

August 25, 2019

“The Seven Woes”  
Matthew 23:13-36

FCF: Dislike of uncomfortable truth

**PROPOSITION:** (magnet) Seeing the stakes, Jesus says some hard things.  
(anchor) We need to take Him seriously and listen.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

We have an instinctive dislike for uncomfortable truth. Astronomers tell us that we had a recent close call with a city-killer asteroid. “Wow, that could happen.” Trips to Cherokee, NC remind me of the Trail of Tears. “I’m a citizen of the nation behind that.” Ecologists warn of the massive amounts of plastic building up in our oceans. “My buying habits contribute to that.” And then I am confronted with injuries I have caused. “My foolishness, fear, and pride did that.”

We have an instinctive dislike for uncomfortable truth. Jesus is not shy of speaking such things to us. Not that He delights in making uncomfortable. But He would have us to be free.

**SCRIPTURE READING:** [Matthew 23:13-36](#)**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION****SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

It’s hard to know who to trust these days. With an imbalanced ratio between our integrity and technology, we have the growing problem of “fake news” ([READ “How Fake News...”](#)):

*The Wall Street Journal* reported a story about how fake news stories and photos can have a powerful impact on shaping our minds and hearts. The story quoted Randi Romo, a female photographer whose photograph at an immigration rally had been manipulated by a Russia-backed account. The fake photo conveyed an anti-immigration message while the original photo clearly conveyed a pro-immigration message. Ms. Romo had a powerful warning for all of us: "We are living in the greatest era of information access. People will watch cat videos endlessly, but they won't take a minute to ascertain whether what they are being told is true or not."

This calls for discernment. We have to ask ourselves, “Is this true?” There are different ways to get at that. One is this. “Where did this come from?” Put another way, consider the source.

What do we learn of Jesus from Matthew? He is powerful in His miracles. Merciful in His healings. Patient with the disciples. Wise in His teachings. Courageous in confrontation. Honest in His willingness to say the hard thing. So, even if we are just getting to know Him, we most likely have a sense that we can trust Him. We can take Jesus at His word. He will not steer us wrong in any way. This is vitally important to keep in mind as we delve into this text.

Seeing the stakes, Jesus says some hard things - some very hard things. We need to take Him seriously and listen. “What hard things do we see here?” At least these three. First, the tragedy of dead religion. Second, the sobriety of Jesus’ anger. And then, third, the reality of eternal judgment. These are some hard things. And we need to take Jesus seriously and listen.

**I. THE TRAGEDY OF DEAD RELIGION**

First, the tragedy of dead religion. By tragedy, I mean a drama of suffering, an unhappy ending, a storyline made all the more painful because of what could and should have been.

*A) What Jesus Says*

Let’s start with what Jesus says, the seven woes spoken against the scribes and Pharisees.

## 1. Initial observations

Some initial observations. A “woe” points to a miserable condition of which someone may not be aware. The number seven is one of completion. And Jesus pronounces seven woes here.

## 2. Breaking it down

Let’s break them down. I’m going to do this in groups. The first two woes (vv.13-15) - in their privileged public role, these men have spread their poison and so infected others. Woes three and four (vv.16-24) - a loss of perspective, focusing upon the minors of God’s Word and ignoring its majors. Woes five and six (vv.25-28) - a love of the outward forms of the faith with little interest in a transformed heart. Finally, the seventh woe (vv.29-36) - in their scheming, they had shown their treacherous ancestry. The tone is high and hot. Likely, Jesus was shouting by the end.

### *B) Why Jesus Says It*

What led to this? What was going on? What would cause Jesus to say such things?

#### 1. They were blind

Two concerns come out plainly. First, their blindness. Jesus says this five times - blind guides, blind fools, blind men, blind Pharisee. These experts in the Law were unable to see the truth.

#### 2. They were hypocrites

They were blind. And they were hypocrites. Jesus says this six times. To be a hypocrite is to be a play actor, someone who pretends to be something they are not. However conscious or aware of this they were, there was a yawning chasm between their full claims and their empty lives.

This is the tragedy of dead religion. And Jesus pronounces seven woes upon it.

### *Application:*

Which leaves us with some questions to consider. First, what audience, whose presence, do I live for? For God or other people? Second, am I consistent? Think of civility. Is the tone of my voice the same with the person on the phone as it is with my family when I hang up? Or honesty. You’re at a restaurant and notice the kid’s meal discount for those “12 and under.” Your thirteen-year-old looks young. What then? Third, is my religious practice the same in public as in private? Is prayer only for set times or am I humbly dependent on the Lord through the day?

Seeing the stakes, Jesus says some hard things. We need to take Him seriously and listen.

## **II. THE SOBRIETY OF JESUS’ ANGER**

Note the tragedy of dead religion. And then the sobriety of Jesus’ anger. By sobriety, I mean a seriousness, gravity, and severity. He could not have said these things in a passionless way. His volume had to have been rising, grabbing the attention of more and more onlookers.

### *A) Not What We Are Used To*

This is not how we are used to thinking about Jesus. Or really about anger itself.

#### 1. Our experience

Anger is often associated with abuse, whether physical or verbal. It’s rarely righteous, often tied to aggression. Think of our expressions. We fly off the handle, blow our top, or lose our cool.

## 2. Jesus' record

But not so with Jesus. His anger is measured, focused, and purposeful. And never about things done or said to Him but others. Think to the cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the tree. Or the parables of the two sons, the tenants, the wedding feast. Measured, focused, purposeful.

### *B) But Tied to His Holy Love*

This anger, this fury and passion, was bound and inextricably tied to His holy love.

#### 1. The wrong question

We may ask, "What kind of loving God is filled with wrath?" But that's the wrong question.

#### 2. The right question

The right question is really, "What kind of loving God is *not* filled with wrath?" Think with me.

#### *Illustration:*

Perhaps you saw the viral video taken at Cades Cove last month of an unidentified man coming within feet of the cubs of a mama black bear, provoking her to charge him. Park officials said the bear would not be put down. If anything, they would cite this man with a misdemeanor. Why? There is no confusion between this bear's love of her cubs and her fury at this man.

#### *Application:*

And we don't need to be confused about Jesus on this either. That said, we do need to ask ourselves some questions about our own fits of anger - whether silent or aloud. Why are we angry? Where is this coming from? Who or what are we defending? Is it truly righteous?

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### **III. THE REALITY OF ETERNAL JUDGMENT**

Which takes us to the final point, the reality of eternal judgment. By reality, we need to address a myth. "What I believe about a thing determines whether it's true." No, it doesn't. You wouldn't say that about bank balances, blood pressure, or batting averages. Why then with this?

#### *A) Jesus' Words*

Many would say, "I can't believe in hell and a loving God." But what does Jesus say?

#### 1. In this passage

(**READ Matthew 23:15**) A "child of hell" is someone destined to go there. (**READ Matthew 23:33**) This conveys a condemnation because of a judgment rendered. These are Jesus' words.

#### 2. Elsewhere

Do you know who speaks of hell more than anyone else in the Bible? It isn't John or Paul. It's Jesus. And His intent is never to frighten or fascinate. It is to move us, to provoke us to repent.

#### *B) Jesus' Love*

Jesus' words on hell are worth considering. As is the way His love shines through here.

#### 1. To warn of it

First of all, He loves us enough to warn us. To know of coming disaster and eternal danger and then not to speak? What would that be? Jesus loves enough to warn of this - even His enemies.

2. To go through it

But Jesus also loves us enough to go through it. To understand hell is to get a glimpse of what Jesus did for us on the cross. Yes, His body was destroyed in a horrible way. But infinitely worse, His soul was abandoned. He was forsaken by His Father. That's the worst sort of pain.

This is the reality of eternal judgment. Jesus both speaks to it and goes through it.

*Illustration:*

Tim Keller cites the great British preacher, Martyn Lloyd-Jones on this point. Lloyd-Jones imagines a man paying his friend's bill. The friend has no idea how to respond until he knows how great the debt was. As Lloyd-Jones says, ([READ quote](#)) "Until I know how much he paid, I don't know whether to shake his hand or fall down on the ground and kiss his feet."

*Application:*

Think with me. The reality of hell is how you can know the reality of Jesus' love. The reality of hell is how you can know the reality of Jesus' love. But the reality of hell is also how we can stand against injustice. We are born with a desire for justice. What do we do with that? We can suppress it, living in denial. Or we can be activists, living for it until we finally burn out. Or we can believe what Jesus says, knowing that a day is coming in which all wrongs will be made right. Which impels and frees us to do what we can now, leaving the results in His hands.

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**CONCLUSION:**

Perhaps we need to stop and ask this question: What were we expecting? Think of how Jesus is described, some the astonishing titles given to Him as found in the Bible ([READ list](#)):

Alpha and Omega, Author and Perfector of our Faith, Bread of Life, Chief Cornerstone, Good Shepherd, Great High Priest, I Am, Immanuel, King of Kings, Lamb of God, Light of the World, Messiah, Redeemer, True Vine, Son of God, Son of Man, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Did we think He would always agree with us? That He would not contradict us? That this was a relationship of peers and equals? Oh, thank God, no! We need to be contradicted. And, given His love for us, there is an inevitability to it. Just as there is in any real relationship.

Some of you have heard me tell of Lucy, a German Shepherd we rescued. In her eyes, I can do no wrong. I have a shirt that says, "Be the person your dog thinks you are." Like her, that's warm and fuzzy. It's also impossible. Because, unless I'm late with her food, Lucy will not contradict me. Her warm fuzzy assessment of me is not enough. It's not real or true. It's not the whole picture. It's what you can have with a dog but not in a person-to-person relationship.

What were we expecting? With Jesus, we have all this to the nth degree. For He knows. And so seeing the stakes, He says some hard things. We need to take Him seriously and listen.

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