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Matthew 23:11 - 23:14



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discourse, Steve Gregg examines Matthew 23:11-23:14, where Jesus rebukes the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy and unjust treatment of the vulnerable members of society. The speaker emphasizes the importance of genuine Christian behavior and the dangers of exploiting others for personal gain. He also notes the biblical precedent for communal prayer and the generosity of those who have nothing to lose. The discourse serves as an admonition to believers to align their actions with their professed faith.

Transcript

Let's look at Matthew chapter 23 today. We are continuing here. In the previous sessions, we've gotten up through verse 10.

And in this chapter, Jesus is taking the scribes and Pharisees to task about their ego trips and about their hypocrisy and about their failure to really be the kind of spiritual leaders that they ought to have been. And he has just finished pointing out to his disciples in verse 7 that these men love the greetings they receive in the marketplaces, especially the titles of honor that people give them, saying to them, Rabbi, Rabbi. And he turns to his disciples and says, you know, don't you be called Rabbi.

That's Christ. He's your Rabbi. And he essentially tells them not to welcome such titles for themselves, but rather he says in verse 11, but he who is the greatest among you shall be your servant, and whoever exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Now, that's not the only place that Jesus teaches these things. He's actually said some of these things earlier in Matthew. In Matthew chapter 20, just three chapters earlier, verses 26 and 27, he points out that the one who would be great in the kingdom of God must be one who is the servant of all.

And so he reminds them of that here when it comes to, you know, people beginning to look to you, a religious leader, as some kind of an object of reverence. No, you're not an object of reverence. If you are great, let me put it this way, if you are not great, then it

would certainly be wrong for you to convey to people that you are.

And if you are great, it is only because you're a servant and you are not concerned about your own greatness. You're concerned about serving others and being a blessing to others and doing the will of God. A person who is right-minded in all this is so concerned about doing what's right in the sight of God that he's not going to have time to think about how great he is in doing that.

To be self-forgetful is really the object, and to have one's focus on God and on others. And this one can do, but it is also possible, and very frequently done, that religious leaders fall into these same traps as the scribes and Pharisees. Now, in verse 13, he begins a series of statements that all are similar.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. The repetition of these again and again is very much like, only in the opposite form, the Beatitudes, where Jesus kept saying, Blessed are you, so and so. Blessed are they.

Blessed, blessed, blessed are such and such. Blessing and woe are opposites. He said to his disciples, Blessed are you poor.

Blessed are you who weep. Blessed are you poor in spirit. Blessed are the pure in heart, and so forth.

But he had also said in Luke chapter 6, after he had pronounced several Beatitudes like this on his disciples, he said, And woe unto you rich, and woe unto you who laugh now, and woe unto you when all men speak well of you. You see, woe is the opposite of blessing. God's blessing is on one group, and God's curse or woe is on another.

The word woe really means grief or disaster. And to say woe to you is to basically say you have reason to be grieved, and you are a disaster. You are in a state that is greatly to be pitied and greatly to be denounced.

And so, again and again he says to the Pharisees and scribes, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. And then he gives his reason, just like in the Beatitudes when he says, Blessed are the poor in spirit, he gives a reason. For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

But when he says, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, he says, For this is what you do. Now, there are quite a few of these, and we won't take them all in this session. We'd soon run out of time.

But let's look at some of them. He begins addressing them directly. Now, prior to verse 13, Jesus has been talking about the scribes and Pharisees to the multitudes and to his disciples.

At this point, he stops talking behind their back. Actually, he wasn't talking behind their back. Apparently, they were right there in the crowd the whole time.

And so, he begins speaking directly to them. He says in verse 13, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men. For you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

Now, each of these is sort of a stand-alone statement. Let's see what he says about that. He says, They shut up the kingdom of heaven against men, and they don't go in themselves, nor will they permit those who are entering to go in.

Now, it's interesting that Jesus described the kingdom of heaven as something that people were at that very moment entering. He says, Those who are entering it, you don't permit them. You see, the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, as it is variously called in Scripture, is a reality that came into existence when Jesus was here and still is in existence.

It is something that you can enter. Paul told his converts in the 14th chapter of Acts, he says, Through much tribulation we enter the kingdom of God. And there are people who are entering the kingdom.

They are the people who receive Christ as their Lord and as their King. And upon doing so, they become part of his kingdom, part of his group of subjects. A kingdom is simply that realm over which a king reigns, and it consists of those who are his subjects.

So, to enter the kingdom means you come into the realm of God's authority, and you come under the authority of Christ. And you become his disciple. And then you are in his kingdom.

Now, there were people who were, in fact, entering the kingdom. The disciples of Jesus would be examples. There were others who were contemplating it.

There were those who wanted to come into the kingdom of God, but were very much discouraged from it by the religious leaders. We need to think not too far to think of an example. In John chapter 9, there was a man who was born blind, and Jesus healed him.

And the man became a follower of Christ. But the religious establishment, the chief priests in this case, did everything they could to dissuade him and to try to get him not to be a believer in Christ. You can read the story in John chapter 9. And that being so, Jesus is saying, these guys, I mean, it's bad enough if they won't come in themselves.

It's worse still if they won't let others come in who want to. You know, there was a story among Aesop's fables that a dog was living in a barn. And where the manger was where the cows would be fed, the dog stood guard against it.

Whenever the cows would come near to eat the hay, the dog would bark at them and snap at them and chase them off. And the cows complained that the dog had no use for the hay himself. And he had no interest in the hay, but he did not want those who did value it to come and consume it either.

And this is really like the scribes and Pharisees. They're like the dog in the manger. They did not value the kingdom of God themselves.

They had no use for it. But there were people who did. There were people who wanted it, but they were doing all they could to prevent those people from coming in.

Now, this is a grievous thing because Jesus said elsewhere that in Matthew chapter 18, that anyone who would cause one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, he said, it's better for him that there were a millstone placed around his neck and he'd be drowned in the depths of the sea. In other words, it's no light matter at all. If somebody is a believer in Christ and somebody else dissuades them, somebody else stumbles them, somebody else destroys their faith, it's no light matter.

Jesus said, you might as well, if you're in the position of doing that to someone, you might as well have a millstone put around your neck and be thrown in the sea. And that you'd be better off, he said, if that happened to you. So Jesus didn't mince words about things like this.

And these scribes and Pharisees were in that very position. There were people who were hearing Jesus, people who said, you know, I do believe. I do believe this man is the Messiah.

I do think I should follow him. But then they were strongly argued against by the scribes and Pharisees. And so some of these people did not end up becoming disciples.

And Jesus says, woe to you, scribes and Pharisees. It's bad enough that you won't come in, but that you stop others from coming in is doubly bad. And you are in big trouble with God.

That's what woe to you means. By the way, there are some listening to this broadcast, perhaps, who are not Christians and refuse to follow Jesus Christ for whatever reasons. And that is bad.

That is bad. Jesus is your Redeemer. He's your Creator.

And he has every right to expect your full loyalty and allegiance and obedience. It's bad that you don't follow him. But it's even worse when you discourage others who are following him and try to get them to sin with you, try to get them to doubt the Christian faith.

Which, by the way, it'd be good to get them to doubt it if it was not true. But the Scriptures are true. And Christianity is the truth.

And to get somebody to disbelieve it is to basically lie to them and deceive them. And this having been done, if you succeed in it, you better hope very much that you don't succeed in it. Because Jesus pronounced some very terrible consequences on those who succeed in stumbling people.

But it's a terrible thing. Terrible enough that you won't become a follower of Christ yourself. If you go further and seek to destroy the faith of others who do have such faith, well, you're just stacking up the woe on yourself.

And there are people out there doing that. Some of them may be listening to me today. I don't know.

Let's look further. What's the next woe on the scribes and Pharisees? In verse 14, Matthew 23, 14, Jesus said, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.

Now, the expression greater condemnation is used also in the book of James. In James chapter 3 it says, Beloved brethren, do not be many teachers, for we receive the greater condemnation. I wonder if James was thinking about this passage, because the Pharisees and hypocrites were teachers.

And Jesus said they had greater condemnation. But you see, it's not simply that by being a teacher do you have greater condemnation. It's that if you are a religious leader, you have an example to set for others.

There is an obligation on your part, if you stand before others to represent Christ, that you be the model of what Christians are supposed to be. And that you be sincerely a follower of Christ yourself. And that you not be secretly a fake.

Because, I mean, people look to you. They look to you as a shepherd, as a leader. And in the sense that you lead them astray in any way, or deceive them in any way, you are not only hurting yourself, you're hurting them.

And therefore the condemnation that you will receive will be greater for having had this influence, than it would be if you merely were not a leader and you just were not a, you didn't follow Christ. There is condemnation for both, but Jesus said the scribes and Pharisees have greater condemnation than they otherwise would, because of their hypocrisy and what they did. Now what was their hypocrisy? He gave this example.

They make a show of spirituality by making long prayers. Remember Jesus said in Matthew chapter 6, when you pray do not be like the hypocrites. Remember that? And

he said they pray on the street corners so people see them and so forth.

You know, what is prayer supposed to be? Prayer is supposed to be actual, sincere, talking to God. When a person is praying, he should not be mindful who else is listening. Now it's very hard when you're praying in the presence of other Christians to not be aware that they're listening, and not even to, you know, there's a sense in which we sometimes pray more eloquently when we know people are listening.

It's a hard hypocrisy to avoid. But the point is, to pray for the ears of other people is to miss the point of what prayer is for. Prayer is for God.

I remember hearing of two famous preachers. I know their names, but I won't give them. They were praying together in the home of one.

And one of these men was a Pentecostal, and the other was not. Of course, Pentecostals believe in being baptized in the Holy Spirit. The one who was not a Pentecostal had never spoken in tongues, of course.

And the wife of the Pentecostal minister came and joined them for prayer. And she began to pray for this non-Pentecostal minister among them. And saying, Oh, God, please help Brother so-and-so be open to the baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues.

Oh, God, please help him not to harden his heart. Help him to be open to your Spirit. Help him, et cetera, et cetera.

And this non-Pentecostal pastor interrupted her and said, Sister, excuse me. But he says, When we pray here, we're praying this way. And he pointed upward.

We're not praying this way. And he pointed across at each other. And it's so true that prayer in front of other people can be a way of preaching to them or a way of trying to impress them with something.

And really, prayer is to be done this way, upward, not that way, sideways. We're not praying for the ears of other people. We can't help it sometimes if others hear because the Bible actually indicates that there are some times when Christians should pray together in agreement with each other.

But we need to watch our attitude. The Pharisees prayed long prayers to appear spiritual, to appear holy, and to appear religious. But Jesus said all the while they were doing it, they were, as he put it, devouring widows' houses.

Now, of course, widows didn't live in gingerbread houses back then, so people didn't eat houses. He's speaking figuratively. They were devouring widows' houses.

What does that mean? Well, it means, of course, they were exploiting widows financially.

In those days, of course, widows were among the most vulnerable class of people. Women could not go out in the job market as much as they could today.

And a woman depended much more in those days than modern women often do on their husband to be their provider and also their defender. And, you know, against neighbors or anyone else who might seek to exploit them in any way. And when a person was a widow, of course, her husband was not there to provide for her or to protect her from charlatans and con artists and everything else.

Now, a widow, therefore, was very vulnerable. And in the Old Testament, the scripture, many times the prophets spoke of the need to guard the widows and to not exploit the widows. And make sure the widows didn't get, you know, mistreated and so forth because they were very vulnerable.

Now, one way in which they're vulnerable is that the widows in that society could not very easily go out and get jobs. And, therefore, the more fortunate widows were those that when their husbands died, they left them an estate. But when these widows had an estate, but they had no husband to help guard it or manage it, there were charlatans who would come to them and try to get them to give them their money for various things, sometimes for religious projects.

There's an actual case known in Roman history of a couple of Jewish men who persuaded a lady. She was not a widow. She was actually the wife of one of the senators in Rome.

But she became a Jew by conversion. And these two Jewish men began to teach her the Jewish religion. They were like her rabbis.

And they persuaded her to make a very large donation to the upkeep of the temple in Jerusalem. And she made this donation. She put the money in their hands and they took off and were never seen again.

They absconded with the money. This became a great scandal, actually, in Rome. And it's enough so to be recorded in Roman history.

Now, that's the kind of thing that some religious leaders do. They prey on the gullibility of women and especially widows who don't have a husband to keep an eye out on these charlatans and con artists. And so these widows end up often, because they are generous in heart, they're women, they're soft-hearted, they care about religious things in many cases and they have money that their husbands left them.

They often will mortgage their homes or do other things, take their life savings and give them to some cause that someone can convince them they should do. You know, many of the Christian television programs depend upon viewer support, just as radio programs. This radio program depends on listener support.

And almost all media ministries, whether on television or radio, depend on the support of viewers or listeners. But it's interesting that statistically, a very large percentage of the support that comes into Christian television ministries comes from older women, widows in particular. And that's partly because, I think out of loneliness, they watch these preachers on the air and they kind of feel bonded to them, perhaps.

And when these preachers say, oh, we really need money, we're going to go off the air, these widows have money that they didn't earn, their husbands earned it and left it to them and they've got it there. Sometimes they're quite rich and so they're very disposed, in many cases, to just send a big check to these people. And that's what ends up happening a great deal.

And that is that these ministries are supported very heavily by income from older women, especially widows. Now that's not wrong in itself. What is wrong is when these preachers play up their appeals to women, especially older women.

There's a great deal of pandering in the way that appeals are sometimes made to exploit the sensitivities of these old women and get them to give. And in many cases, the money that is given is then used for things other than what it was given for. There's been too many cases to enumerate of people who raised funds in their television ministry and then took the money and just feathered their own nests instead of using the money to spread the gospel as they said they would.

They bought themselves their third or fourth mansion and their seventh or eighth Mercedes. And these people are devouring the estates of these widows. They are devouring widows' houses.

Now, I don't know the exact ways in which the Pharisees did this, but they did that kind of thing. Jesus said they were hypocrites because they devoured widows' houses. I don't know if they came up to a widow recently who lost her husband and said, Well, you know, sister, your husband had some back tithes he hadn't paid.

We're going to have to mortgage your house to pay what's owed to God here. I don't know exactly what ruse they took, but they saw widows as vulnerable, as gullible, as someone whose spiritual and religious sensitivities could be exploited, and they exploited them to the full and ended up ripping off women who had no husband to guard them from such con jobs and so forth. And Jesus said this is the kind of thing that the scribes and Pharisees routinely did.

Now, what he's saying, of course, is they did wicked, unjust, exploitive things to the helpless in their society. They used religion as a means of getting money for themselves and simply of taking advantage of others. They used religion for that purpose.

And that is, of course, absolutely wicked. And yet, while doing that, all the while, they

would in public places make very long prayers so that everyone would notice how religious they were. That's what Jesus says.

They're hypocrites. He says you devour widows' houses and for a pretense you make long prayers. Therefore, you will receive greater condemnation.

Judging from what Jesus said, I think there are quite a few well-known religious personalities, leaders, about whom Jesus would say you shall have greater condemnation. It were better for you that you never were a religious leader than that you were in a position of leadership and exploited it and used it to your own advantage, for your own glory and for your own enrichment. And there certainly is a greater condemnation, as James said, to those who are in the ministry if they abuse their position in the ministry.

There are so many ways in which they can be abused. And as we read of these abuses that the scribes and Pharisees were guilty of, in Matthew 23, we find all the same tricks are being used today by many who are in religious leadership. It's a sad thing, a frightening thing, really, when we think of what they'll have to face on the Day of Judgment.

We'll see some more of the things Jesus said about the scribes and Pharisees next time. I hope you'll be able to join us.