

Matthew 22-02-27a

Good morning, welcome to the Sunday morning services at Grace & Truth Bible Church. We're continuing our study in the Gospel of Matthew. We're looking at the final declaration or delivery of the woes to the Pharisees in the latter part of Matthew chapter 23.

We're gonna be picking up at verse 27, Matthew 23, 27, the final pair of declarations of judgment by the Lord Jesus on the hypocritical religious leadership of his day. Has great pertinence and traction in the current day, the world in which we live, and the state of our Christian faith, our religious climate in this country and around the world. And not so much as a direct application to us, I like to think that we are not hypocritical and rigid and uninformed in our faith, but to see the incursion of these kinds of attitudes and ways of thinking that deceive many is important for us, especially as we interact with our fellow believers who may be subject to or seduced by some of these ways of thinking.

So it's very helpful for us. Let's take a moment to ask God's blessing on the portion of his word that we are about to examine and we'll begin. Father, it is such a privilege to be nourished and strengthened and cleansed and enabled by the truth of your word, by the presence and power of your Holy Spirit.

We pray that our fellowship will be uplifting and up-building for each one who has joined with us this morning, those who re-examine this study in later times. We pray that the fruit of the spirit will be evident in our souls as the seed of your word is planted deeply within us so that we make the most of the time that remains to us in this life and are fully prepared for every good work, both now and in the future. We ask these things in Jesus' name, amen.

Let's begin by reading our passage. We've already seen the first set of woes, the first five beginning in verse 13 and extending through verse 26. And we saw in verse 26, the one imperative, the one solution for these problems.

And that is first cleanse the inside of the cup. We're gonna see a second imperative coming up this morning that is sort of the antithesis of this and it will show us that there is a choice. There is a fork in the road and the Pharisees are going to take it.

But we pick up in verse 27 this morning. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead bones and all uncleanness. Even so, you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous and say, if we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.

Therefore, you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up then the measure of your fathers, serpents, brood of vipers.

How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Well, we begin in verse 27 with the introduction that we've seen in each of these, which is woe to you, scribes, Pharisees, and hypocrites. And woe sayings, we've seen some of these in the earlier part of Matthew, and we're going to see more. You may remember back in chapter 11, verse 21, where Jesus said, woe to you, Chorazin, woe to you, Bethsaida.

If the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. The basis for this woe is failure to repent. We saw it again in chapter 18, verse seven.

Woe to the world because of offenses, for offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes. This is a prediction of judgment. There have been some, and I've heard this in recent days, who want to say that this is not an active judgment from God, that it is simply a consequence, that bad behavior has its own built-in negative consequence.

But I think the examination of passages that talk about other woes, such as the one in chapter 11 and the one in chapter 18, show us that the condition is repentance. The works that Sodom and Gomorrah or the other towns that are mentioned, Tyre and Sidon, they have done a lot of evil, and repentance alone would not undo these supposed automatic consequences of having done evil. The evil, if it's got built-in consequences, repentance wouldn't make a difference.

The fact that repentance makes a difference tells us that the fulfillment of the woe is from God. Does that make sense? You couldn't imagine that abstractions would fail to fulfill themselves just because you've had a change of mind. You can't practice evil for 20 years, have a conversion and time of repentance, and the 20 years doesn't have its built-in woes come into effect unless there is a God who is actively involved in turning cursing to blessing, in washing us clean and renewing us, forgetting those things which are behind and allowing us to press toward the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

So I dispute, I reject, and I have a strong argument with those who are saying in our present day, well, God is not actively judging. He's not actively involved in the consequences for the practice of evil or the commission of sin, and with an unrepentant heart and a lack of repentance of any kind, God is actively involved in bringing these woes about. We're going to see a couple more instances in the next chapter, chapter 24, verse 19, and you'll remember this.

We've been familiar with Matthew 24 for most of our lives, the prediction of what's going

to happen in the time of Jacob's trouble, the tribulation, and Jesus says in verse 19, "Woe to those who are pregnant "and to those who are nursing babies in those days." All you have to do is look at current events or look at any time there has been military conflict and oppression to see that when people start becoming refugees, it is extremely difficult and much harsher to try to protect and nurture and care for children in days where infrastructure has dissolved and you're without the things that you would rely upon to have a stable home. We'll see it again in chapter 26, verse 24. "The Son of Man indeed goes, "just as it is written of Him, "but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed.

"It would have been good for that man "if he had not been born." Very interesting statement about Judas, Judas, which we'll examine when we get there, but it is sort of a pair with chapter 18, verse seven. "Offenses must come, "but woe to that man by whom the offenses come." So looking at these woes here in Matthew chapter 23, remember that this is active ensuring of judgment by God. God doesn't just sit back and say, "Well, that has its own built-in consequences." So in this one, beginning in verse 27, "You are like whitewashed tombs, "which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, "but inside are full of dead bones and all uncleanness." Trivia question, quiz question.

It's actually not trivia, but it is a pop quiz. What is the date that Jesus is delivering this woe? We actually know the day of the month, the day and the month that Jesus is speaking. What is the date? This is Tuesday of crucifixion week, if that helps you any.

What is the date of the crucifixion? When is the Passover lamb slain? The month is Nisan and the day is the 14th, right? So this is the 12th of Nisan, right? Here's an interesting factoid. In the month Adar, A-D-A-R, on the 15th of the month, there was a Jewish practice once a year where the Jewish people would go to the tombs and whitewash them. They did this because there was a chance of unintentional defilement.

You would bring about ceremonial uncleanness by accidentally walking over or otherwise contacting a grave. And so to ensure that this did not happen, they would apply lime or whitewash to the tombs. This caused them to stand out in a very vivid fashion from the surrounding rock and sand.

You might put in the margin next to this, something of an antithetical parallel in Luke chapter 11, verse 44, where Jesus pronounces a woe on a different occasion that is not included in this set. He says in Luke 11, 44, woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like graves which don't appear. They're not evident.

And men that walk over them are not aware of them. It's the flip side. In some ways, the Pharisees and scribes in their hypocrisy, people don't realize that contact with them is contact with evil, is contact with death, is contact with that which defiles.

The Pharisees tried to whitewash themselves to look great, but you would think, well, the

whitewash is supposed to decorate the tombs, but this wasn't its purpose. It wasn't to make them look nice. It was a warning sign.

And so in both cases, contact with the scribes and Pharisees was a negative experience. Whether they are whitewashed or not, when they're not whitewashed, people are defiled without realizing it. And this goes back to them sitting in Moses' seat.

And listen to the words that they speak from the law, but do not follow their practice because they say and do not. But when they are whitewashed, the whitewash marks it out as a tomb, but it doesn't change what is inside. And there's a sense in which these declarations, these proclamations by the Lord Jesus are applying the whitewash to these whited sepulchers. Remember later on, when Paul is arrested and brought before the high priest and the priest commands that Paul be struck.

And he says, you whited wall, you bring me here to judge me according to the law, and then you have me struck in violation of the law. And they say, don't you know, you're talking to the high priest? And then Paul apologizes out of respect for the office. But that's another use of this word whited or whitewashed.

But in either case, I think when I was in Sunday school, the whitewash was supposed to make it be attractive. It still is something not to be touched. This is like putting the yellow and black striped tape around a thing.

Danger, warning, be careful, caution. So they would smear them with lime powder, but this was done on the 15th of Adar. Adar is the 12th month of the year.

Nisan is the first. So as Jesus delivers these words on the 12th of Nisan, it has been less than four weeks earlier that they did the annual whitewashing of the tombs. So it is a vivid, stark picture coming from his lips.

It's possible that you could glance to the hillside and see these freshly whited sepulchers less than a month earlier gleaming in the springtime sun. But this is a perfect participle. You are like tombs or tombstones having been whited, but the warning doesn't do anything to eliminate the death that is inside.

Similar in some ways to the previous woe about the clean cup on the outside, but inside it is full of corruption. So very graphic picture as Jesus so often did using things that were visible to his audience, whether it is small seeds or birds in the air or fields white for harvest and so on. Even so, verse 28, you outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

And lawlessness is an excellent translation because this is the word anomia. These who claimed to be experts in the law and tried to give an external appearance of great diligence in keeping the law inside are full of lawlessness. And this full of is from pleiro, the verb, which is the same word that Paul uses to say, be not drunk with wine wherein

is excess, but be filled with the spirit.

And you have the same notion of influence. It's not just that there is a lack of life, but being full of hypocrisy and being full of lawlessness, it defines and conditions and colors everything that they do. It's pervasive, not a minor problem.

Then in verse 29, the seventh woe, woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous. It's an interesting movement from Jesus. It's the very elegant segue, if you will, from the cup that has an outside that is wiped, but the inside is unclean to a tomb that is whited on the outside and is full of death on the inside.

And then tomb again, but now he's shifting the use of tomb to something new. You build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous and say, if we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. This is really fascinating because you have to think about it to really catch what Jesus is saying.

Building the tombs of the prophets. How long ago did the prophets live? We're in the post-exilic prophets, the last ones of the Old Testament. What is the distance between Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and the earlier prophets, Daniel, Ezekiel, Hosea, all of the list out your minor prophets.

How many years has it been since those men lived, performed their prophetic ministry and passed away? It's been on the order of five to 600 years, right? Depending on which prophets you're talking about. They've been dead and gone for centuries. So what are these religious hypocrites doing? They are building new monuments to old prophets.

Imagine yourself to be a prophet. Let's say that God called you to proclaim his word, to deliver it in an effective fashion to the current generation. In the current generation, maybe you would do this via media.

You might have a blog, you might have a Sunday morning service or a Wednesday night service, but you've been called to prophesy the word of the Lord. When God sent his prophets and in the near future from the time Jesus is speaking, he's going to send apostles and prophets and pastors and teachers, but the apostles and prophets in particular, why does God send these prophets? Why do we have the preserved words that they delivered? They said things that weren't in the existing scripture. Prophets prophesied new things, right? So to honor a prophet, you'll recall Jesus saying a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and among his own people because a prophet needs authentication, often accompanied by sign miracles or by other forms of ID that let people know that he is in fact from God.

Nicodemus says this about Jesus in John three, no one could do the things you do unless

he is from God. You think about Elijah and you think of Elisha and you think of Daniel and his preservation and his abilities to interpret dreams. You think about many of the prophets who, especially in the earlier days of prophetic ministry were authenticated by God.

In the later days, there was not such authentication. Why do you think that is? Why would God put his obvious supernatural imprimatur on the earlier prophets beginning with Moses and extending through many of the others? You think particularly of Elijah and Elisha working these miraculous sign miracles. This is to impress on the current generation that this is a message from God that should spark repentance, faith and obedience.

There are other prophets who were not so vetted, so designated, so identified with the imprimatur of God and yet they delivered their prophecies. Why would God not similarly mark them out with miraculous intervention? The miracle prophets are there to convert people who are convertible to spark repentance where there is a potential for repentance. The later prophets, some of the writing prophets are delivering a word for people who have already repented and who need guidance, who need hope, who need encouragement, who need to understand the current and future unfolding of God's plan.

And those people are already able to identify the word of God. Does that make sense? Do you see the difference? Those who need to repent, this is why Jesus performs miracles. It gives people confidence that they are listening to someone with the true words of life.

It is doubly interesting that John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets did no miracles. He baptized, which was a sign, but John the Baptist did not do a single miracle. And remember all Jerusalem and Judea comes out to be baptized by John.

The fact that John does no miracles is tied to the potential for repentance. Even the Pharisees and scribes came out to the Jordan to be baptized by John. And what does John say to them? You brood of vipers, a phrase Jesus is about to use again in our context.

Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? They have come and there is this outward conformity to baptism, but there is no change of heart. There's an old gospel song that the state's been used to saying, Matthew and I listened to it as little guys. In this modern day of living, my how things have changed.

People often get religion, but their heart's not changed. They go to church, they testify, but what an awful fate because they have no real salvation. Let's hope it's not too late.

Superficial conformity without heart change to spark and to provoke repentance. Jesus comes doing miracles. The apostles are going to do miracles in the first years of the church age, but there is a potential for change of heart, for repentance.

The miracles in anticipation of the deliverance from Egypt with Moses and Aaron are designed to convince and to provoke change of mind, faith, and obedience on the part of Israel. And on the part of those in Egypt who would join with Israel. Remember there is a mixed multitude that comes out and many who were not Jews recognize that God was in fact, real and they came out and joined their fate to Israel.

So you build the tombs of the prophets. The thing about this is there is a Latin phrase that has come down to us through Suetonius that is attributed to the Caesar in Rome circa 211, AD 211. His name is Caracarus, and he had a brother who was his co-ruler and he murdered him.

And this Latin phrase is *sit divus dum non sit vivus* and *divus* and *vivus* rhyme. *Sit divus dum non sit vivus*. And this Caracalla murdering his brother Geta is saying in Latin, let him be a God so long as he is not alive.

The Roman emperors were considered divine *divus*. And so Caracalla says, well, they consider me and my brother both divine because our father was the emperor. And my brother can be a God just as long as he's not alive.

And so he had him murdered and so that he could take sole power. And they were both sons of Septimius Severus. People who watch these or read the books of Harry Potter, there's somebody in there named Severus.

Well, this goes back to this guy who had these sons who were kind of no goodnicks. But anyway, *sit divus dum non sit vivus*. He can be divine just as long as he's not alive.

I'll memorialize him as long as he's not active. And that's really the idea here in this 2329 of Matthew, we'll honor the prophets as long as we don't have to listen to them. If you really wanted to honor a prophet, what would you do? You would listen to his message, recognize it as the word of God and respond with repentance, faith and obedience.

Instead, you make an issue of the messenger and memorialize him because he's not talking anymore. He can't say anything new. So it's safe.

Why is it safe? Aren't the prophecies still recounted in the Old Testament? The Pharisees and the scribes had had decades and centuries to explain away and to redefine and to blunt the sharp edge of these prophecies. What's the problem with someone like Jesus? They haven't had that time. Jesus can say something and they've got no system to counter his points.

And what they wanna do is kill him. And then they can put a pile of stones on his grave at best, but he's not talking anymore. We've handled the Old Testament prophets.

We've jockeyed around and maneuvered and twisted and connived so that their words can't penetrate our defenses. Jesus comes and says, you've heard it said, but I say, he is

not in any way diminishing the force, the effect, the authority or the truth of what you have heard said. We've seen this in earlier chapters of Matthew.

What you've heard it said, what do they do? They've already got a built-in distortion. They have figured out a way to blunt that truth so that it does not pertain. You've heard it said, honor your father and mother, but these guys don't honor their father and mother.

They declare their stuff Corban and I'm dedicating it to God. And it's all gonna go to the work of God once I die. You've heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say, you've heard it said, if a man's unhappy with his wife, let her write a bill of divorcement.

But I say, and what Jesus has done is crumble these defenses and demolish these structures and connivances. And that's what prophets have always done. That's why the fathers of these individuals slew the prophets because they were saying something new, something convicting, something that called out sin and evil and the people would have none of it.

A dead prophet is safe and you can appear righteous and religious by honoring the dead prophet whose words you have neutralized. But they want to make Jesus a dead prophet and they have no intention of building him an elaborate tomb. So this is kind of what's going on here.

You build the tombs, you garnish them and they would do this. There were four of this kind of monument at the foot of the Mount of Olives in Jesus' day. And this is called the Valley of Jehoshaphat.

It starts out being the Kidron Valley and Gehenna. The valley feeds into it. And then this extends up to the North and West and becomes Armageddon Valley, so to speak, Jezreel.

But it starts this Valley of Jehoshaphat. And the architecture has been dated back to the time of the Herods, which would be Jesus' day, these four that remain. And these may be the ones that Jesus was alluding to in the same way that on the hillside you could see these whited tombs.

If you've seen the hillside east of Jerusalem and up the slopes of the Mount of Olives, it is nothing but a gigantic graveyard. Have you seen pictures of that? I've not personally been there, but people thought it's holy ground and it's just wall-to-wall monuments. But they had these in the modern day.

It's the tomb of Zechariah, the tomb of Absalom, the tomb of Jehoshaphat and James, the apostle. Apostle. They probably had different names back in Jesus' day.

These names have kind of come and gone over the centuries. There's all kinds of things

that have been renamed and re-identified for more modern pilgrims. But you remember in verse 35 coming up, Jesus is going to cite all of the blood of martyrs from Abel to Zechariah.

And one of the tombs in this valley is attributed to, or attributed as being the tomb of this Zechariah of which Jesus is about to speak. So, Tacitus said, as the faces of men are frail and perishable, so are the works of art that represent their faces, but the form of their character is eternal. And this we can retain in memory and set forth to others, not by external matter and skill of art, but by our own character and acts.

And it's kind of ironic that a secular Roman historian says the message that someone's life represents, the character that they evidenced, the course of their decisions and actions speaks louder than paintings and monuments and statues of people who tried to memorialize them. The faces of men are frail and perishable, and so are the works of art that represent them, but the form of their character is eternal. And this we ought to retain in memory.

It is the message, if you really want to honor a prophet, listen to what God gave him to say, don't build a monument and say, hail Zechariah, hail Isaiah, hail Ezekiel, hail Daniel. And there is a lot of this in the modern day where people are quick to quote mine earlier worthies, earlier scholars, earlier church fathers, and they quote mine them. They say, this was a wonderful thing that this guy said, but the message in which that particular quote is contained, the biblical truth that should be interpreted and applied is lacking.

There is a form of godliness, there is a monument to godliness that looks great on the outside, but the power is lacking. You find this in a lot of the modern movements that are just swarming like snakes on the head of Medusa, saying wonderful things, building a monument to righteousness, building monuments to Jesus, building monuments to love, building monuments to social justice, but it is a form of godliness, it is an external monument to godliness. There is no life inside it.

It's a tomb, it is not a living and abiding vine in Jesus himself that is producing genuine fruit. Well, we have more to see and more to say about this when we come back from our break.