



THE DANGER OF DAMNATION IN SINCERE RELIGION **Matthew 23**

If you have Bible, and I hope you do, turn with me to Matthew 23.

It is good to be back from the Horn of Africa. Thank you for praying for me and the team I was with. It was a really good 10 days. We spent time with our church planting team among the Arundo*. Three Brook Hills' members who are living there right now focused on the Arundo—one of the most unreached, most dangerous people groups in the world. And then we have another member who is serving nearby, focused on another people group. So we got to spend time with all of them, including J.D. and J.J. You remember that J.D. is the first church planter we sent out a year and a half ago, and they are doing well. J.J. is pregnant with their second child, so be praying for them as they are multiplying disciples in that way.

Then we spent time in Kenya with Vapor Sports Ministries, which is led by Micah McElveen, a member of our faith family who, along with many other members of our faith family, are doing incredible things among the poorest of the poor in the world through Vapor. So picture a slum filled with poverty and trash and waste, and then see kids playing soccer (or as the rest of the world calls it—football) there in the slum on a green field with coaches who are disciple-makers extraordinaire. These brothers and sisters are leading kids and their parents to Christ all over the place in these slums, using soccer as a means—a tool—for disciple-making and for physical ministry to the poorest of the poor. We played football, I ran up hills that Kenyan marathon runners train on, we studied the Word, and we danced in worship, and we celebrated God's grace in this incredible ministry.

And then we spent some time with Erik and Amanda Hansen, Brook Hills' members who are serving north of Nairobi in a hospital. Erik is a pediatric surgeon. We highlighted the Hansens at Christmas during our global offering, and man, this brother is doing what God has created him for. And he's doing it alongside his wonderful wife, Amanda, and their four kids, working really hard, providing extensive medical care in a hospital that services the entire region of central and east Africa, and he's doing it in particular with a focus on a very unreached, very dangerous people group.

So, I just came back from this trip proud. I believe proud in a good way. Proud to be the pastor of these brothers and sisters. Not proud in a way that I have anything to do with what they're doing—well, I hope we are encouraging what they are doing—but proud in the sense of seeing God's grace in brothers and sisters who have said, "We're going to spend our lives, and our families, no matter what it costs, for the spread of the gospel in a world of urgent spiritual and physical need."

So be encouraged, church. Our brothers and sisters are doing well. They are extensions of this body in some difficult places in this world, and they are bringing great glory to God. So my heart is full with joy. And ... I'm tired.

We flew back into Chicago late Friday night. Our flight was then canceled, so we rented a minivan and drove through the night from Chicago to Birmingham, got back mid-morning yesterday, and my body has no idea what time it is. I officially claim the right this morning to take back anything that I say that I might regret once I am fully awake and fully aware. And this text is a tough one.

So on one hand, my heart is full with joy, and on the other hand, my heart is heavy with conviction because I've been studying Matthew 23 all week, and this is one of the most serious passages of Scripture in the entire Bible.

One writer said of Matthew 23: "Jesus' words in this passage fly from His lips like claps of thunder and spears of lightning. Out of His mouth on this occasion [come] the most fearful and dreadful statements that Jesus [ever] uttered on earth."

In this text, Jesus addresses the scribes and the Pharisees, and He calls them hypocrites, sons of hell, blind guides, fools, robbers, self-indulgent, whitewashed tombs, snakes, vipers, persecutors, and murderers. That's what this chapter is all about.

Now there are a couple of different ways we could approach this passage. We could read it and say, "Man, those scribes and Pharisees were horrible, evil to evoke such wrath and condemnation from Christ. They were clearly in the wrong."

But this is where I want to remind you that the scribes and Pharisees were the most highly regarded religious leaders of their day. They were well-respected. They were devout. And they were not insincere—they were very sincere. They believed in what they were doing, and they believed what they were doing was right and good, and so did everyone else.

A Serious Caution...

So here's the serious caution from this text that I want to start with it—and I'll go ahead and warn you, this is a heavy statement—but I'm convinced based on this text that it's true. I've thought about and poured over and been convicted by this statement all week long. And not just as it applies to scribes and Pharisees 2000 years ago, but as it applies to you and me today.

So here it is: It is possible for you and me to genuinely believe that we are doing God's work, obeying God's Word, and accomplishing God's will, yet to be deceived and to experience eternal damnation. Let me say that again. It is possible for you and me to genuinely believe that we are doing God's work, obeying God's Word, and accomplishing God's will, yet to be deceived and to experience eternal damnation.

That's what I think this passage is all about. It's about people who genuinely believed that they were doing God's work, obeying God's Word, and accomplishing God's will, yet they were deceived and they experienced the most severe pronouncements of damnation every mentioned by Christ in the world.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees" is repeated seven different times. "Woe to you." Condemnation, damnation, judgment be upon you. And Jesus said it to people who believed that what they were doing brought honor to God.

That's frightening, but it's true. Think about it. This is at the foundation of major world religions all around the world. Muslims in the Horn of Africa—where I just was—believe that they are doing God's Word, obeying God's Word, and accomplishing God's will, yet they are deceived and they will experience eternal damnation. Devout Jewish men and women today genuinely believe that they are doing God's work, obeying God's Word, and accomplishing God's will, yet they are deceived and they will experience eternal damnation. Man, have we left political correctness behind in this sermon already, or what?

And it's not just Muslims or devout Jews or any other religion. It is possible for you and me to genuinely believe that we are doing God's work, obeying God's Word, and accomplishing God's will—you and me!—yet for us to be deceived and for us to experience eternal damnation.

There are all kinds of people in the world who under the banner of Christianity, claiming to be Christian, are deceiving and being deceived. Whether it's Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses or Orthodox churches like I saw in the Horn of Africa, this is happening all over the world. And we would be fools to think it can't happen with us, that we can't be deceived in the same way.

So as we read this text, I don't want to read it as if it's just about a couple of groups of people that Jesus was speaking to 2000 years ago and we think, "Man, they missed it." I want us to consider these words and ask the question, "Have we missed it? Where are we missing the point? Where are we deceived?"

So what I've got in your notes is a series of questions that we all need to ask ourselves in light of this text—as individuals and as a church—based on what Jesus said to and about these scribes and Pharisees. I want us to ask these questions very seriously, very honestly. These are the kind of questions that when we ask them, pride in us says, "Well, of course, that's not me," but I want us to ask, "Really, is this me? Is this us?"

My prayer this morning is that God might expose our blind spots; that He might expose areas of our lives and our faith and our church that we don't see that need correcting; that God may uncover *our* hearts that God might help us to see everything that is there honestly; and ultimately that God would save us from ourselves; that God would save us from *our* tendency to be sincere in religion yet miss the point altogether. Because this is a dangerous temptation for every single person in this room, and for us as a church, and for me as a pastor.

I have had to spend much time in confession based upon this text this week. And when I got into my office this morning, I received an encouraging note from a brother in the church, and it was so appropriate, in ways he likely did not realize. But in his note, he shared this quote:

"We should pursue profound honesty before God, for he knows everything. We need to admit our inner spiritual sins (even the 'really bad' sins) and ask for his help. We must reject worldly rationalizing and moralizing, for in these ways the sickness and impotence of the Church is perpetuated. Furthermore, we need to pray specifically and honestly for deliverance and grace."

Let's pray toward that end. Father, we pray today that you would take these words from the mouth of Jesus and apply them to our hearts in this room. We don't want to miss the point. And we confess that we are prone to deceive and to be deceived. We live in a world full of sincere religion that ultimately leads to damnation, so help us, we pray, to hear Your Word

clearly in the next few minutes and to evaluate our lives honestly so that we might not experience the condemnation we deserve, but so that we might experience the consolation and comfort that we don't deserve in Christ. In His Name we pray, Amen.

Key Questions...

Okay. Key questions that we must ask in our lives and in the church. And later I want to apply this particularly to leaders in the church—all based on what Jesus said to and about these scribes and Pharisees.

Do we practice what we preach?

We'll walk through them step-by-step in the text, so let's start in verse 1:

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. (Matthew 23:1-4)

Question number one: Do we practice what we preach? In a statement of pure irony, Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat. In other words, with Moses' authority—the authority to teach God's Word—so practice and observe what they tell you. But we know that Jesus doesn't mean do everything these guys are saying. Throughout Matthew, he has confronted these leaders about their false teaching.

So Jesus is not saying, "You should do whatever they tell you," but rather, "When these men teach the Word of God rightly, as Moses did, you *should* observe what they say, but not what they do. For they preach, but they don't practice." So don't follow their example. These are guys who pour heavy burdens on others, telling them to do this or that, but they aren't willing to carry any of those burdens themselves. This is why Jesus calls them hypocrites throughout this chapter. They don't practice what they preach.

Now obviously no one is perfect. No one is completely holy. I don't presume to carry out perfectly everything I call us as a church to do, but this is a question I must ask and you and I must ask together. Do we practice what we proclaim? Is there consistency between what you say and how you live? As a parent, in your profession, on your campus, in your marriage, in your friendships? Leaders in this body, particularly those who teach the Word, whether as an elder or a small group leader, is there anything you are calling others to do that you are not committing your own life to? I urge you to consistency: Where is there inconsistency between what you say and how you live? Do we practice what we preach?

Are we content with the approval of God or do we desire the applause of men?

Second question, based on verses 5-7:

They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. (Matthew 23:5-7)

Second question: Are we content with the approval of God or do we desire the applause of men? This is the same thing we saw in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus called out men

and women for fasting, praying, and giving in order to be seen by men. Here, it's scribes and Pharisees who want to be seen by others. They make their phylacteries broad—these small boxes inscribed with texts from God's law that were worn on their arms or fastened to their foreheads. Or fringes—basically tassels worn on the outer corners of your clothes. These things were prescribed in Exodus 13 and Deuteronomy 6 and Deuteronomy 11, and the whole point was to draw attention to God and His Word. But the scribes and Pharisees were using these things to draw attention to themselves.

And we see in them a tendency in our own hearts, and it's why I phrased this question the way I did: Are we content with the approval of God or do we desire the applause of men? It is a deadly thing to desire the applause of men, for once you receive it, your flesh enjoys it and you want it more and more and more and you become less and less and less content with the approval of God.

Are you so content to enjoy God's smile that shines upon you by His grace to the point that you are dead to what men say to or about you? Let's pray for this in our lives and in each other's lives.

I ask that you pray for this for me. Over the last few years, particularly in light of that little orange book, many people have encouraged me in various ways (while others have not so encouraged me!). But it's all evidence of the grace of God, yet the applause of man has a way of poisoning the soul, and I want to be a man who lives for nothing more than the gracious approval of God.

Do we assert our superiority over others (and in the process usurp Christ's superiority over all)?

Third question: Do we assert our superiority over others (and in the process usurp Christ's superiority over all)? Jesus ends verse 7 by talking about the delight the scribes and Pharisees take in being called "rabbi" by others, and then He says:

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. (Matthew 23:8-10)

Now we know that Jesus is not saying here that there should be no teachers or leaders in the church. All throughout the New Testament, God sets up, for example, elders to teach and to lead in the church. Paul calls himself a spiritual father to Timothy, his dear son in the faith. Even later in this passage, Jesus talks about how He sends New Testament prophets and scribes and wise men, basically as missionaries, so this is not a total denouncement of any spiritual leadership among God's people.

But it is a clear rebuke to those who have used their leadership position to assert some sort of superiority above others to the point where they usurp or subvert Christ's superiority over all. And that's exactly what these scribes and Pharisees were doing. They were calling themselves rabbis and teachers and spiritual fathers and instructors, and in doing this, they were drawing people *to themselves* and *away from Christ*. And Jesus reprimands this.

Does your heart delight in receiving honor over other people? Do you find some weird sort of comfort whenever you realize that you are in a better, or even higher, position than someone else? Are you prone to, even in your own mind, exalt yourself above others? Do you compare yourself with other people, even subconsciously measuring yourself against them to discern your own level of spirituality?

This is what C.S. Lewis talked about in his powerful chapter on "Pride" in *Mere Christianity*. He calls pride, or self-conceit, "the great sin." Lewis said: "If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed ... If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud."

And then listen to how he links pride with competition:

"Now what you want to get clear is that pride is essentially competitive—is competitive by its very nature.... Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If every one else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest."

We are naturally prone to compete with one another, to measure ourselves against one another. And it cuts both ways. If I'm doing better than the person next to me, I feel good about myself spiritually. If I'm doing worse than the person next to me, I feel bad about myself spiritually.

But the whole point here is that we are brothers and sisters in Christ, equal before God through Christ, and He alone is superior. God, help us to live and lead and relate to one another in ways that affirm equality as brothers and sisters with Christ alone as superior over all.

Do we humbly serve others or are we hypocritically centered on ourselves?

Which leads right into the next question: Do we humbly serve others or are we hypocritically centered on ourselves? Jesus says in verses 11-12: *The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23:11-12)*

We've seen this picture of humility now numerous times in the book of Matthew. Jesus goes against the grain of every natural, worldly leadership principle, and He makes clear: God humbles the self-exalted, and God exalts the self-humbled—expressed most clearly in the way you serve others.

So are you constantly, consistently looking for ways and opportunities to serve others? Or is your more consistent thought, "What would be best for me in this situation?" Would people around you say that humble service is your posture? Would the people you work with say that? Would the people around you in the church say that? Would your husband or your wife or your children or your parents say that? Are you a servant? Do you humbly serve others or are you hypocritically centered on yourself?

Are we hindering people's salvation ...

Now this question leads us right into the first of seven woes that Jesus pronounces upon the Pharisees. Jesus transitions from talking about them to talking to them. There are all kinds of ways that different people have grouped these woes, but what I've done is basically grouped the first six into three pairs because it seems like they overlap in certain ways. So that leads to three more questions I want to ask, each of which has separate parts, and that will then lead us to the seventh woe, which I've labeled in your notes, "The Final Charge."

So let's read the first two woes starting in verse 13:

"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 those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." (Matthew 23:13-15)

Wow ... what a statement! So let's ask ourselves this question: Are we hindering people's salvation? That's the whole point of what the scribes and Pharisees were doing. They were keeping people out of the kingdom of heaven. And don't miss their sincerity in doing it! "They travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte..." These guys really believe that what they are doing, the message they are spreading, is right, and they've given their lives to making it known to everyone they can. But in the process, they are hindering people's salvation, keeping people from the kingdom of heaven.

So can this be true in us? Yes! So we must ask: Are we hindering people's salvation ... either through deceiving potential disciples of Jesus? In their blindness to Jesus as the Messiah, they were keeping others from seeing who Jesus is and they thought that what they were doing was right! Oh, realize this: False teachers abound in Christianity—throughout the New Testament and throughout church history. And some of them have malicious motives in doing so, but others of them have good motives in doing so, yet they deceive nonetheless.

Being in Africa these last couple of weeks was so humbling because there are prominent teachers in what's called the church here in America who are all over Africa, spreading gospel-less teaching and gospel-less thoughts. One of them recently led a huge campaign here in Birmingham and the message that's being taught is: trust in Jesus and things will go well for you. You will have a better life. You will have health and wealth and prosperity and success in this world. And the people in the slums of Africa are eating it up, but it's not the gospel.

I talked with one Arundo woman who has come to faith in Christ. Her decision to follow Christ could very possibly, very easily lead to her having her throat slit. Yet she has turned from her sin and herself and trusted in Christ because she believes He's worth it. That's the gospel.

To follow Christ, to enter into the kingdom of heaven, costs you everything you have in this world, and to preach anything less than that is to preach a false gospel. And this is why we must clearly and boldly and passionately confront false teaching and easy believism in all its forms—no matter how sincerely it is communicated.

Brothers and sisters, the supposed church is full of teachers—men and women—who minimize the character of God, His holiness and righteousness and wrath; who dilute the sinfulness of man; who trivialize the sacrifice of Christ as merely one option for salvation; who call people to give quick, intellectual assent to Jesus by raising a hand and praying a prayer without counting the cost of what it means to follow Him; and teachers who flat out deny, or at the very least skirt around, the doctrine of an eternal hell. It's deceptive, dangerous, and damning. We must not hinder people from entering the kingdom of heaven by deceiving potential disciples, giving them less than the gospel of the kingdom.

Or are we hindering people's salvation through creating virtual disciples of ourselves? These guys were not only preventing disciples of Jesus, but they were creating disciples of

themselves, leading others down a road of legalistic, Pharisaic self-exaltation, which snowballed into others receiving even further condemnation—*"twice as much a child of hell than the first."*

Oh, God help me, help you, help us to never create disciples of ourselves who follow us. Following the thoughts of men and the teachings of men will always lead down a road of condemnation. Only Christ can draw people into the kingdom of heaven, so let us constantly and consistently lives point to Him and call people to Him.

Are you sharing the biblical gospel with people around you and pointing the people around you to Christ as King? Or are you hindering people's salvation through subtle deception and dilution of the gospel, through spreading your own ideas? Or even, are you hindering people's salvation through your silence about the Savior?

Are we more concerned with biblical minutia than we are with practical ministry?

Next two woes, verse 16:

"Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it."

*"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!"
(Matthew 23:16-24)*

Now I really struggled with how to phrase this next question, based on these two woes, and I think this question here is the essence of what Jesus is saying, but it's open to misunderstanding, so follow with me closely.

Next question: Are we more concerned with biblical minutia than we are with practical ministry? Are we more concerned with biblical minutia than we are with practical ministry? Are we so focused on little things—that are important, so I don't want "biblical minutia" to sound like there's anything unimportant in the Bible because it's all important. But there are weightier things, Jesus says, and there is a tendency that we have to focus on lighter things while ignoring weightier things.

Let's unpack this in two ways according to these two woes. One: Do we justify sin according to our traditions or do we flee sin according to God's truth? That is a huge question. This whole conversation about swearing by the temple or the gold of the temple or the altar or a gift... Basically they had created traditions that said, "Well, if you only swear by this, then you are bound to what you said, but if you swear by that, you're not really bound to what you said." It had become common, it was their practice to hold people responsible for telling the truth or keeping a promise only under certain circumstances, and Jesus says, "No, God

is true. Whenever/wherever you swear to something, make an oath, speak a promise, you are accountable to God.”

They had justified sin according to their traditions instead of fleeing sin according to God’s truth. So do you and I do the same? Are there things in our lives that are sin that we think, “Yeah, I guess technically it’s sin, but everyone kind of does it, and it doesn’t seem like a big deal, so it’s okay.” Consider sins among us that are common that we become casual with and we justify—like gossip, gluttony/over-eating, small white lies, materialism. We adjust to sin because it’s common to us instead of fleeing sin because it’s repulsive to God.

Which leads, then, to probably what is the most convicting question of all for me, especially after my last two weeks in the Horn: Do we pride ourselves on following convenient laws or do we spend ourselves expressing costly love?

So Jesus mentions the law of the tithe in verse 23, and He talks about the scrupulous, careful ways the scribes and Pharisees had sought to obey that law. But they ignored showing justice and mercy and faithfulness, and the clear allusion here is to Micah 6:8, where God calls His people “*to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.*” To express justice and kindness to the poor and the needy. To walk humbly with God in a way that overflows into humble service of the people around you.

We live in a world where nearly half of the population lives on less than \$2 a day, and approximately a billion people live in desperate poverty, and I was with them this last week. To walk among and alongside brothers and sisters in a slum that also serves as a city dump where kids are mining through other people’s trash for food and supplies to sustain themselves. The stench alone is unforgettable as you watch where you step here and there to avoid sewage and waste running through a community filled with tin shacks where people live with nothing, on nothing.

So it doesn’t make sense, it just doesn’t make sense to spend my life, our lives, this church, priding ourselves on obeying convenient laws that are easy for us to do or debating minute truths that are easy for us to get hung up on when there is such great need to show justice and mercy and faithfulness in Birmingham and around the world. And again, it’s not that those convenient laws—like tithing here—are unimportant; they are important, Jesus says, but even weightier is the need to express the mercy and justice of God to the poor and needy. And that is costly love.

So are we willing to go out of our comfort zones and to get our hands dirty in practical ministry that is hard for us and costly to us? Or are we content to spend our lives mining through biblical details and doing that which we find relatively easy for us to do?

Are we focused on outward cleanliness instead of inward holiness?

Last question, based on this last pair of woes in verses 25-28:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (Matthew 23:25-28)

Are we focused on outward cleanliness instead of inward holiness? This is exactly what we've seen all throughout the book of Matthew: the tendency of the scribes and Pharisees to observe rules and regulations, principles and practices on the outside, while neglecting humility and purity on the inside. And Jesus reminds them through this fierce denunciation: Purity always begins in the heart. You don't clean the outside of a cup; you clean the inside, and the outside will become clean. When all you do is focus on the outside, when your religion is all about external improvement, you become like a whitewashed tomb.

Oh, hear this: Religion is a subtly dangerous cover-up for spiritual deadness. Do we see this in our lives? We go to church, we attend small group, we read the Bible, we walk through the motions, we check off the boxes, but if we're not careful, we miss the point. In all our efforts at moral renewal, trying to be better people, we only cover up the curse of sin that lies at the core of who we are.

Religion is a subtly dangerous cover-up for spiritual deadness, so we must ask ourselves: Is there life inside us? Is there inner transformation that is happening within us? Are our hearts being changed so that we desire Christ more than we desire the things of this world? Is there love, is there affection for Christ at the root of our obedience? Is Christianity a matter of duty for you, or is it a matter of delight for you? Is holiness being joyfully cultivated in your heart? The answer to all of these questions was a clear "no" among the scribes and Pharisees, so it set the stage for this final charge.

The Final Charge...

The seventh woe that Jesus pronounced upon them, verse 29:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation." (Matthew 23:29-36)

Follow this. They would take the tombs of prophets who had gone before, prophets we have read about in the Old Testament who were stoned or sawed in half, who were persecuted and reviled, and they would erect monuments to these prophets, as if to say, "We would never have done what our forefathers did." But Jesus says to them, "You absolutely would have done everything they did, because your heart is the same as theirs."

Jesus makes clear that this wasn't just something their forefathers had done; in essence, they had murdered God's messengers in the Old Testament. They were the sons of murderers, and they would show this, Jesus says, in the days ahead, when they would

murder Christian missionaries. Jesus says, "I'm going to send you prophets and wise men and scribes," and they would be crucified and flogged and persecuted and murdered.

It's exactly what we see unfold in the lives of disciples and missionaries for Christ who spread the gospel in the book of Acts. The Jewish religious leaders in the book of Acts are always on the heels of Christians who are proclaiming the gospel. We see this in Acts 13 at Pisidian Antioch; Acts 14 at Iconium, Lystra, and Thessalonica; Acts 17 at Thessalonica and Berea; Acts 18 and 20 at Corinth; Acts 20-23 at Jerusalem.

Then, here in Matthew 23, Jesus gives a climactic overview of how, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, basically the first person sinfully murdered in the Old Testament to the last man murdered in the Hebrew arrangement of the Old Testament Scriptures (which would have ended with Zechariah the priest being stoned in 2 Chronicles 24:20-22). And the picture is clear. The blood that was on their hands because in the past and in the future would ultimately lead to the blood that would be on their hands in the present.

These scribes and Pharisees, just days from when this was spoken, were about to murder the promised Messiah. This generation would bring to a culmination the opposition of God's people to to God and His Word. In a matter of days, these leaders would incite the crowds to cry out for the crucifixion of the Messiah, and they would say in Matthew 27:25: "*His blood be on us and on our children.*" Verse 32, these leaders, and the people they led, would fill up the full measure of their fathers' sin, and God would tolerate it in no more.

We've seen this in Scripture before. In Genesis 15, God said He would delay His wrath for four hundred years, for four generations, until the sins of the Amorites were complete, and when the sins of the Amorites had reached their full measure, God would bring His wrath on them. And that was applied at different points to different nations in their sin in Scripture but never before until now was that pictured applied to the people of Israel. But now it is. Woe, condemnation, damnation, judgment be upon those who murder the Messiah.

But not just upon them, ladies and gentlemen. I hope we have seen in various questions that we have asked of ourselves that the scribes and Pharisees in this text are not as foreign to us as we might like to think.

The Frightening Conclusion...

And so as we come to the climax of these condemnations, this denouncement of scribes and Pharisees and crowds who murdered the Messiah, we come face-to-face with a frightening conclusion: We are them.

We have hearts that would murder the Messiah, and to think anything different is to flatter ourselves in the same way these scribes and Pharisees did. The old Negro spiritual asks, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" And the answer is, "Yes, we were there." Not as spectators, but as participants, guilty participants, plotting, scheming, betraying, bargaining, and handing Him over to be crucified.

John Stott said, "Until you see the cross as that which is done by you, you will never appreciate that it is done for you."

The great Scottish hymn writer Horatius Bonar wrote:

*"Twas I that shed the sacred blood; I nailed him to the tree;
I crucified the Christ of God; I joined the mockery.
Of all that shouting multitude, I feel that I am one;
And in that din of voices rude I recognize my own.
Around the cross the throng I see, Mocking the Sufferer's groan;
Yet still my voice it seems to be, As if I mocked alone."*

We have all rebelled against God. We have all turned from Him and from His Word, supremely revealed in His one and only Son. And no matter how sincere we are, no matter how hard we try, no matter what we do, we have hearts that warrant the wrath and condemnation of God.

And so the last verses in this chapter, though they have special application to the people of Israel, also have particular application to us. Verse 37:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" (Matthew 23:37-39)

The Inevitable Certainty...

So don't miss it: the inevitable certainty for them and the inevitable certainty for us. The condemnation of sinners is imminent. It was for the people of Jerusalem. The audience has now broadened from just the scribes and the Pharisees to the people who followed them. They would all experience the wrath of God. This temple, this house in Jerusalem, would be utterly desolated within a matter of years.

They would experience divine judgment, and, ladies and gentlemen, though we are in a different scene at a different time, the condemnation of sinners is imminent in this room. Every single man and woman in this room, without exception, will stand before God accountable for your sin, deserving His condemnation.

But the good news is the salvation of sinners is possible. Jesus says, "I have longed, my people, to gather you under my wings and to give you rest and protection and salvation." But they would not come to Him!

O, come to Him! Salvation is possible for all who come to Him! Do not resist Him!

The condemnation of sinners is imminent, the salvation of sinners is possible, and the exaltation of Jesus is guaranteed. He *will* come back as the reigning Lord, and every knee *will* bow down and every voice will cry, "Blessed." The question is: When He returns, will you see Him coming as your consuming Judge or your welcomed King?

So How Shall We Respond?

Among our elders ...

So how do we respond to this text? In light of all that we've seen here, I believe it is appropriate to apply this text to two groups of people. The first is our leaders, particularly our elders and pastors. As you know, today we are affirming six new elders in our faith family, who join 25 others who are serving in this capacity right now. And this passage is a particularly stern warning and caution to the spiritual leaders, elders, pastors in our midst—both these new brothers who are coming on and the brothers who have been and will continue to serve in this capacity.

Notice in the Bible, all throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament, and particularly in the ministry of Jesus here, the most stern warnings and the most furious wrath is reserved for those who claim to be God's servants, who are in positions of leadership among God's people, but who deceive and mislead them away from God's glory. So elders, myself included, let us be particularly cautioned and challenged this morning.

Let us lead with integrity from God's Word as the only source of authority for what we believe and how we behave. Oh God, may there not be hypocrisy among us. May God's Word be clear from our lips and be clear in our lives. May we never be guided by our traditions but always be guided by His truth. May it be the compass around which everything in our lives and everything in this church revolves.

And let us lead by submission to God's Son as our Chief Shepherd and the Coming King. I have phrased that very intentionally. Leadership in the kingdom involves submission to the King. To submit to Christ. He is our Chief Shepherd. He is our Teacher, our Instructor. This is His church, not ours, and we are accountable to Him. And He is our coming King to whom we must give an account for how we shepherd this body. So let us love Christ and let us lead His church to be ready for the day when He returns to claim His people fully and finally.

Oh, church, pray for these things among your pastors and elders. Pray for these things in my life.

In our lives ...

And then in all of our lives, three particular takeaways from this text. First and foremost, more important than anything else, let us humbly hide under the shelter of Christ's mercy. We need the mercy of Christ, and this is the one thing the scribes and Pharisees missed the most. So don't miss it. This is what separates true religion that brings glory to God from sincere religion that warrants wrath from God. Are you hiding under the wings of Christ's mercy?

I urge every person in this room—hide under the wings of Christ's mercy! If you have never trusted in Him to save you from your sins, hide in Him today. See that He has taken the condemnation of God the Father that you deserve upon Himself. He has endured the wrath that we warrant through His death on the cross, and He has risen from the grave, conquering sin and death, so that all who hide in Him, all who turn from their sin and themselves to trust in Him as the Savior, Lord, and King of the universe will be saved. Hide under the shelter of Christ's mercy. And once you do, Christian, live there. Every day, every moment, humbly hide under the shelter/the wings of Christ's mercy.

Second, let us wisely walk in surrender to Christ's authority. So how do we avoid, then, the trap of sincere religion that misses the point altogether? Two things that are most

important. One, by understanding His Word rightly. At the center of all of these woes is a wrong understanding of the Scriptures, a misguided use of the Scriptures, and a fundamental failure to discern what God's Word means. This is so key.

God has not left us alone to figure out how to honor Him, how to obey Him, how to glorify Him. We are not wandering in the dark wondering how we can please and worship God. He has revealed Himself to us in His Word, so we must read it and study it. Not in attempts to twist it according to our tastes, but in surrender to it as His truth, in such a way that what He says goes. We must understand this Word rightly, which means we must read it and study it and obey it.

So we walk in surrender to Christ's authority by understanding His Word rightly, and by desiring His worship wholeheartedly. We walk in surrender to Him. He is King, He is Lord, He is Ruler, He is Master, and He is worthy. The scribes and Pharisees refused to live for the glory of Christ. May the opposite be said of us. Let us refuse to live for anything else but the glory of Christ.

And along those lines, in the midst of this chapter, yes, see the condemnation of Christ on sinners, but also see the compassion of Christ for sinners. He longs for Jerusalem's salvation.

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that right before this, in Luke's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, when He saw the city, He wept. Even now, there are literally billions of people in various places in the world who are giving themselves to sincere religion where they genuinely believe they are honoring God or whatever gods they worship, but they are deceived and they are headed to eternal damnation. Over 1.5 billion Muslims in the world, over a billion Hindus, hundreds and hundreds of millions of Buddhists and animists and others who are under the condemnation of God at this moment.

I saw them this last week. The Arundo—10 million people, 99.99% of whom are sincere, dedicated Muslims, and most of them have never even heard that there is a Savior under whose wings they can receive mercy!

And they're not just there. They're here. Men and women who you work with and live around who need to hide in the shelter of Christ's mercy. Let's tell them, brothers and sisters, let's tell them!

Let us humbly hide ourselves under the shelter of Christ's mercy, let us wisely walk in surrender to Christ's authority, and let us passionately proclaim the supremacy of Christ's glory. In Birmingham and to the ends of the earth. From the wealthiest of the wealthy to the poorest of the poor; to every tribe, tongue, and clan in Africa; and to every other people group on the planet. Let's give our lives and this church as God's people passionately proclaiming the supremacy of Christ's glory.

* NOTE: Arundo is an adopted nickname for a people group in the Horn of Africa whose identity must be kept secure. For more information about the Arundo people, visit [The Church at Brook Hills website](#).

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