

Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

23:13-33

by J.C. Ryle

Transcript

We have in these verses the charges of our Lord against the Jewish teachers, ranged under eight heads. Standing in the midst of the temple, with a listening crowd around him, he publicly denounces the main errors of the scribes and the Pharisees, in unsparing terms. Eight times he uses the solemn expression, "Woe unto you;" seven times he calls them hypocrites; twice he speaks of them as blind guides; twice as fools and blind; once as serpents! And a generation of vipers! Let us mark that language well. It teaches a solemn lesson. It shows how utterly abominable the spirit of the scribes and the Pharisees is in God's sight, in whatever form it may be found. Let us glance shortly at the eight charges which our Lord brings forward, and then seek to draw from the whole passage some general instruction. The first woe in the list is directed against the systematic opposition of the scribes and Pharisees to the progress of the Gospel. They shut up the kingdom of heaven; they would neither go in themselves, nor suffer others go in. They rejected the warning voice of John the Baptist; they refused to acknowledge Jesus when he appeared among them as the Messiah; they tried to keep back Jewish inquirers. They would not believe the Gospel themselves, and they did all in their power to prevent others believing it: this was a great sin. The second woe in the list is directed against the covetousness and self-aggrandizing spirit of the scribes and Pharisees. They devour widows' houses and for a pretence made long prayer. They imposed on the credulity of weak and unprotected women by an affection of great devoutness, until they were regarded as their spiritual directors. They scrupled not to abuse the influence thus unrighteously obtained to their own temporal advantage, and, in a word, to make money by their religion: this, again, was a great sin. The third woe in the list is directed against the zeal of the scribes and the Pharisees for making partisans. They compassed sea and land to make one proselyte. They laboured incessantly to make men join their party and adopt their opinions. They did this from no desire to benefit men's souls in the least, or to bring them to God; they only did it to swell the ranks of their sect, and to increase the number of their adherents and their own importance. Their religious zeal arose from sectarianism, and not from the love of God: this also was a great sin. The fourth woe in the list is directed against the doctrines of the scribes and Pharisees about oaths. They drew subtle distinctions between one kind of oath and another; they taught the Jesuitical tenet some oaths were binding on men while others were not; they attached greater importance to oaths sworn by the gold offered to the temple, than to oaths sworn by the temple itself. By so doing they brought the third commandment into contempt and by making men overrate the value of alms and oblations advanced their own interests: this again was a

great sin. The fifth *woe* in the list is directed against the practice of the scribes and Pharisees to exalt trifles in religion above serious things to put the last things first, and the first last. They made great ado about tithing *mint* and other garden herbs, as if they could not be too strict in their obedience to God's law and yet at the same time they neglected great plain duties, such as justice, charity and honesty: this again was a great sin. The sixth and seventh *woes* in the list possess too much in common to be divided. They are directed against a general characteristic of the religion of the scribes. They set outward purity and decency above inward sanctification and purity of heart; they made it a religious duty to cleanse the *outside* of their cup and platters while they neglected their own inward man; they were like *whitened sepulchres*, clean and beautiful externally, but within full of all corruption. Even so, they outwardly appeared righteous but within were full of hypocrisy and iniquity. This also was a great sin. The last *woe* in the list is directed against the affected veneration of the scribes and the Pharisees for the memory of dead saints. They built the *tombs of the prophets* and garnished *the sepulchres of the righteous* and yet their own lives proved that they were of one mind with those who killed the *prophets*: their own conduct was a daily evidence that they liked dead saints better than living ones. The very men that pretended to honor dead prophets could see no beauty in a living Christ: this also was a great sin. Such is the melancholy picture which our Lord gives of Jewish teachers. Let us turn from the contemplation of it with sorrow and humiliation. It is a fearful exhibition of the morbid anatomy of human nature: it is a picture which unhappily has been reproduced over and over again in the history of the church of Christ. There is not a point in the character of the scribes and in which it might be easily shown that persons calling themselves Christians have often walked in their steps. Let us learn from the whole passage how deplorable was the condition of the Jewish nation when our Lord was upon earth. When such were the teachers, what must have been the miserable darkness of the taught! Truly the iniquity of Israel had come to the full. It was high time, indeed, for the Sun of Righteousness to arise, and for the Gospel to be preached. Let us learn, from the whole passage, how abominable is hypocrisy in the sight of God. These scribes and Pharisees are not charged with being thieves or murderers, but with being hypocrites to the very core. Whatever we are in our religion, let us resolve never to wear a cloak: let us by all means be honest and real. Let us learn from the whole passage, how awfully dangerous is the position of an unfaithful minister. It is bad enough to be blind ourselves; it is a thousand times worse to be a blind guide. Of all men none is so culpably wicked as an unconverted minister, and none will be judged so severely. It is a solemn saying about such an one *he resembles an unskillful pilate: he does not perish alone.* Finally, let us beware of supposing from this passage that the safest course in religion is to make no profession at all. This is to run into a dangerous extreme. It does not follow that there is no such thing as true profession because some men are hypocrites. It does not follow that all money is bad because there is much counterfeit coin. Let not hypocrisy prevent our confessing Christ, or move us from our steadfastness, if we have confessed him. Let us press on, looking unto Jesus and resting on him, praying daily to be kept from error, and saying with David, *Let my heart be sound in thy statutes* (*Psalm 119:80*).

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