

Chapter 96: Neglecting Weightier Matters

Matthew 23:13–24

After Jesus had warned the crowds and his disciples about the scribes and the Pharisees in the last section, he now turns to address the scribes and the Pharisees directly. In this section, Jesus begins a series of seven “woes,” where he proclaims judgment against their false teaching. It is interesting to see how Jesus’ critiques move from seemingly minor matters to outright murder, from least to greatest. Nevertheless, Jesus rebukes them even from the beginning of these woes for a false religious system that binds people in hell. Jesus shows how the Pharisees have created a heavy and burdensome religion that cannot accomplish what they hope. By exposing this system as corrupt and bankrupt, Jesus shows that *only the gospel can lift the weight of the law*.

Burdensome Gospel (Matt. 23:13–15)

As we observed in our study of the last section, Matthew does not tell us explicitly here that the scribes and Pharisees are present; however, the natural reading of this section seems to suggest that they are present as Jesus addresses them directly. If so, we see here Jesus’ excoriating denunciation of these false teachers in a manner that should cause us to pause and consider. Some in the church have a temperament where they are always seeking the thrill of entering into a fight. Others, however, are too reluctant to rebuke false teachers under any circumstances, unwilling to confront wolves who may harass the flock. John Calvin, a Reformer who faced constant threats and opposition from the false teachers of the Roman Catholic Church, felt keenly the importance of rising to oppose false teachers:

Hence we may infer how cruel is the mildness of those who dislike our vehemence. They are displeased to see harshness and severity used towards the wolves, which are constantly, with open mouth, tearing and devouring the sheep; and yet they see the poor sheep deceived by a vain disguise, freely throwing themselves into the jaws of the wolves, unless the pastor who desires to save them, and endeavors to rescue them from destruction, drive them away with a loud voice. We must therefore follow out the design of Christ, by copying out his example in severe threatenings against wicked despisers, and in boldly exclaiming against them, that those who are capable of being cured may be led by the fear of destruction to withdraw from them. For though we gain nothing by addressing the enemies of the truth, yet they must be summoned to the judgment-seat of God, and others must be warned, that they may know that the same destruction awaits themselves, if they do not speedily withdraw from a wicked league with them.¹

¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:83.

While we must constantly check our motives to examine the ways in which sin may lead us to judge people wrongly, pastors must always be ready to drive out wolves from the midst of the church.

To rebuke these leaders, Jesus issues seven “woes.” In many ways, these seven “woes” are the inverse of the beatitudes that taught to open his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.² The “woe” has a variety of uses in the Gospel of Matthew, sometimes only as a “compassionate ‘alas!’” (Matt. 24:19), but here it includes a “strong condemnation,” so that by these “woes,” “Jesus the Messiah pronounces judgment.”³ Even while these statements offer clear judgments, Morris is probably right to say that Jesus “is not rejoicing over their final overthrow. He is stating the way things are, and at least in some places the word contains something of an appeal. Surely they will turn from their evil way?”⁴

In the first woe, Jesus rebukes the scribes and Pharisees as “hypocrites,” accusing them that “you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in” (v. 13). Calvin notes well that, under the old covenant, the priests, Levites, and the scribes were appointed to the work of publicly reading and teaching God’s law (Deut. 33:10; Ezra 7:1–10, 25–26; Neh. 8:1–8). By their teaching, they were to be “porters [i.e., doorkeepers] for the kingdom of heaven.” Therefore, their work corresponds to the work of pastors today under the New Testament, since Christ has now “committed [the keys to the kingdom of heaven] to the custody of pastors, that they may admit believers into eternal life, and exclude unbelievers from all expectation of it.”⁵ Jesus here rebukes the scribes and Pharisees, then, because their teaching did not properly offer life to the people, but rather took away “the key of knowledge” from the people, so that the people perished (Luke 11:52; cf. Hos. 4:6).⁶

While Jesus will unfold the full nature of their errors in the following woes. In this first woe, however, Jesus limits his scope to a general denunciation of the effects of their ministry. In addition to shutting the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces (v. 13), they go to great lengths to convert Gentiles to their faith, but in so doing, Jesus says, “you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves” (v. 15). They sought to bring people to their religion, and their religion brought these proselytes to a door to the kingdom of heaven that remained locked, since the scribes and Pharisees had taken away the key of knowledge. Regarding this missionary zeal, Calvin observes that it “was a holy and excellent work to gain disciples to God, so to allure the Gentiles to the Jewish worship—which was at that time degenerate, and was even full of wicked profanation,” but that the failure of the ministry itself meant that the total effect of that ministry “was nothing else than to hurry them from Scylla to Charybdis.”⁷

Blind Guides: Minimized Holiness (Matt. 23:16–22)

In the second woe, Jesus begins to add specifications to the general charges of the first woe. He

² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 903.

³ Carson, “Matthew,” 536.

⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 578–79.

⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:83–84.

⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 828.

⁷ This illustration comes from Homer’s *Odyssey*, where Scylla was a six-headed sea monster, and Charybdis was a whirlpool. Both were deadly for sailors, and the scribes and Pharisees were moving people from one source of destruction to the other. (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:86.)

begins by discussing the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees regarding oath-taking, a subject he had discussed during the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:33–37. There, Jesus did not explicitly charge the scribes and Pharisees with wrongdoing, but he interacted with the same general approach that Jesus deals with again here. As Morris explains, “A whole tractate of the Mishnah is given over to the subject (*Shebu’ot*), with, of course, the corresponding section of the Talmud. This tractate goes into a bewildering variety of forms of oaths, their validity and their invalidity, and this makes it clear that the topic was both difficult and of enormous interest for what went on in daily life.”⁸ Indeed, we see a kind of sophistry and casuistry at play that attempts to find justification for things that are not justifiable according to God’s Word.

In Matthew 5, Jesus dealt with a similar approach to oath-taking. Namely, Jesus rejected the idea that oaths were not binding unless someone swore those oaths in certain ways. So, to swear by heaven, or earth, or Jerusalem meant that the oath was not binding, but to swear by Yahweh’s name bound one to keep the oath. Here, Jesus talks about distinctions the scribes and Pharisees made between the gold of the temple (binding) and the temple (not binding), or the altar (not binding) and the sacrifice on the altar (binding). While the Pharisees suggested that there were some ways of swearing that gave enough verbal distance between the object of the oath and God himself, Jesus’ point is comprehensive: to swear by anything in all of creation is to swear by the Creator of heaven and earth (vv. 21–22). They were attempt a legalism that was constantly looking for loopholes out of their obligations, whereas Jesus insists that these matters are of basic, fundamental importance.

Now, it is important to recognize how significant this point is. Jesus cites this kind of oath-keeping as a reason to pronounce a woe of judgment against the scribes and Pharisees because, by this purportedly sophisticated reasoning, they violated the demands of God’s Law as summarized in the Ninth Commandment: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” The second table of the Ten Commandments moves from the most heinous outward offense (murder) to commandments that deal with sins of decreasing external heinousness (adultery and stealing), where the command against bearing false witness comes next to last, right before the command against coveting, which (on its own) has no external consequences. We tend to judge sins solely on the degree of external damage those sins may cause, so that we might be tempted to downplay the significance of this particular issue. Jesus, however, begins here to show that, by neglecting something that is (outwardly) minor in God’s Law, they were violating something that God—who cannot lie (Heb. 6:18)—considered very important.

Blind Guides: Externalized Righteousness (Matt. 23:23–24)

Yet, while the scribes and Pharisees downplayed some of the obligations in the (outwardly) minor aspects of God’s law, they also over-emphasized other minor commandments, to the neglect of the weightier commandments: “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” (v. 23). From this, Calvin rightly observes that the Pharisees engaged in a two-pronged legalism. First, they “endeavored to please God by observing with exactness some trivial matters,” and, second, when they do discover

⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 580–81.

ways in which they have fallen short of God’s law, they seek “recourse to this second remedy of expiating any heinous offenses by satisfactions which are of no value.”⁹ Both in establishing their own righteousness, and in seeking forgiveness for their sins, they adopt a minimalistic view of what God demands. Thus, they neither practice the weightier matters of the law, and neither do they recognize how great of a debt they owe to God for their sins.

For this, Jesus rebukes them: “You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” (v. 24). As commentators point out, it was good and right for the Pharisees to try to strain out a gnat, since “the gnat, as an insect, was unclean (Lev 11:20–23; cf. also the “swarming creatures” of Lev 11:41–44) and therefore must not be ingested; but then the camel was no less unclean (Lev 11:4), and a lot bigger!”¹⁰ As with tithing in the previous verse, the point was not that Jesus wanted to do away with God’s law. Indeed, he affirmed that “these you ought to have done,” although “without neglecting the others”—i.e., the other, weightier matters. By all means strain out the gnat, but don’t think that by straining a gnat you can imbibe the camel! Their religion was built on externalities and formalism, rather than on the truly weighty issues that were internal, spiritual, and from the heart.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Jesus mean by the word “woe” (v. 13a)? Who were the “scribes and Pharisees” (v. 13b)? What does Jesus mean by the word, “hypocrites” (v. 13c)? In what sense do the scribes and Pharisees “shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces” (v. 13d)? What is wrong with their missionary zeal (v. 13e)? How do you think that Jesus’ criticisms here should shape the way that we understand the ministry of the church?
2. Why were the scribes and Pharisees so concerned with determining the criteria that made oaths binding (vv. 16–22)? What kinds of strategies did they use to evade the binding requirements of those oaths? Why does Jesus reject their approach? Why do you think that Jesus begins with the issue of swearing oaths that we would consider to be relatively minor? How does our honesty reflect on the glory of God?
3. Why were the scribes and Pharisees so concerned with tithing their herbs and spices (v. 23a)? What do you think is the connection between scrupulous tithing and a failure to practice justice, mercy, and faithfulness (v. 23b)? Does Jesus reject the practice of tithing altogether with his rebuke (v. 23c)? In what areas are you concerned to strain out a gnat? In what areas might you be swallowing a camel (v. 24)?
4. What have you learned so far from all that Jesus has taught about the dangers of Pharisaic legalism? How does legalism differ from a true zeal for righteousness? Are there aspects of legalism that the church struggles with today? What are the aspects of legalism that you have recognized within your own heart? What would it mean to embrace the fullness of the gospel to lift the weight of the law in your life?

⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:89.

¹⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 874.