

Episode #907 Matthew 23 Part 2-The Eight Woes

I. The purpose of the gospel of Matthew is to present Jesus as the Christ, the King of Israel. It is another grand treatise like John to prove to Israel Who Jesus really is. It is the book of being “in Israel,” in contrast to believers today who are “in Christ.”

II. The Lord was having a final, conclusive confrontation with the corrupt, religious leaders of Israel in Jerusalem. He is about to pronounce eight woes against the terrible hypocrisy of the liars and deceivers, the scribes and Pharisees.

III. The Woes on the Scribes and Pharisees. Matthew 23:13-32.

- A. Verse 13. “Woe” is the Greek *ouai*, sounding like wailing. The Lord gives eight woes that correspond to the eight beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 5. We will compare and contrast these as we go through this list of woes.
 1. “Entering” occurs three times in Greek, also rendered “go in” in the NKJV.
 2. The modern Greek texts have verses 13 and 14 transposed, though some modern texts skip verse 14 altogether. This is not correct, for as we have pointed out, as suggested by Dr. Bullinger in the *Companion Bible*, there are eight woes to correspond with the eight beatitudes of chapter 5, and verse 13 corresponds with the first beatitude.
 3. Contrast this with the first of the beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens” (Matthew 5:3). These men were anything but poor in spirit, and in their pride they would not enter the kingdom and receive its good.
- B. Verse 14. “Woe” is again *ouai*. “Hypocrites” means actors or pretenders. A pretense or a show, a cloak, as an act. These actors thus acted. This is a thing that was notorious in Israel, and there is record after record of it. It was both condemned and practiced, as so many things are today, like the use of alcohol, which is condemned and condemned and yet is almost universally practiced. The rich would loan money to a widow in need. They would claim great credit for having loaned this to help her. Yet they did it at exorbitant interest, knowing that she could never pay, and therefore they could devour her land for non-payment. These Pharisees and scribes always remained in the background, so when the officers came to foreclose on her property and put her out, they would wipe some alligator tears from their eyes and proclaim for all to hear that they should go down to the synagogue or the temple and offer some prayers for this woman. People would see this and say what great men these must be! That is what these hypocrites did.
 1. “Greater” is much more much more or abundant.
 2. “Condemnation” is judgment, the Greek *krima*, in this case referring to the outcome of it, which in their case would be condemnation.
 3. Contrast this with the second beatitude: Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted (Matthew 5:4). These men pretended to mourn over the impoverishment of the widow, but in reality their mourning was a false pretense. The widows might be comforted, but they would be condemned.
- C. Verse 15. “Land” is literally dry in Greek, the contrast between sea and dry being an obvious one, though not our way of saying it in English.
 1. This is the first of four times “proselyte” occurs in the New Testament: here, the proselytes who were at Jerusalem for Pentecost in Acts 2:10, one of the

seven was Nicolas a proselyte in Acts 6:5, and Jews and proselytes followed Paul after his speech in Pisidian Antioch in the synagogue in Acts 13:43. It meant a comer over to or a convert. Typically it referred to Gentiles who had gone so far as to circumcise themselves and join the Jewish religion, but in this case, it perhaps means a Jew who has decided to join the strict sect of the Pharisees. These scribes and Pharisees were not concerned about converting Gentiles to Jews, but about converting wealthy, powerful Jews to Pharisees.

2. “Son” is the Greek *huios*, meaning to represent the character of one who would be condemned there.
 3. “Hell” is Gehenna. This was a valley near Jerusalem, originally called the valley of the sons of Hinnom. *Ge Hinnom* in Hebrew means “valley of Hinnom,” and shortened to Gehenna in Greek. This had originally been the valley where the idolatrous Jerusalemites passed their sons and daughters through the fire to Molech. After Josiah defiled it, it became in Christ’s day the garbage dump for Jerusalem. Gehenna became the proper disposal place for the particularly wicked criminals, whose bodies were ignominiously cast there after their executions. The people might have thought of the Pharisees as the elite, but God looked at them as the lowest of the low. The missionary efforts of these men only made those they reached worse, not better.
 4. Contrast this with the third beatitude: blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). These men were far from meek or submissive to God, and were only going to inherit Gehenna and destruction.
- D. Verse 16. By “guides” He meant they were leaders or teachers of the people. “Temple” does not mean the temple grounds, but *naos*, the holy place in the center. “Obliged” means he is obligated, owing what he swore. The incredible craft and deceit of the Pharisees come out here. They might impress and fool someone by saying, “I swear by the temple! I swear by the temple!” Then, when the time came and they did not perform what they claimed and were called on it, they would actually claim that their oath meant nothing, since swearing by the temple meant nothing; only swearing by the gold (or the golden ornaments) of the temple was meaningful. If swearing by the temple meant nothing, then why did they do it? They proved themselves to be liars. This was no better than those who say their lying is excused because they did it with their fingers crossed.
- E. Verse 17. “Fools” is *moros*, from which we get “moron.” The Lord was wasting no words here, and did not soft-pedal at all His condemnation of these godless men. “Sanctifies” is *hagiazō*, to separate or make holy. Gold is not holy of itself. It is the temple which is made holy by God, and therefore which makes holy its vessels.
- F. Verse 18. “Altar” is used both for the altar of sacrifice out in front of the holy place and the altar of incense inside the holy place. If it was nothing, then why did they swear by it? This was a way of tricking people. “Gift” can and often does refer to offerings and sacrifices, as here. Again, this was a way of fooling people, and of not having to pay debts they swore to.
- G. Verse 19. “Fools and blind,” the same words as in verse 17. Of course the gift was not the most important thing. Many Gentiles offered similar gifts to idols, and those gifts were unholy, not holy. It is not the gift that sanctifies the altar, but the other way.
- H. Verse 20. This should be totally obvious.

- I. Verse 21. “Temple” is again *naos*, the central building, not the temple grounds. “He Who dwells in it” is obviously a reference to God. He is spoken of as inhabiting the temple since He chose to make it His Own and place His name there. This is the typical word for making your home in a place, and God stooped to call a place on earth His dwelling. To swear by the temple, then, far from being nothing compared to swearing by the gold of the temple, is actually more: swearing by God Himself.

IV. Conclusion: The Lord condemned the scribes and Pharisees for their acting which hid their true, selfish, corrupt motivations. He condemned their shutting up the kingdom against people, their devouring widows houses while praying for them, their traveling sea and land to make proselytes to their ways and then corrupting their characters like their were corrupt, and their hypocritical rules regarding swearing. Next time, we will see the last four woes He brought against these hypocritical men. Let us never act like they did!