

Matthew 23D

- Today we conclude our study of the seven woes Jesus pronounced upon the religious leaders of Israel in Chapter 23
 - We'll dispense with a review for today to dive back in, starting with Jesus' fifth woe in v.25

Matt. 23:25 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.

Matt. 23:26 "You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.

- Once again, Jesus calls these men hypocrites, and last week Jesus condemned them as false teachers who selectively obeyed the word of God
 - When the Bible uses the term false teachers, it's not merely referring to the false things they teach
 - After all, anyone can teach something false from time to time, but that by itself doesn't make a person a false teacher
 - The Bible uses the word "false" to describe the teacher himself, not just his teaching
 - So a false teacher is someone who is false, someone other than who they claim to be
 - Which is why Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites because they falsely claimed to know the Bible and to have spiritual insight
 - They portrayed themselves before others as godly and pious
 - The Pharisees convinced generations of Israel that they were experts on God and the most qualified to instruct Israel
 - In reality, they were far from God, so they didn't possess what they claimed to offer others
 - They were unbelievers, and therefore they were false teachers because they were not who they claimed to be
 - And that's what made them so dangerous...people were attracted to their outward appearance yet without knowing it was a lie

- When we encounter people like this, we drop our guard and assume that anything these teachers tell us must be correct
- Their outward appearance convinces us they are genuine and trustworthy...but inside they are very different
- So in this fifth woe, Jesus condemns those men for selective piety...for caring only for their outward appearances while ignoring inward realities
 - To make His point, Jesus uses a simple but effective illustration of dirty dishes to describe these men
 - In v.25 Jesus says these men clean only the outside of their dishes, leaving the inside dirty
 - Jesus is referring to the way Pharisaic Judaism placed importance only on the external behaviors of a person
 - Their system of religion placed no importance on the quality of a person's character or their inward godliness
 - So Pharisees could be scrupulous about keeping rituals while at the same time they gave no attention to their inner sin
 - So imagine sitting down to eat at a restaurant (a distant memory for most of us, I know), and the waiter comes to set your table
 - At first glance, your dishes appear spotless, but as you inspect them more closely you notice the inside of your cup is filthy
 - So you complain to the waiter saying the dishes aren't clean
 - To your shock, he dismisses your concern by pointing out that the outside was perfectly clean therefore the inside didn't matter
 - How would you respond to the waiter? You would tell him you demand a dish that is clean on both the inside and the outside
 - And if you had to choose only one side, you would certainly choose a clean inside over a clean outside
 - That's Jesus' point to the Pharisees...they were practicing selective piety
 - They chose to focus on only one side of the cup, so to speak, claiming that the cleaning the outside was good enough
 - And to make matters worse, they picked the wrong side of the cup

- Jesus compares cleaning the outside of the cup to the ritualistic traditions and practices of Pharisaic Judaism
 - Pharisaic Judaism was an exercise in making the outside of a person – the other appearance – as “clean” as possible
 - From their clothing to their public prayers to how and what they ate, Pharisees followed rituals as a means of godliness
 - They fussed over how they wore their hair and beard and how many times they washed before a meal and many other things
 - They did all these things because they believed that these rituals made them acceptable to God
 - Pharisees believed their scrupulous devotion to external religious rituals made them pleasing to God
 - And they did all this without giving a thought to their inward character, to their true inner righteousness
 - Jesus said inside these men were full of robbery and self-indulgence
 - Robbery is forcibly taking someone else’s possessions and self-indulgence is obeying your lusts
 - And last week we saw how these men were lovers of money and used religion to steal from people including taking from widows
 - That’s the robbery and self-indulgence Jesus is talking about, and it was indicative of their corrupt, sinful character
 - So if we could look into their hearts, spiritually speaking, we would see a cup filled with moldy filth
 - Yet they would have turned the “cup” over to show us the outside bragging about how shiny and clean it looked
 - And that’s why Jesus condemned these men: they were experts in religious ritual but they cared nothing about inward character
- And of course this kind of hypocrisy isn’t unique to Pharisees, since everyone including Christians can choose to put on an act in front of other people
 - We too can pretend to be better than we truly are to gain others’ approval, and I suspect the day we do it most often is Sunday morning

- But because we have the Holy Spirit living in us convicting us when we sin, we remain fully aware of these games we play
- We know God knows our true self, and He judges us for who we are inside, so we feel may guilt over our hypocrisy
- And hopefully that leads us to drop the pretense and submit to the Spirit so that we become the person we pretend to be
- But for Pharisees, living a pretend life of external religious ritual wasn't an act...it was the means to obtaining internal righteousness
 - They truly believed their rules resulted in making them more holy and righteous before God
 - It's like thinking that if we make barking or meowing sounds long enough, we will eventually turn into a dog or a cat
 - As silly as that sounds, it's what all false religions is trying to do... to use external ritual to force inward change and it doesn't work
- We're learning the difference between ritual and relationship
 - Before you have a true relationship with God through faith in Jesus, religion is nothing more than external ritual
 - But religious ritual has no power to change the inside of a person
 - No more than making barking sounds will change you into a dog
 - Our spiritual nature can only be changed by a work of the Spirit through our faith in Jesus Christ

[Titus 3:4](#) But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, [Titus 3:5](#) He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, [Titus 3:6](#) whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior,

- As Paul explained, because of the kindness and mercy of God, we were saved not because we accomplished external rituals
 - But instead because He renewed us by the Holy Spirit through our faith in Jesus Christ

- Being born again in his way is the inward cleansing we needed... it's making the inside of our "cup" clean, which only God can do
- But after God makes our inside clean, Paul says He continues the renewal process in us by the Holy Spirit
 - That renewing process, which the Bible calls sanctification, is the process of working that inward cleanliness outward
 - The righteousness God has placed inside us by His Spirit will show itself over time through changes in our words and actions
 - By the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, who we have become inside begins to influence who we are outside
- That's the power of a true relationship with God through Jesus, and it's completely the opposite of how external ritual religion tries to work
 - Those who practice religion hope that performing rituals will produce inward positive change and please some god
 - But following rituals can only create outward changes, they leave the inside unchanged
 - It's cleaning the outside of our "cup" and claiming that will automatically clean the inside
- But the Lord doesn't just judge the outside of our cups...He looks at the inside too
 - And if you want to clean the inside and the outside of the cup, you must enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ
 - By your faith, your spirit will be cleansed and so will your entire body
 - You can clean the outside of a cup and leave the inside untouched
 - But you can't clean the inside without the water spilling over the side and cleaning the outside as well
- So these men promoted selective piety, ritual instead of relationship, and Jesus condemns them for it with His fifth woe...which leads us to the sixth woe

[Matt. 23:27](#) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.

[Matt. 23:28](#) “So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

- The sixth woe appears to be similar to the fifth woe, because Jesus uses another illustration of outward appearance vs. inward reality
 - But in the sixth woe Jesus is condemning these men for a separate error: they contributed to the lack of righteousness in others
 - Jesus calls these men whitewashed tombs, perfectly clean and attractively painted
 - But inside, the tombs were unclean, full of dead men’s bones
 - To understand Jesus’ critique, we need to understand a practice in Jerusalem during Jesus’ day
 - Every year at Passover, thousands and perhaps millions of Jewish pilgrims would descend upon the city of Jerusalem
 - They came walking from all directions and since the city couldn’t accommodate them all, they slept on neighboring hillsides
 - In the Law of Moses, a Jew would be barred from participating in the feast of Passover if that person was unclean
 - For example, Numbers 19:16 says if a Jew came into contact with a grave, that person was considered unclean for seven days
 - And the hillsides outside the city of Jerusalem were covered in graves in that day, as they still are today
 - So it became customary in the weeks before each Passover for Jews to go out into the hills to paint every tomb with a fresh coat of white paint
 - Not only did it make the graves look nice, but it also made them easier to spot by traveling pilgrims
 - That way Jews could avoid stumbling over the graves and being disqualified from participating in the Passover
- So that’s the scenario Jesus is using to describe the Pharisees, they are like those tombs that were whitewashed right before every Passover

- They have whitewashed themselves in the sense that they have made themselves look attractive and clean on the outside
 - No one looking at them could know how unclean they truly were on the inside, because we can't see the inside of a grave
 - But Jesus says on the inside, these men were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness
- But the real problem was that their attractive exterior led many in Israel to come to these men for religious guidance
 - And as they did, the people were unknowingly walking on graves, so to speak, and therefore they were becoming defiled
 - The Pharisees led other Jews to become unclean in the sense that they led people away from the truth of God
- And by defiling the people, the Pharisees disqualified the nation of Israel from participating in the true Passover
 - Remember, this scene is taking place barely 2 days before the Passover celebration
 - And on that day Jesus will get up on a cross to die for the sins of Israel and the world
 - This is the year the Passover will be fulfilled, when Israel will be set free from their sins, yet most of Israel will miss it
 - In effect, the nation of Israel will have stumbled over the whitewashed graves of the Pharisees and been disqualified
- So the sixth woe against the Pharisees was for being a defiling influence on the nation of Israel causing them to miss their Messiah at Passover
 - They were like tombs full of death that a generation of Israel stumbled over and became disqualified
 - And for that offense, Jesus says they are to be condemned
- Before we move to the final woe, let's reflect on these two sins for a moment
 - These two were emphasizing ritual over relationship and allowing our own hypocrisy to become a stumbling block to others
 - Christians can also fall prey to substituting ritual for relationship and becoming a negative influence on another person's walk

- We could preach for a month of Sundays on these two topics, I know, and maybe one day I will
- Just give some thought to where ritual fits in your walk with Jesus...is it a compliment to your relationship or a way to avoid relationship?
 - The Christian church has precious few prescribed rituals, and in fact I can think of only a handful we're given in the Bible
 - Baptism, communion, regular gatherings, and laying on of hands are the only ritualistic requirements of the New Testament
- But over the centuries we've added many more rituals, and although ritual isn't wrong in itself, it can become a crutch
 - If we don't have a relationship with Jesus by faith yet we want to appear to have one, we may adopt empty rituals instead
 - Or maybe we do have faith in Jesus, but we don't want to spend the time or energy to invest in our relationship
 - So we repeat a routine of rituals every Sunday and we call it faith, rather than engaging in prayer, study and following the Lord
- You may be a Christian who is living out rituals rather than enjoying a relationship with the Lord, and you know in a sense you're faking it
 - You can feel your hypocrisy, and perhaps you just assumed that's what everyone feels...but that isn't true
 - You're missing something important...and maybe that something is Jesus Himself
 - Maybe you need to get right with God through a genuine faith in Jesus?
 - Or maybe you have saving faith, but you've never let the Lord become a major part of your life, so you're going through the motions
 - Maybe you do rituals to please your spouse or your parents
 - Maybe you're doing it out of obligation and guilt or because you have some superstitious hope God will bless you for it
 - You need to mature out of ritual and into investing in a relationship

- Either way, this church can help you move from ritual to relationship, and I hope you will reach out to us for help
- If we go on practicing ritual instead of relationship, we run the risk of repeating the sin of the sixth woe by causing others to stumble
 - You might get so good at the ritual that others see your external piety as their guide and model
 - You become their whitewashed tomb full of hypocrisy, attracting people to the wrong thing and defiling them
 - Scripture indicates this is the greater sin, which should give us all incentive to put hypocrisy aside and seek authentic relationship
 - If not for our own sake, for the sake of those around us
- Now let's finish with the seventh woe, and as we do we'll put all seven together

[Matt. 23:29](#) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous,

[Matt. 23:30](#) and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'

[Matt. 23:31](#) "So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.

[Matt. 23:32](#) "Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers.

[Matt. 23:33](#) "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?

- Once again, Jesus draws upon a Jewish practice of His day involving tombs to make a comparison to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees
 - The Lord sent the prophets to Israel during times of disobedience to correct and teach them, which didn't make them popular men
 - In fact, being a prophet to Israel was a thankless and dangerous job
 - Prophets were almost always killed by those they came to serve
 - The writer of Hebrews describes the fate of the prophets this way:

[Heb. 11:32](#) And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets,

[Heb. 11:33](#) who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,

[Heb. 11:34](#) quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

[Heb. 11:35](#) Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection;

[Heb. 11:36](#) and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment.

[Heb. 11:37](#) They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated

[Heb. 11:38](#) (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

- They were universally hated and martyred for bringing the truth to Israel
- That's quite a recruiting pitch for becoming a prophet, isn't it? It helps us understand why Jonah ran away from the job
- But the Pharisees declared that had they been the religious leaders of those days, they would have defended the prophets
 - In that day, the Pharisees had designated certain places in Israel as the place of the graves of the Old Testament prophets
 - Some of these burial locations were probably accurate while others were likely just tradition
- And the Pharisees made quite a show of honoring the graves of these men by building great monuments around them
 - They said that when Israel rose up against the prophets to kill them, the Pharisees would have opposed the people
 - In other words, they claimed that Israel's history would have been different had they been alive at that time
- But Jesus says in v.31 that by their claims, they are testifying against themselves by acknowledging they are responsible for Israel today
 - These men were now in a position to direct the people of Israel concerning the prophets of that day

- They could direct the people to receive the prophet John and Jesus, the Messiah Himself
- So if they were so sure they would have sided with Isaiah, then surely they will direct Israel to embrace those Isaiah foretold?
- But they didn't and in fact they sought to kill both, just as their forefathers did in their day
- So even as they publicly embraced the memory of the martyred prophets, they were leading the nation of Israel to reject their Messiah
 - It was the absolute worst kind of hypocrisy, and Jesus condemns them for it
 - In vs.32-33 Jesus says they are filling up the measure of the guilt of their fathers, the religious leaders of earlier days
 - Their guilt will exceed that of those who killed the prophets, the ones they say they would have opposed, and they will enter hell
- So the sin of the seventh woe against the Pharisees was for thinking themselves righteous and better than the people
 - The sin of self-righteousness isn't just a matter of pride...it also inoculates a person from seeking God's mercy
 - If you don't believe you're a sinner, then you won't embrace God's offer of forgiveness when it comes
 - If you don't think you need saving, then you won't accept the Savior when He comes
- And that's the issue at the heart of the seventh woe...these men couldn't see themselves honestly so they couldn't see their need for Jesus either
 - They were blind to their own predicament, so they wouldn't acknowledge Jesus' call to repent and believe
 - It's why they objected to Jesus spending time with the prostitutes and tax collectors
 - They expected the Messiah, when He came to Israel, would honor them above all others
 - So when Jesus dismissed their hypocrisy and honored the down and out, it convinced them that Jesus was a fraud

- Notice Jesus repeatedly calls them blind guides, and the thing they were most blind to was their own sin
 - As Jesus said in John 9, the Pharisees said “We see”, meaning they said they were already righteous
 - And therefore, Jesus left them in their blindness
- So now let’s end this section by standing back to look at all seven of the woes in this chapter
 - Remember, we said that they formed a chiasm, a literary structure commonly found in Scripture
 - It’s an arrangement of ideas in a certain pattern that helps the reader follow the development of an argument or story
 - In this chapter, there were seven woes, and the woes are paired up so that the compliment one another
 - The seven woes can be summarized this way:
 1. Believing a gospel of works
 2. Promoting a religion of works
 3. Using religious ritual for personal gain
 4. Selective obedience to God's word
 5. Emphasizing ritual over relationship
 6. Making others unrighteous
 7. Believing themselves righteous
 - The first and the last woe are connected in thought, as are the 2nd and 6th, as well as the 3rd and 5th, leaving the 4th woe by itself
 - When you arrange the list in this way, it forms a shape of the Greek letter chi (X)
 - The pairing of each idea with another helps us work out the interpretation of each point knowing they must match up
 - But the main benefit of chiasms is in pointing us to the author’s main idea or central thought

- The main point of the chiasm is the unmatched idea in the middle of the **X**
- As some say, the point is the “point,” and the point in this chiasm was the way the Pharisees’ manipulated the word of God
- The fourth woe was against the Pharisees’ selective obedience to the word of God, as they chose to tithe on mint but ignored justice and mercy
 - They were selectively determining which parts of the law they would follow and which parts they ignored
 - And once you starting picking and choosing what you will follow in God’s word, you will inevitably cherry pick
 - Cherry picking means selecting only the things you like, just as you only pick the fruit that looks good to you
 - So if the Bible says we can’t do something we want to do or it commands we do something we don’t want to do, we ignore that rule
 - But when the Bible says something we prefer, we do it enthusiastically to draw attention to our piety
 - It’s as if we’re trying extra hard at the rules we will keep in order to make up for the ones we want to ignore
 - Cherry picking the Bible is simply a game played by hypocrites living in rebellion to God’s authority
 - No one obeys the Bible perfectly, of course, but that wasn’t Jesus’ concern here
 - He didn’t condemn these men because they tried and failed to obey the Bible
 - He condemned them for ignoring the Bible when it suited them
- And that’s the core issue that lead to all the other woes in this list
 - It’s why this point sits at the center of the chiasm
 - Because how you approach the word of God will determine how you live and whether you obey the Lord
 - Do you come to the word of God sincerely with an open heart to accept what you find in it?

- Or do you seek to manipulate it to allow you to get your way in life?
- The Pharisees were master manipulators of the word of God, and they played their game to ensure they could have their cake and eat it too
 - They gained praise from people for being scrupulous men of God, while still being able to live as they desired
 - They prayed on Saturday morning and partied on Saturday night
 - They pointed to the word of God when it supported what they desired and they ignored it when it didn't
- There are three ways we can live in respect to the Bible, but only one will bring us into greater spiritual maturity and godliness
 - We can ignore the Bible, which seems to be the path most Christians take
 - We treat it like a dictionary on our bookshelf...we only take it down when we have a question and then back it goes
 - I call this Bible bingo, and those who play Bible bingo learn very little, and as a result they usually grow very little
- The second group engages in some level of study regularly, but it's not a search for truth...it's a search for affirmation
 - This group has pre-conceived ideas about God and faith and many other things they bring with them to study
 - And they aren't interested in having their minds changed about anything, especially if it involves personal correction
 - For them, the Bible exists just to confirm their views, and should they stumble upon something contradictory, they ignore it
 - I call this cherry picking the Bible, and it merely produces pride and hardens the heart against conviction
- Finally, there are Christians who make study of God's word a life-long pursuit, and they enter into the experience expecting to make changes as a result
 - They expect God to change their minds, and change their behaviors and ultimately change their hearts

- They know they will be convicted at times, and when they are, they are ready to repent
 - They expect to be corrected at times, and when they are, will embrace the truth gladly
 - They expected to be amazed and intrigued and maybe even confused by what they learn, but they aren't worried by any of it
 - They plan to be engaged in study for the rest of their lives, so it will all work out for their eternal good in the end
- I call this group truth seekers, and they are the ones Jesus is seeking, because they are the opposite of the Pharisees and all like them
 - How you approach the word of God is key in determining who you will become in Christ