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Matthew 23:1-39

Legalism, Hypocrisy, God's Judgment, and Grace

D. A. Carson is a Baptist theologian, author, and seminary professor that I've learned much from over the years. In several places, Carson has reflected on a conversation he had with a friend who grew up in a Mennonite context, and who gave this summary of his Mennonite heritage:

“One generation of Mennonites *believed* the gospel and held as well that there were certain social, economic, and political entailments. The next generation *assumed* the gospel, but identified with the entailments. The following generation *denied* the gospel: the “entailments” became everything.’ Assuming this sort of scheme for evangelicalism, one suspects that large swaths of the movement are lodged in the second step, with some drifting toward the third.”¹

What he's saying is simple, yet profound: the first generation *believed* the gospel. They preached the gospel regularly, and believed it. They also preached about the implications of the gospel towards good works, but they centered on the gospel as the main thing. But the second generation *assumed* the gospel - they believed it, but they no longer centered on it; they no longer majored on preaching the gospel - they just assumed it; instead they majored on its implications - they majored on practical applications and works. The next generation *denied* the gospel - they lost it altogether. They no longer assumed or believed the gospel - the gospel that had been assumed had now become replaced with a legalistic, works-based view of the Christian life - and therefore, works-based view of salvation. What is assumed in one generation is lost in the next. A church can go from being *gospel preaching and gospel centered* to to *gospel-oblivious, works-based and legalistic* just like that!

We cannot just *assume* that everyone in our families, churches, and communities knows the gospel. Yes, the gospel rightly motivates us to do many good works and live holy lives! But we can never *just focus* on its applications and good works without *first grounding them in the Word and the gospel*. We can't settle for man-centered, self-help sermons; we can never just settle for practical lists of do's and don't - because that will never save anyone! We can't settle

¹ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers*, p.26.

for a works-based view of the Christian life or legalistic church culture. We cannot assume the gospel, or we will lose it.

Why is this the case? *It is because we do not drift towards faith and grace.* The default mode of man-made religion is *legalism*. If we're not careful, we *will drift away from the gospel*. If we're not careful, we *will drift towards legalism, towards dead, empty religion*. Because the temptation towards legalism, dead religiosity, and hypocrisy lies inside of all of our hearts - and therefore, inside every church. And this is why we must be *relentlessly intentional* about preaching the gospel every week; every day, even, to ourselves and each other! We must be intentional about centering *everything we do* on Jesus Christ! This is why we gather as the church every week, to read the Bible, pray, and sing songs that praise the Lord for who He is, what He has done, and who we are *by His grace in Christ!* This is why our steady diet of preaching in this church is going through books of the Bible, one passage at a time. This is why I make it my goal in every sermon to show us *the gospel of Christ* from every passage - to show us our sin, the absolute hopelessness of anyone ever being good enough through our own works and religious efforts; to show us the glory of what Christ has done in His life, death, and resurrection, and the glorious good news that we can be saved completely by grace, if we simply trust in Jesus, bow the knee to Him in faith, and follow Him!

This is why we can never tire of the gospel; we never graduate from it. This is why the gospel can never get old: because if it does, and we move on from Jesus to something else, then *we will be in danger of moving away from the Lord and towards Hell.*

Therefore, we need to examine our own hearts and be on guard against *drifting away from the gospel towards works-based religion*. And that's why we need the words of Jesus in *Matthew 23:1-39*. In this passage, Jesus gives a scathing rebuke against the "scribes and pharisees," the religious leaders of Israel, and yet He calls them, repeatedly, "hypocrites." He warns the people against following them, then gives seven "woes," seven pronouncements of judgment, before lamenting over the unbelief of Jerusalem. And in this passage, we're invited to examine our own hearts of the same pride, legalism, hypocrisy, and unbelief, so that we might confess it, repent of it, and continue to believe in the grace of Christ.

So let's walk through this long rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees; but let's not just say, "Man, I can't believe they could be so dead wrong and wicked!" Let's also examine our own hearts, lest we become just as blind to the Pharisee inside of our own hearts.

First, we see...

I. Jesus's Judgment on Those Who Seek Their own Honor and Glory Instead of God's (Matt. 23:1-12)

Jesus opens, in verses 1-3, by giving an ironic, almost sarcastic, depiction of the Pharisees - they put themselves in the place of Moses, assuming their teaching has the same authority as Moses did. When Jesus says, "do all that they tell you," he's being very sarcastic here. He is, in fact, condemning everything they say and do! He does not want us following, listening to, or imitating these legalistic Pharisees.

They are hypocrites. They give harsh commands, upholding the letter of the law and not the spirit - but only with their words, not their own lives - "for the preach but do not practice" (v.3b).. This is because they don't really care about obeying God or helping others to know GOD, obey, and glorify Him. They just want people to obey and admire *them*. They are religious leaders, teachers of the Old Testament scriptures, but they don't do it to glorify God or obey Him - they are seeking their *own* glory and honor. As verse 5 says, "They do all their deeds to be seen by others" not by God.

They make a great show of religious piety - but it is just that: a show. It's pretend. It's religious ostentation. The rest of verse 5 says, they "make their phylacteries broad and fringes long." "Fringes" or "tassels" would have been worn by the average Jew, and they were to help people in their observance of the Old Testament Law. But this means they were visible. And so the Pharisees made theirs extra long, to bring extra notice to their outward "piety." "Phylacteries" were small boxes containing different passages of scripture; the Pharisees would wear these boxes, and make them very big, to make sure everyone could see them. They were visibly proclaiming to everyone, "Look how spiritual, religious, and holy I am!" As Jesus says in Matt. 6 about such things - they have earned their reward and will receive none from God; this is not fake piety, not spiritual at all.

Verses 6-7 tell us the Pharisees loved being given seats of honor; they loved being called special titles of honor, like "rabbi." They loved their own glory; they wanted to be seen as religious and spiritual by others; they wanted everyone to show them honor.

We must beware false teachers, in our own Christian churches today, who seek their own glory; who seek to be praised by men, not to please the Lord; who use their places of authority, their platforms for preaching and teaching, to exalt *themselves* instead of Christ. We should

always be wary of those who want a position in the church, or a title, or church leadership, or to teach Sunday school, children's class, or even preaching or pastoring - merely so that they will have a better reputation and be thought well of by others. Such ostentatious pride should *never* go hand in hand with church leadership - *especially* not with pastoral leadership. If a pastor is marked by such pride and self-exaltation, something has gone terribly wrong; that should never be the case.

But we must always be on guard against this same temptation in our own hearts (11-12). The temptation towards pride, seeking praise from other people, and exalting our own reputation is common for each one of us. But this is not the way of Christ. The way of Christ is humility, as vv.11-12 remind us. "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." Christ, the greatest of all, came to be a servant of all! HE served us by humbly taking on flesh and dying in our place! Brothers and Sisters, let us value and glorify Christ by valuing self-sacrificial humility, just like him. Let us put off pride, let us seek Christ's glory, not our own. Let us be a church that truly values humility and seeks the glory of the Lord, not our own.

Next, we see...

II. Jesus's Judgment against Legalism and Hypocrisy (Matthew 23:13-28)

The bulk of our passage is made up of seven "woes" - seven judgments of condemnation Jesus pronounces against the Pharisees for distorting scripture in their teaching, lives, and hearts. The first six specifically denounce their legalism and hypocrisy, and can be grouped into three pairs.

The first two woes, in vv.13-15, tell us:

A. Legalism leads to Hell (13-15)

Jesus has already denounced the Pharisees as *legalists* - *people who put their trust in doing good works and following their own religious rules*. Look at verse 4 again: They "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on peoples' shoulders." They add to the commandments of God - commandments even they themselves cannot keep! They preach rules, do's and don'ts - not mercy or grace. This is the *exact opposite* of the way of Christ, isn't it? In **Matt. 11:28-29**, Jesus tells us, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give your rest," for he is "gentle and lowly in heart." The way of Christ is the way of compassion and

grace! But the way of the legalist - the way of the Pharisee - is completely empty of any shred of compassion or grace. It is utterly unChristian. It looks very religious and spiritual - but is is Satanic.

This is why the very first two “woes,” the first two judgments, show that these religious teachers themselves are heading to Hell and dragging others with them: “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 others to go in” (v.13). They are trusting in their own works, but reject Jesus; and when they teach others to do likewise, they’re making their converts “twice as much a child of Hell” as they are (v.15).

The way of the legalist looks very religious and spiritual at a glance, doesn’t it? There are lots of rules - don’t do this bad thing, don’t do that; make sure you do these long lists of good things. There is a great show of religious piety, abstaining from evil, appearing to do much good. The legalist adheres to all kinds of commands - but they have forgotten the God that gave them. And not just that: they add their own rules, even replacing God’s rules with their own, and while they may give lip service to God, or even the gospel, they leave grace out of it. Their lists of do’s and don’t look very religious and spiritual - but they are actually Satanic. The way of religious legalism leads to Hell, not Heaven.

Next, in the third and fourth woes, we see that...

B. Legalism distorts and misinterprets the Word of God (vv.16-24)

The third and fourth woes give us two different examples of how the Pharisees completely distorted and misunderstood the Old Testament scriptures. They are supposed to be religious leaders, teachers of the scriptures, yet they twist them; so Jesus calls them “blind guides” (vv. 16, 17, 24).

The first example, in verses 16-22, centers on their teachings about oaths. The Law of Moses taught that oaths were binding and were very serious business, since they were swearing on the things of the Lord - kind of like if we today were to lay our hand on the Bible and swear to tell the truth in court. But the Pharisees came up with a system of loopholes, to try and get around this; they came up with a system of oaths that *were binding* and which ones *were n’t*. So if you swear by the “temple” or “altar,” they said, “you’re fine, it’s not binding; don’t worry about it, you don’t have to do what you swore you would do.” But if you swear by the “gold of the temple” or the sacrifice “on the altar” - well, that *is* binding. But Jesus points out - this is all

foolish nonsense. The temple and its gold, the altar and the sacrifice - one is not greater than the other - you're swearing by the Lord either way, as Jesus tells us in verse 22. The Pharisees were just coming up with ways people could claim loopholes around God's commands; they were simply encouraging lying. And this missed the whole point of the laws concerning oaths - the whole point is: we should be a people that are trustworthy, tell the truth, and keep our word.

The second example is in vv.23-24, the fourth woe: the Pharisees were very meticulous about tithing, even tithing down to herbs, "mint and dill and cumin," - yet they "neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness." They took great care to tithe meticulously, and teach others to do likewise; yet they missed the greater, more important points of the Law: to do justice to one's neighbors, to show mercy and love, to do all things out of faithfulness to God. They missed the entire point of the Law - they wrongly interpreted scripture.

We need to acknowledge we're tempted to do this as well; we can be tempted to focus on parts of scripture that we like while ignoring or trying to find loopholes around the parts we don't like.

SO for example, if we focus on the parts about sexual immorality, but ignore parts about anger, forgiveness, and mercy, we're ignoring the weightier matters. If we focus on justice and judgment, but lack love and compassion, we're out of balance and missing the point. If we're wrongly interpreting scripture, so that we teach that we should still be under the Law of Moses, we've missed the point. If we twist what the Bible says, adding our own laws that God doesn't like, for example, don't drink alcohol, don't smoke, don't get tattoos, or any other rule that God doesn't command us as Christians - then we're twisting and distorting the Bible, just like the Pharisees. That's legalism.

We all have blind spots. That's why we need to hear the "whole counsel of God" - the entirety of His Word. THIS is why it's so important that you read the Bible regularly - even daily - for yourself, on your own. And not just parts of it - all of it. This is also why I preach the way I do - going through whole books of the Bible, eventually with the goal that we will preach through the entire Bible throughout my time as pastor here, Lord willing. We don't need to just hear the parts of scripture that my hobby horses are about - we need to hear *all of God's Word*. *And we need to rightly know, understand, believe, and obey it, in the way God wants us to, now that Christ has come.*

C. Legalism is hypocrisy (vv.25-28)

The fifth and sixth woes, in verses 25-28, warn us against the hypocrisy of having many good works on the outside, so that we appear righteous, while not actually being righteous at all, since we're spiritually dead and impure on the inside. They "clean the outside of the cup" but "inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence" (v.25). Clean on the outside, while worthlessly dirty inside. Jesus says they are "like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness." They "outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (vv.27-28)

Legalism is a hypocritical sham. It doesn't work. The legalist puts hope in his own good works, putting on a great show of being morally upright on the outside, even appearing righteous - but in the end, it's just hypocrisy. They aren't righteous at all.

There will be many people who appear good, moral, and righteous in Hell. There will be many morally conservative, upstanding citizens in Hell. There will be many polite, nice people in Hell. There will be many well-educated, well-respected, well-employed people in Hell. There will be many monogamous spouses who never got divorced or cheated on each other in Hell. There will be many parents who took good care of their children in Hell. There will be many politically sound and economically sound people in Hell. There will be many religious people in Hell. There will be many church members and tithers, many who said the prayers, who went through Catechism, used the rosary, observed religious days, or walked the aisle, in Hell. There will be many who seem very religious, morally decent, spiritual and pious people in Hell.

Because it is possible to do all of these morally good and upright things - possible to have a very moral and pious, even religious life, full of good works on the outside - and yet be completely spiritually dead on the inside. It is possible to do every one of these good works from a heart of unbelief - a heart that doesn't truly care about God or trust in Christ, but only worships self. Good works will never save anyone; in fact, good works apart from grace make us worse off spiritually, because they let us lie to ourselves; they let us convince ourselves that we're ok on our own, *while we comfortably drift down the lazy river of works-based righteousness straight into Hell*. Only personally knowing Jesus and resting in His grace can save us.

And this leads to the last point:

III. Jesus's Judgment Against Those Who Reject God's Grace in Christ (Matthew 23:29-39)

This long series of “woes,” where Jesus pronounces judgment and condemnation, comes to a climax with the seventh and final woe - and it is the worst. “Woe” to the “scribes and pharisees, hypocrites,” for they rejected Jesus Christ, God’s Son, savior, and promised Messiah. There is hope for the hypocrite and legalist - they can repent, believe, and be saved! But there is no hope for someone who rejects Jesus, for someone who refuses to come to Him by faith - because Jesus *is* our only hope.

Verses 29-36 tell us about this seventh “woe.” Jesus tells these religious leaders that they are just like their forefathers - the Israelites of old who rejected God’s messengers, the prophets, even persecuting and killing them. The Pharisees claimed to believe the prophets; they claimed that if they had been alive in the days of the Old Testament, when prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Zechariah were around, they would not have treated the prophets like their forefathers did - by beating, imprisoning, and even murdering them. They even commemorate the prophets of old by decorating their tombs and building memorials. But Jesus tells them that they are, indeed, just like their forefathers. They are part of the long line of those who murdered God’s people and prophets, all the way from Abel (the first innocent blood shed in human history) all the way to Zechariah (the last of the Old Testament prophets to be put to death). Though they claim to believe and obey God’s Word, they are just like their forefathers, even worse: they reject God’s Son, God Himself, Jesus Christ - the true messenger of God, the true prophet, the promised savior and Lord Himself!

Therefore, God’s judgment will come to bear upon them. They “fill up” the measure of sin for the people of Israel, filling up the cup of God’s wrath against them - and that cup of wrath will surely be poured out. Jesus says to them, in verse 33, “You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” And in verse 36, he seals the fate of their judgment, saying, “Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation” And this doesn’t just include the scribes and Pharisees but the nation as a whole - indeed, *anyone* who rejects Jesus Christ, who does not believe in Him as the Savior and Lord.

God’s wrath and judgment against our sin is a very painful reality to think about - and yet, we must think about it, because *it is in fact a reality!* God’s just judgment and wrath against sin is promised and certain, not just for the legalistic and hypocritical pharisees who rejected Jesus, but for *everyone in the world* who does not repent and believe in Christ! We’ve all sinned. We’ve all rejected God in our sin. Our only hope is salvation in Christ Jesus!

The closing verses of 37-39 show a complex mix of emotions; as Jesus laments over Jerusalem, we see a twofold picture of Jesus's *judgment*, but also his *gracious compassion*. He closes with the word of judgment: "See, your house is desolate." And I think he means the temple - God no longer dwells in the temple, He left Jerusalem because they rejected Him; and when Jesus does return, at His Second Coming, indeed, all the earth will say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." This is a quotation from Psalm 118:26, and I think its a clear allusion to the Second Coming, the final judgment. Jesus is coming again, and when he does, *every knee will bow* and declare His praise - even His enemies! Yet it will be too late for them at that point. When He comes again, He will bear the sword, and bring judgment against all sin and wickedness in the world. Ask yourself: will you stand on that day? If you do not bow the knee to Christ in faith *today*, then you will not stand on that day of judgment, but will fall.

But this does not contradict the gracious love of Jesus; we cannot say He is without compassion! Even here, amidst His pronouncement of judgment, we see the wondrous compassion and mercy of Christ's heart on display! He laments, in verse 37, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

The time for mercy is *now*. The judgment of God is coming against all flesh; we'll all die and stand before Him one day. But *today* is the time to repent, believe in Christ, and be saved! This is why Jesus Christ came into the world: because we are all wretched sinners, who cannot save ourselves; we all have legalism and hypocrisy inside of us; none of our works are good enough, we've all disobeyed and rejected God; yet CHrist came and lived a perfect life in our place! He came and died on the cross, bearing God's wrath against sin; and He rose on the third day, showing that God accepts His perfect righteousness and sacrificial death as a *substitute* for *anyone* who trusts in Christ's grace as sufficient!

The way of legalism leads to death - don't trust in your own good works; don't trust in how good you've been in life, or that you'll clean yourself up one day - because you'll never be good enough. It doesn't matter how good your life looks on the outside - if you're spiritual dead inside, it doesn't matter. And don't pretend, don't lie to yourself, others, or God - because hypocrisy leads to death, too. There's only one way - *throw yourself upon the mercy, compassion, and grace of Jesus Christ, truly believing that His righteousness is good enough to*

save you! For all of us who do so, He gathers us together as the children of God beneath His healing wings!

Let us examine each of our hearts today; and if we find any legalism, any works-based righteousness or hypocrisy, let us confess it to God, repent of it, and trust in the gospel once more - as we must do every day! And what better way for us to respond by coming to the Lord's Table, where we corporately and visibly proclaim to one another our faith in the sufficient life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as we eat the bread and drink the cup! If you're a believer, trusting in Christ alone, and you're a baptized member of a gospel preaching church in good standing, then we invite you to join us at the Table this morning.

But if you're not a believer, then you can just stay seated where you are, because there's a *different* way for you to respond this morning: turn away from trusting in yourself, your own works, or any false religion or spirituality, and *turn to Christ*; repent, believe, and trust in Him alone for salvation! And then, make your faith public by being baptized and joining a gospel preaching church!

If you have any questions about this, or baptism or church membership, I would love to speak with you after the service. Let us pray.