attack of the most astonishing bitterness
2. He pulls no punches, pours on the most shocking rhetoric
3. Though he had occasionally exposed these hypocrites before, there is nothing like this in all the gospels for its length and intensity

B. Our Day and Age: Toleration

1. Postmodern America delights in "live and let live"
2. Clear denunciation of others for their spiritual lives and doctrines is considered extremely rude, divisive, harsh, judgmental
3. BUT let us never forget... the One who speaks these words is actually the Judge of all the Earth

John 5:22-23 the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father.

Matthew 25:31-32 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

4. So, when the Judge of all the Earth speaks these words, how can anyone fail to tremble

Matthew 23:33 "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

C. Context

1. The Gospel of Matthew has one uniting theme: The Kingdom of Heaven... or, more specifically, Jesus' credentials as the KING of the Kingdom of Heaven
2. Therefore, Matthew begins with a genealogy, to prove Jesus' lineage from both Abraham and David
3. Then Jesus brings forth John the Baptist, who proclaimed "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near!" and who testified that someone was coming after him who was greater than he was, whose sandals he was not worthy to untie
4. Then Jesus defeats Satan in the desert, fasting forty days and forty nights, and refuses to sin
5. Then Jesus begins His powerful ministry of miracles and proclaiming the same message as John, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near!"
6. Then the Sermon on the Mount proclaims the true nature of the Kingdom of Heaven: a Kingdom of righteousness, in which the righteousness of those who dwell there must surpass that of the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law; a Kingdom of a TRUE, HEART righteousness, in which we fight not just external crimes like murder, but internal heart states like anger; not only do we hate adultery, but also the root cause of lust in the heart; a Kingdom of Heaven in which the servants refuse to do their acts of righteousness to be seen by men and praised by men; a lifestyle in which seeking first His Kingdom and His righteousness is everything; a life free from prideful judgmentalism, in which we labor to take the plank out of our eye before trying to take the speck from a brother's eye... a life shunning false spiritual leaders who are wolves in sheep's clothing, who are known by their fruits
7. Matthew's Gospel goes on from there to display the most extraordinary preaching and miracle-working ministry we can imagine... the only perfect man that every lived... there was NOTHING He could not do... he healed the sick, cleansed the lepers, drove out demons, fed the 5000, walked on water, stilled the storm, raised the dead; he taught many things in parables, which clearly depicted the spiritual nature of the Kingdom of Heaven
8. Final week of Jesus' life:
 - a. Triumphal entry... riding on a donkey, He is acclaimed by all to be the Messiah, the Son of David
 - b. The cleansing of the Temple: Jesus, filled with the zeal of God, makes a whip and drives out all the thieves who have turned the temple into a wicked marketplace

- c. Jesus' enemies, bitterly shocked by His attacks, go on the offensive themselves
 - i) They demand to know His credentials... by what authority He was cleansing the temple; by what authority He was teaching in the temple
 - ii) They make plots against Him; terrified of the crowd on the one hand, terrified of the Romans on the other, they struggle to find some way, legally or illegally to have Jesus murdered

9. Matthew 22: Jesus' enemies organize and attack

- a. First the Pharisees and Herodians ask about taxation... ***“Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”*** The goal is to get Jesus in trouble with either the Romans or the crowd
- b. Then the Sadducees ask about the resurrection
- c. Then the teacher of the Law asks about the greatest commandment in the Law
- d. Now here in Matthew 23, Jesus goes on the attack
 - i) Three central roles in the OT: PROPHET PRIEST KING
 - ii) Jesus here is the classic prophet, declaring the word WOE over their case
 - iii) OT prophets used this word WOE as a terrifying warning of impending judgment

D. Overview

- 1. Who were the “Scribes and Pharisees”?? We met them in last week’s sermon, but let me repeat it briefly:
 - a. The Pharisees were a sect of the Jews who were extremely conscientious about keeping every detail of the Law; they believed that righteousness came from meticulously obeying every aspect of the Laws of Moses... and that they HAD obeyed every aspect
 - b. They taught a whole long list of traditions they had made up themselves based on the Law, and those traditions became MORE IMPORTANT than the Law itself... they believed they were SAVED by obeying those traditions
 - c. The “scribes” were responsible to copy the Law of Moses by hand; experts in the Law, they felt they were spiritually superior to everyone else

2. Matthew 23: Jesus' attack in a rhythmic cadence punctuated by one phrase over and over:

"Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites...!!"

Seven times in this one chapter, followed in every case by some specific aspect of their wickedness... the word WOE a word of prophetic JUDGMENT

Isaiah 3:11 Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them! They will be paid back for what their hands have done.

Isaiah 5... six times, the prophet proclaims "Woe" to people in Israel

Isaiah 5:20 Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,

Then amazingly adds the word to HIMSELF!!

Isaiah 6:5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

Here Jesus proclaims a SEVEN-FOLD woe on the Scribes and Pharisees... the number seven may be significant... it is a number of prophetic perfection or completion... like Jesus is saying "YOU ARE COMPLETELY CONDEMNED!!!!"

Seven-fold woe!!!!!!

3. Astonishing perceptiveness... Jesus probes their hearts for the true condition of their hearts

Luke 16:15 He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts."

- a. Again and again it is made clear that Jesus knows men's hearts

Matthew 9:4 Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?"

Matthew 12:25 Jesus knew their thoughts

- b. This is a heart exposure of these spiritual hypocrites
- c. Hypocrites = actors, those who appear to be one thing but are not
- d. At root is Jesus' ability to know the true condition of every man's heart... and it is clear that Judgment Day will be a matter of the HEART... the true motives of the HEART... what proceeds from the HEART

1 Corinthians 4:5 He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts.

Romans 2:16 the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ

4. Jesus has “eyes of fire”... tremble before Him!!!

Revelation 1:14-15 His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.

III. The Seven Woes

A. Woe for Shutting Seekers Out of Heaven

Vs. 13 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

1. Simply put... following them as spiritual leaders DID NOT LEAD to the Kingdom of Heaven

You yourselves do not enter...

a. Jesus calls them blind guides; He says to leave them

Matthew 15:14 Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit."

b. In another place, He makes it plain that their righteousness is insufficient to enter the Kingdom of Heaven

Matthew 5:20 I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

c. They reduced the Laws of God to a system of works established by the traditions of men; it was overwhelming and comprehensive, but it was doable (kind of, as long as you were willing to be a hypocrite)

d. AND it left the heart unchanged... the heart was unregenerate, and unrighteous

e. Thus they missed the point of the Law of God... it was designed to crush pride and make the sinner beg for mercy; the Scribes and Pharisees reduced it to a religious machinery that was designed to produce pride for the successful and despair for the unsuccessful

2. Legalism fails BEFORE GOD

- a. It may soothe your conscience
 - b. It may make you feel proud, religious, better than other people
 - c. It may bring order to your life and enable you to achieve very showy results
 - d. BUT it will inevitably damn your soul
3. There's another way to understand this saying... that these men made themselves the JUDGES of who was going to heaven or not, who was righteous or not
- a. They "Shut the Kingdom of Heaven in men's faces" by saying "You will NEVER be acceptable to God... you are already forever disqualified"
 - b. They offer NO HOPE to a prostitute or a tax collector; NO HOPE to a murder or a thief dying on the cross
 - c. There was NO GRACE in their system, and thus they shut the Kingdom of Heaven in men's faces
4. For people who were TRYING TO ENTER, the Scribes and Pharisees were ministers of hopelessness; they were also BITTER ENEMIES of Christianity... fighting it every step of the way
- a. As a Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus was zealous in his persecution of the early church in the name of Judaism; obtaining letters from the chief priests to the synagogues in Damascus and travelling there to crush the Christian movement
 - b. So also, after Saul converted, the Jews were zealous in their efforts to stop Paul from preaching to the Gentiles

1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 the Jews, ¹⁵ who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men ¹⁶ in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

5. Notice that again Jesus clearly warns them that they themselves are not entering, but are on the outside!!! A clear warning to them to repent

B. Woe for Making Hellish Disciples

Vs. 15 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.

1. Continuing the previous theme, Jesus addresses their ZEAL FOR CONVERTS... they exert themselves with great zeal to gather disciples after themselves, but they cannot lead them to heaven
2. Notice the level of their zeal: they *travel over land and sea to win a single convert*... few of us can match the religious zeal of legalists
 - a. At that time such travel would have been very dangerous and costly
 - b. In their legalism and zeal for their own spiritual achievement, these Pharisees were amazing
 - c. So it is today:
 - i) 21st century Islamic jihadists train for years in the Koran and in terrorist tactics, then lay down their lives in a bloody offering to Allah
 - ii) Mormon young people give two years of their lives to travel to the ends of the earth to make converts for their cult... they deprive themselves of modern comforts and subject themselves to persecution and even death for the sake of a false religion concocted by Joseph Smith; the LDS church has 53,000 missionaries worldwide, compared to 5000 SBC missionaries
 - iii) Jehovah's Witnesses spend hour after hour knocking on doors to win converts to their perverted system of legalism
3. The real tragedy: THEY MAKE HIM TWICE AS MUCH A SON OF HELL AS THEY ARE
 - a. "Son of hell" = a person belonging to, worthy of, and bound for hell
 - b. Even worse, they have been TRAINED for this by the Pharisees
4. Zeal for evangelism is no certain mark of salvation
 - a. You can be a "soul-winner" and still wind up in hell
 - b. Our works don't save us

C. Woe for Being Blind Guides

vs. 16-22 "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' ¹⁷ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? ¹⁸ You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' ¹⁹ You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰

*Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹
 And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it.
²² And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits
 on it.*

1. Already mentioned this title, “Blind guides”
2. They seek to guide people without the “light of the world”... they have no spiritual eyesight
3. After the healing of the blind man, the Pharisees and chief priests call him in and insult him and attack him, and eventually throw him out of the Jewish faith
4. Jesus attacked them for it

John 9:39-41 Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." ⁴⁰ Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?" ⁴¹ Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.

5. Their blindness displayed here: swearing of oaths
 - a. “I swear by the temple of God that I will be in Jerusalem by the Passover”... it turns out that oath means nothing; but if he had said “I swear by the gold of the temple”, now THAT oath is binding
 - b. The swearing of oaths is commonplace in Judaism... the rabbinic scholars had a whole system of rules and regulations about this practice... it amounted to the “fine print” of a verbal contract... a way to GET OUT of doing what you said you would do
 - c. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus discouraged the whole practice of swearing oaths

Matthew 5:33-37 "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' ³⁴ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

6. Central Flaw: Blind to the God of Truth

- a. At core, a dishonest heart makes a “read the fine print” oath... one who swears by something, and then later says “It isn’t valid because I didn’t swear the exact, verbally correct oath”
- b. Jesus’ basic point: God hold us to our promises, our commitments, our words...
- c. AND human religious leaders should not play tricky little games with differences between the temple and the gold of the temple; or the altar or the gift on the altar
- d. The Pharisees were blind guides because they could not see that central reality of the universe: there is a God in heaven who keeps ALL His promises and holds us to all our words

Matthew 23:21-22 he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. ²² And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

- e. A true spiritual guide has eyes of faith, the eyes of his heart enlightened to see God as He really is... the God of truth who demands that we speak and live the truth as well
- D. Woe for Inverting God’s Priorities: Tithing Mint Leaves and Neglecting Justice, Mercy, Faithfulness (vs. 23-24)
- E. Woe for External Cleanness But Internal Defilement (vs. 25-28)
- F. Woe for Honoring Dead Prophets While Murdering Living Ones (vs. 29-32)

IV. Applications

A. Assess Your Own Heart

- 1. The Scribes and Pharisees were hypocrites... appearing godly and attractive on the outside, but truly corrupt inwardly
- 2. Everything they did was done for men to see
- 3. They loved the perks of spirituality without any of its true power
- 4. What about us???
- 5. The hypocritical heart is only concerned with the APPEARANCE of righteousness, not the reality
- 6. The true gospel heart CRIES OUT for inner purity

Matthew 5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Matthew 5:8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

7. Thomas Brooks:

The hypocrite's only care is to keep his outward life from defilement. But the sincere Christian's care is mainly to keep his heart from defilement; for he very well knows, that if he can but keep his heart clean—he shall with more ease keep his life clean. If the fountain is kept pure—the streams will run pure. The heart is the spring of all actions, and therefore every action is as the spring is, from whence it flows; if the spring is good—the action is good which flows from it; if the spring is evil, the action is evil which flows from it.

Hypocrites are all for the outside; they wash the platters and the cups, and beautify the tombs—like an adulteress whose care is to paint a fair face upon a foul heart.

But a sincere Christian, though he has a great concern for the well-ordering of his outward life—yet his main business and work is about his heart—

"Oh that this ignorant heart were but more enlightened!

Oh that this proud heart were but more humble!

Oh that this profane heart were but more holy!

Oh that this earthly heart were but more heavenly!

Oh that this unbelieving heart were but more believing!

Oh that this passionate heart were but more meek!

Oh that this carnal heart were but more spiritual!

Oh that this vain heart were but more serious!

Oh that this dull heart were but more quickened!

Oh that this dead heart were but more enlivened!

Oh that this lukewarm heart were but more zealous for God, and Christ, and the gospel, and the great concerns of eternity!"

8. Is this the cry of your heart? Then let Christ work these things in you!!

9. If this is not the cry of your fear, then FEAR the status of a Gospel Hypocrite... come to Christ and allow His blood to atone for your sins... the applause of the audience on how righteous we are will not help us at all on Judgment Day
10. Crave the REALITY, not the COUNTERFEIT