

# THE SEVEN WOES OF MATTHEW 23

At the start of His ministry, Jesus pronounced seven blessings on the righteous in Matthew 5:3-10:

1. Theirs is the kingdom of Heaven (vv. 3 & 10).
2. They shall be comforted (v. 4).
3. They shall inherit the land (v. 5).
4. They shall be filled (v. 6).
5. They shall obtain mercy (v. 7).
6. They shall see God (v. 8). And...
7. They shall be called sons of God (v. 9). Then...

At the close of His ministry, He pronounced seven woes on the un- and/or self-righteous Pharisees and scribes in Matthew 23:13-31. Why? Because...

1. They kept people out of God's kingdom (v. 13).
2. They took advantage of widows (v. 14)
3. They misled men to eternal destruction (v. 15).
4. They were covetous of worldly things (vv. 16-22).
5. They refused to show compassion (vv. 23-24).
6. They were inwardly corrupt (vv. 25-28). And...
7. They afflicted the righteous (vv. 29-31). Now...

For some reason we read and hear a lot about the seven blessings, while we very seldom read or hear about the seven woes; but since there seems to be a correlation between these, perhaps we should read and hear much more than we do. Notice the following chart of contrast:

THE RIGHTEOUS...	...THE UNRIGHTEOUS...
...enter the kingdom of God, while...	...keep people out of the kingdom of God.
...are comforted, while...	...are condemned.
...inherit the promised land, while...	...are doomed eternally.
...hunger for holiness, while...	...are greedy for gain.
...obtain mercy, while...	...are merciless.
...are pure in heart, while...	...are defiled in heart. And...
...are children of Heaven, while...	...are the children of Hell. So...

While the beatitudes express the true way to please God, the woes express the wrong way to please Him.

There's another thing I find interesting: Notice that Jesus called these unrighteous leaders seven things—hypocrites, children of Hell, blind guides, fools, whitewashed tombs, murderers, and serpents. Well...

Before considering each of these seven woes on the un- or self-righteous, let's consider what the words **hypocrites** and **woe** mean: (Incidentally, I want to use the NLT today.)

**Hypocrites** are simply actors, those who pretend to be what they aren't; so, when used religiously, this word came to refer to those who act and profess to be better than what they really are (cf. vv. 25-28), whether consciously (John 12:42-43) or not. (They are called **blind** after all [23:16, et al].)

The term **woe**, especially when used in *this type of context*, expresses pity due to imminent punishment; surely the seven woes and judgment of God in Isaiah chapter five came to their minds.

## Let's begin by considering **Woe #1** → Keeping people out of God's kingdom:

How terrible it will be before you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you won't let others enter the kingdom of Heaven, and you won't go in yourselves (Mat. 23:13). *The question is: How did they do this? In at least two ways:*

1. **By keeping others from hearing the truth:** Speaking of some Jewish leaders, in First Thessalonians 2:16 Paul wrote that they were trying to keep us from preaching the Good News to the Gentiles for fear some that might be saved. [Sort of reminds us of Jonah. Huh?] Then Paul went on to say the very same thing that Jesus indicated in the latter part of Matthew 23: By doing this, they continue to pile up their sins. But the anger of God has caught up with them at last.
2. **By teaching false doctrines:** At another time when Jesus was preaching woes to these leaders, in Luke 11:52a He said, How terrible it will be for you experts in religious law! For you hide the key to knowledge from the people. You don't enter the kingdom yourselves, and you prevent others from entering. Adam Clarke, in fact, said that "In ancient times the rabbins carried a key, which was the symbol or emblem of knowledge."

**Woe #2 → Taking advantage of widows:** How terrible it will be for you teachers ... and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! You shamelessly cheat widows out of their property, and then, to cover up the kind of people you really are, you make long prayers in public. Because of this, your punishment will be the greater (Mat. 23:14).

One way in which they were described as hypocrites was in that they uttered lengthy prayers with the wrong motives.

In Matthew 6:5 Jesus spoke of these very men when He said, When you pray, don't be like the hypocrites who love to pray publicly on street corners and in the synagogues where everyone can see them.

Paul, no doubt, had such men in mind when he wrote First Thessalonians 2:5 about using religion as a cloak for covetousness (NKJV); i.e., they'd extort money (or other resources) from people through the façade of piety.

Just as the Bible implies the vulnerability of widows in Exodus 22:22, these men, being well aware of this susceptibility, purposely exploited it.

Jesus touched on the very same idea of verse 14 in verses 25-26 where He referred to how they were full of extortion (NKJV). (Cf. Mark 12:40 w/ vv. 41-44. How Sad!) Incidentally...

Some believe that these men didn't just extort from widows in an emotional manner like televangelists do today, but they also did it in more forceful ways such as foreclosing on their property and teaching that children could just give to them as leaders instead of to their needy parents as God commanded (something we'll get back to in Woe #4). Furthermore in this verse...

Jesus clarified why He placed a woe upon them: they'd receive greater condemnation (NKJV).

**Woe #3 → Misleading men into eternal destruction:** Yes, how terrible it will be for you teachers ... and you Pharisees. For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn him into twice the son of Hell as you yourselves are (Mat. 23:15).

In this verse Jesus has moved from their shutting up God's kingdom to men to opening up the gates of Hell to them; i.e., there's no middle ground—it's salvation or condemnation for all men. So...

What did Jesus mean by twice the son of Hell? Well, I think Albert Barnes aptly answers this for us when he wrote that "*The Jewish writers themselves say that the proselytes were 'scabs of Israel' who 'hindered the coming of the Messiah' by their great wickedness. The Pharisees gained them either to swell their numbers or to make gain by extorting their money under various pretences; and when they had accomplished that, they took no pains to instruct or restrain them. They had renounced their superstitions, which had before somewhat restrained them. But the Pharisees had given them no religion in its place, so they were left to the full indulgence of their vices.*" Incidentally...

It wasn't their zeal that Jesus was condemning, for as Paul wrote in Romans 10:2, many of them had a zeal for God, but [it just was]n't according to knowledge. (While we're on the point, some like McGarvey believe Jesus was speaking of Jewish proselytes to Phariseism, not Gentile proselytes to Judaism.) Anyway, let's also not fail to notice that...

Jesus told these men they were sons of Hell as opposed to sons of the kingdom (cf. Mat. 13:38).

**Woe #4 → Covetous of worldly things:** Blind guides! How terrible it will be for you! For you say that it means nothing to swear "by God's temple"—you can break that oath. But then you say that it's binding to swear "by the gold in the temple." Blind fools! Which is greater, the gold or the Temple that makes the gold sacred? And you say that to take an oath "by the altar" can be broken, but to swear "by the gifts on the altar" is binding! How blind! For which is greater, the gift on the altar or the altar that makes the gift sacred? [So] when you swear "by the altar," you're swearing by it and by everything on it. And when you swear "by the Temple," you're swearing by it and by God who lives in it. [In fact, even] when you swear "by Heaven," you're swearing by the throne of God and by God who sits on the throne (Mat. 23:16-22).

This time, instead of calling the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites, Jesus called them blind guides and fools. Why? Well, let's consider the blind guides concept first.

The other place where Jesus used this language is found in **Matthew 15:14** where He spoke of the blind leading or guiding the blind. And what's the context of that statement? Well, let's read **verses 1-9**, and we'll find out. See...

In Matthew 15 Jesus was dealing with how these men had become blind to the true values of life, life under God, that is; and this blindness came from the teaching that they received from their forefathers, perhaps even those under consideration in Malachi 3 where God condemned the leaders of Israel for their covetous practices.

It was a vicious cycle—blind leading blind, creating more blind to lead more blind! And who knows where it all began? So...

The men who Jesus was speaking to here seemed to be those who were fools because, as they themselves might have said, "That's just way it's supposed to be: the poor are supposed to be coerced into giving this way so that their religious leaders can be wealthy." In other words...

By emphasizing the gold and the gifts as more significant than the temple or the altar, then people would be obliged to give more, especially if they wanted to make any vows to God, & much of that money would eventually ... somehow ... end up in the pockets of the scribes & Pharisees. So...

They were likely called fools for one of the two following reasons:

1. Because they were essentially trained to be covetous of other men's goods and didn't realize they were being covetous. Or...
2. Because they were essentially and unknowingly defeating their purpose by (as a consequence) leading the givers into thinking less of God's temple and altar than of their own possessions, causing them to want to give less rather than more. Anyway, the point is...

These men were utilizing a religious system that basically permitted them to rob God and others and somehow still preserve their reputations.

**Woe #5 → Refusing to show compassion:** How terrible it will be for you teachers ... and Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you're careful to tithe even the tiniest part of your income, but you ignore the important things of the law: justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but you shouldn't leave undone the more important things. Blind guides! You strain your water so you won't accidentally swallow a gnat, then you swallow a camel (Mat. 23:23-24)!

This is a classic case of majoring in minors, while minoring in majors.

There are numerous passages concerning what's really important to God in contrast to what isn't as important. Here are just a few:

1. In First Samuel 15:22 Judge Samuel once said to King Saul, What's more pleasing to the Lord: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to His voice? Obedience is far better than sacrifice. Listening to Him is much better than offering the fat of rams.

2. In Micah 6:6-8 Prophet Micah once said to Israel, What can we bring to the Lord to make up for what we've done? Should we bow before God with offerings of yearling calves? Should we offer Him thousands of rams and tens of thousands of rivers of olive oil? Would that please the Lord? Should we sacrifice our firstborn children to pay for the sins of our souls? Would that make Him glad? No, O people, the Lord has already told you what's good, and this is what He requires: to do what's right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. And you know what's funny about this?
3. One scribe for sure understood all this, whether he was complying with it or not: in Mark 12:33 he said to Jesus, I know it's important to love God with all my heart, all my understanding, and all my strength, and to love my neighbors as myself. This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings & sacrifices required in the law. And more than likely...
4. He had Hosea 6:6 in mind where the Lord said to Israel, I want you to be merciful; I don't want your sacrifices. I want you to know God; that's more important than burnt offerings. I.e., to know God means in turn to be merciful to those He has created (cf. Mat. 25:34ff).
5. In Matthew 9:13 Jesus said to some Pharisees, Go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: "I want you to be merciful; I don't want your sacrifices." And...
6. In Matthew 12:7 He said to some Pharisees again, You wouldn't have condemned those who aren't guilty if you knew the meaning of this Scripture: "I want you to be merciful; I don't want your sacrifices."
7. In Deuteronomy 10:12 Moses said to God's people, What does the Lord your God require of you? He requires you to fear Him, to live according to His will, [and] to love and worship Him with all your heart and soul. So...

Since we know God did indeed command sacrifices, what's the point of all these passages? Well, think about it:

Sacrifices (at least literal, physical ones) didn't exist in the beginning, nor were they ever meant to continue forever after they were initiated; their purpose (which people in general just never seemed to comprehend) was merely to point to the offering of God's Son later—a one-time, eternally satisfying sacrifice. So...

While all those bloody sacrifices were merely temporary in nature, the ideas of loving God and neighbor have always and will always exist, implying that sacrifices were always meant to be secondary in significance to the eternal concepts of justice, mercy, and faith.

Now that there's no more need for bloody sacrifices, Jesus emphasizes the offering of oneself to God and neighbor in Romans 12:1: I plead with you to give your bodies to God. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind He will accept. When you think of what He has done for you, is this too much to ask? Oh...

And the part about straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel was just a sarcastic way of illustrating the absurdity of their actions in the eyes of God: gnats were like the smallest of unclean animals around (Lev. 11:42) and camels were like the largest of unclean animals around (Lev. 11:4); but while they'd strain their drinks to be sure they didn't swallow a gnat, they'd (figuratively, of course) swallow a camel. Incidentally...

Jesus may have been using a Jewish pun here: I say this because these words in Aramaic were *kamla* (gnat) and *gamla* (camel). So, unlike it might seem at first...

Rather than condemning these men for doing too much, Jesus was condemning them for doing too little—waaayyy too little actually: tithing they should've done, while at the same time not leaving justice and the love of God behind (the way Luke 11:42 puts it). And...

A great example of these men is when they paid Judas 30 pieces of silver to betray Jesus to be killed, but then later said they wouldn't accept it back because it was blood money (Mat. 27:6)!

**Woe #6 → Inwardly corrupt:** How terrible it will be for you teachers ... and Pharisees. Hypocrites! You're so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you're filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence! Blind Pharisees! First wash the inside of the cup, and then the outside will become clean too. How terrible it will be for you

teachers ... and Pharisees. Hypocrites! You're like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside, but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity. You try to look like upright people outwardly, but inside your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness (Mat. 23:25-28).

While the other woes may be closely related, these two are more than that—they're saying the exact same thing, so I placed them together. Anyway...

Although sad, it's interesting that these so-called leaders were more concerned about a clean vessel than they were about what went into the vessel; i.e., the vessel may be ceremoniously clean, but the food in it may have been acquired by extortion (the meaning of **greed** here), and/or it may be the means by which they become gluttons. Likewise...

While their "earthen vessels" may have been clean and smelling sweet on the outside (that which men could see and smell), their insides—their hearts, that which God sees (1 Sam. 16:7)—were nasty, nasty, nasty in His sight; so Jesus told them that if they'd just clean their inward man, their outward man would follow suite. As Dwight L. Moody used to say, "If I take care of my character, my reputation will take care of itself."

Perhaps Jesus added the whitewashed tombs woe as yet another illustration of the same point because this was Passover week; I say this because the Jews had the practice of using the preceding month of Adar to renew the whitewashing on tombs in order to mark them clearly so that the pious who were on their way to Jerusalem for the Passover wouldn't accidentally defile themselves by touching a place where the bodies of the dead were buried.

In Luke 11:44 Jesus put it this way: How terrible it will be for you! For you are like hidden graves in a field. People walk over them without knowing the corruption they're stepping on.

Paul called the high priest Ananias a **whitewashed wall** in Acts 23:3 because he sat in judgment of Paul while at the same time having him beaten against the law. So...

Whitewashing wasn't a mark of beauty; it was a warning of uncleanness—of being dead as these men were to God, which explains why Jesus warned His disciples to avoid Herod (Mark 8:15) as well as the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mat. 16:6 & 12).

[If there's time, the Lord's answer to all this obsessive, ritualistic worship without the spirit can be found by reading Mark 7:1-23.] And lastly...

**Woe #7 → Afflicting the righteous:** How terrible it will be for you teachers ... and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you build tombs for the prophets your ancestors killed and decorate the graves of the godly people your ancestors destroyed. Then you say, "We never would've joined them in killing the prophets." In saying that, you're accusing yourselves of being the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead: finish what they started. Snakes! Sons of vipers! How will you escape the judgment of Hell (Mat. 23:29-33)? You know...

I find it interesting that Jesus implies that being religiously rigid in the way these men were doesn't lead to persecution BY others as much as it does to persecution OF others. I.e....

It sounds like Jesus was saying to these men who had left off faith (v. 23) that when men try to please God by works alone—by their own righteousness (which is actually like **filthy rags** to God, Isa. 64:6), they end up judging others by comparing them with themselves.

In Romans 14:4a Paul asked, **Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls.** And...

In Second Corinthians 10:12b Paul sarcastically said of some Jews that **they're only comparing themselves with each other and measuring themselves by themselves.** What foolishness!

It's also interesting that what Jesus was implying here is that while these religious leaders pretended to be kind toward the departed prophets, they were persecuting those of their own day (vv. 34-36)!

When Jesus referred to how they agreed that their forefathers killed the prophets of God and how that they were therefore accusing themselves at the same time, what did He mean? Well, He could have meant a couple of things:

1. He could've been saying that since they concurred that their forefathers did indeed kill God's prophets, and since they were at this very time plotting to kill Him—the very Son of God, then they were demonstrating that they were no better than their forefathers, but were in fact worse than they were! Or...
2. He could've been saying that since they concurred that their forefathers did indeed kill God's prophets, they were actually liars when they said that they wouldn't have done what they did because it was their general practice to justify themselves by boasting in their ancestry; after all, Jesus did call them **hypocrites** here.

Two more things on these verses before we close:

1. While Jesus called opponents of the Gospel wolves in sheep's clothing, and while He called Herod a fox, He called these men by the most detestable of creatures: vipers—deadly, poisonous, yet small snakes. And...
2. While John the Baptist in the beginning of Jesus' ministry indicated that these so-called leaders may not be so hardened as to be unable to change (Mat. 3:7-9), here at the end of Jesus' ministry He indicated that they were too hardened to be able to change (v. 32). Well...

## **In Conclusion...**

It's said that "When a hot-tempered man is angry, you don't pay much attention; but when a meek man is angry, you tend to pay very close attention."

In this passage, Jesus wasn't just sad, He was mad: He had put up with these hypocrites and blind fools long enough.

He knew His time was being fulfilled anyway, so He laid it on the line this time, not pulling any punches as He put them in their places. So...

I believe it's just as important that we study the woes of Christ as it is the beatitudes of Christ, trying to find ways in which we ourselves might be guilty of the things Jesus accused them of in order to avoid making Him angry with us.

Here's our summary in general application:

1. Let's be sure we don't do anything to keep people out of God's kingdom.
2. Let's be sure we don't take advantage of anyone, regardless of our rationale.
3. Let's be sure we don't mislead people into eternal destruction.
4. Let's be sure we aren't covetous of physical, material, temporal, worldly things, but of spiritual.
5. Let's be sure we are as compassionate, merciful, and gracious as possible.
6. Let's be sure we are inwardly pure first, then we'll be outwardly pure automatically. And...
7. Let's be sure we don't make the lives of the righteous more difficult than they already are.