

JUDGMENT AWAITS! **(Matthew 23:13-36)**

It was a Saturday morning, some years ago. I had some errands to run; so, I took my son along with me. I think he was in first grade at the time. I needed to get some cash from an ATM. Several blocks from our bank's main building was a drive-thru branch. I knew it had an ATM. I drove to the back side of the facility. To access the parking lot, I could either drive to the corner, turn right and take another right or I could take a short cut and use the driveway that was on the back side. There was a sign there that read "Exit Only." I saw it, but I didn't think my son would notice it. I was wrong.

Just before I took that driveway, my son spoke up: "Dad, that sign says, 'Exit Only.'" I explained, "Yeah, but there is no one here right now."

That wasn't a good enough excuse for my son. He replied, "Mom says that what you do when you are alone shows your true character."

Have you ever been shamed into doing the right thing by a 1st grader? I passed up on the shortcut and drove to the corner. When I got home, I said to his mom, "Who's bright idea was it to teach our son to read?"

As adults, we have a tendency to rationalize and to excuse ourselves for not doing what we know we should do and for doing what we know we shouldn't. We are good at finding what we consider to be exceptions to the rule because, after all, we are exceptional people. We think we are exempt from following the rules that others expect to do.

In his book *When God Whispers Your Name*, Max Lucado tells the following story:

I rolled out of bed early, real early. I'd been on vacation for a couple of weeks, and I was rested. My energy level was high, so I dressed to go to the church office. My wife . . . tried to convince me not to go.

"It's the middle of the night," she mumbled. "What if a burglar tries to break in?"

There had been an attempted break-in at the office a few weeks previously. [Ignoring my wife's concern, I drove to the church,] entered the office complex, disarmed the alarm, and then re-armed it.

A few seconds later the sirens screamed. *Somebody is trying to break in!* I raced down the hall, turned off the alarm, ran back to my office, and dialed 911. After I hung up, it occurred to me that the thieves could get in before the police arrived. I dashed back down the hall and re-armed the system. "They won't get me," I mumbled defiantly as I punched in the code.

As I turned, the sirens blared again. I disarmed the alarm and reset it. I walked to a window to look for the police. The alarm sounded a third time. Once again, I disarmed it and reset it.

Walking back to my office, the alarm sounded again. I disarmed it. *Wait a minute; this alarm system must be fouled up.* I called the alarm company. "Our alarm system keeps going off," I told the fellow who answered. "We've either got some determined thieves or a malfunction."

“There could be one other option,” he said. “Did you know that your building is equipped with a motion detector?”

Then the police arrived. “I think the problem is on the inside, not the outside,” I told them, embarrassed that I was the culprit setting of the alarm.

Am I the only one to blame an inside problem on an outside source?

Alarms sound in your world as well. Heaven knows you don’t silence life’s alarm by pretending they aren’t screaming. But heaven also knows it’s wise to look in the mirror before you peek out the window.

My goal for us today is that we, you and I would look in the mirror.

In Matthew 23, Jesus sounded an alarm. He wanted the Pharisees and the scribes to quit looking out the window and to start looking in the mirror. Of all the sermons that Jesus preached, of all the stories He told, and of all the things He taught, what we find here in our text may be the harshest. Jesus had some stern words to say. Being the courageous man that He is, Jesus spoke unflinchingly. He let them know what was what. He was crystal clear about where those leaders had failed and how that judgment was coming their way.

Seven times between verses 13 and 36, Jesus used the word *woe*. That is not a word we use often, and if we do use it, we probably use it differently that did Jesus. In the Greek, that word is two syllables rather than one. It is *ouai*.

That word is an *onomatopoeia*. It is a word that sounds like what it means. For instance:

- In traffic, some people *honk* their horn.
- At night, Kathy’s cat likes to *meow*.
- On the first hole, I *whacked* my ball down the middle of the fairway.
- At the end of the performance, everyone *clapped* their hands showing appreciation.
- I heard the *bang* when the gun went off.

The Greek word *ouai* is a word that means, “How horrible it will be.” It means *disaster*, *horror*, or *calamity*. Woe does not mean, “Pity me because I am having a bad day.”

When Jesus pronounces *woe* upon the Pharisees and the scribes, He is not making a prediction that hard times are coming for them. He is announcing judgment. In reality, He is sentencing them. Basically, Jesus is saying, “You are damned.” The sentence of damnation has gone forth, and that sentence will be carried out in God’s good timing.

The title for today’s message is “Judgment Awaits!”

I will let you in on a secret. I do not like preaching harsh, stern sermons. You know me. I am rather laid back when I preach. I don’t pound the pulpit. I don’t wag my finger at you. I don’t yell and stomp.

I would much rather preach positive, encouraging, and uplifting messages. The word gospel means *good news*, and I am a good news preacher. I want you to leave this place feeling better than when you came. I want to build you up, not beat you down.

But as a preacher, I am called by God to preach the full counsel of God’s word, and

not every text in the Bible is a feel-good text. Some texts are harsh and stern and tough.

That is why I preach through entire books of the Bible. If I just picked and chose every week a different portion of God's word from which to preach, I would likely avoid the tough passages. If, however, I preach through an entire book of the Bible, I am forced to deal with passages I would otherwise overlook or just outright ignore.

I have never heard a sermon on the passage I am about to preach, and it is likely you haven't either. Today, we are going to talk about judgment, damnation. Upon whom will it come and why? Let's read Matthew 23:12-36.

I. JUDGMENT AWAITS THE HYPOCRITES FOR THEIR HYPOCRISY.

We said last week the Greek word for hypocrite means *actor*. It was used of a person who wore a mask and just pretended to be someone he or she wasn't.

Six times in this passage, Jesus looks at the scribes and Pharisees and calls them *hypocrites*. Now, in our culture, we might consider that name-calling because the word hypocrite has a bad connotation. Although almost everyone is, no one wants to be called a hypocrite. It is an ugly word to us, but Jesus wasn't name-calling. He was simply describing the lifestyle of these religious leaders. He is saying, "You guys are play actors. You are going around wearing a mask pretending to be what you are not in reality."

Jesus is addressing the scribes and Pharisees. Who were they? Consider the scribes. In Jesus' day, there were no printing presses. There was no way to mass produce books. If the Scriptures were to survive, they had to hand copied. The scribes were trained for that task, but they were also viewed as experts in matters of the Jewish law. Many of the scribes held teaching positions.

The Pharisees were the conservatives in the Jewish faith. They took the Scriptures seriously and sought to order their lives by what they understood God's word to say. Today's Baptists would have made great Pharisees. Of course, the main difference is that we believe Jesus is the Son of God, and the Pharisees did not. To them, the idea of God having a Son was heresy. They were trying to win God's approval by their religiosity. To say they were self-righteous would be an understatement.

Time will not allow us to expound every phrase of every verse in our passage, but let's look at the specific reasons that hypocrites are judged. **Hypocrites are judged for concealing saving truth.** Look again at vv. 13-15. One way that it is possible to conceal saving truth is to ignore what God has said by emphasizing our traditions.

If my goal is to make you a Baptist rather than a Jesus-follower, then I have terribly missed the point.

In recent months we have witnessed demonstrations and even riots that are meant to emphasize that black lives matter. What I find interesting is that I have not heard a single person say, "Black lives don't matter." Of course, black lives matter.

Let me tell you something else that matters. Truth matters. The saving truth found in the Bible matters. It matters whole lot more than the name on the church sign.

We will come back to vv. 16-22. Let's look now at vv. 23-24. **Hypocrites are judged for misplaced priorities.** In other words, for majoring on the minors and minoring on the majors. It wasn't enough for the Pharisees to tithe their income. When they harvested the produce of their gardens, they meticulously separated the contents. "Here is one mint leaf

for God and nine mint leaves for me. Here is one little bunch of dill for God and nine bunches for me. Here is one cumin seed for God and nine cumin seeds for me.”

Do we really think God is counting mint leaves? Jesus said that God is looking for justice, mercy, and faithfulness. It doesn't matter if you correctly tithe your dill but never get around to showing mercy to that hurting person or pursuing justice for that elderly person who was swindled.

Another way we misplace our priorities is that we focus on the exterior rather than the interior. Look at vv. 25-26. A hypocrite polishes the outside but neglects and ignores the inside. Jesus carried that thought forward in vv. 27-28.

What would you think of a homeowner who beautifies the outside of his house? It has a wonderfully manicured lawn, trimmed bushes and a flower garden without a single weed. The house has loads of curb appeal, but when you walk inside, you are instantly met with a foul odor. The trash hasn't been taken out in weeks. Rotting food and unwashed dishes, pots, and pans cover the kitchen. Crawling insects are everywhere.

Likewise, you can beautify your body with cosmetics and clothes. You can be perfected toned and tanned, but what about the interior? Are you a stranger to holiness? Are you mindful of God and His word?

The inside matters more than the outside. The inside is where you live while the outside is only what people see. Are you taking care of your inner life—what you think about, what you value, who you trust? Does your inner life honor God? God means to make your heart His home. Is your heart a fit habitation for the Holy One?

II. JUDGMENT AWAITS THE BLIND GUIDES FOR THEIR WILLFUL BLINDNESS.

In vv. 16-22, Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees blind guides, blind fools, and blind men. He calls them blind guides again in v. 24. You could consider the phrase “blind guide” to be an oxymoron which is two words that are contradictory. A few examples are:

- plastic glasses
- jumbo shrimp
- pretty ugly
- awfully nice
- seriously funny
- strangely familiar
- same difference

The scribes and Pharisees were supposed to be guides, but they were blind to the truth; thus, they were unable to lead other to the truth. What's worse is that they were intentionally deceptive. They hid the truth. They had an organized system by which a person could make an oath and not be bound by his promise. It was like saying something with your fingers crossed. Jesus had not patience for that.

John Heywood was a poet, playwright, and a musician who lived in England. He was born more than 500 years ago. In 1546 he published a collection of sayings in the English

language. Many of these had never found their way into print until Heywood wrote them down. We don't know which were coined by him, but many of these you might have been lost had it not been for John Heywood. Here are some sayings that have survived because of Heywood's work:

- A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.
- A rolling stone gathers no moss.
- All's well that ends well.
- Beggars can't be choosers.
- Haste makes waste.
- Let sleeping dogs lie.
- Look before you leap.
- Nothing ventured, nothing gained.
- Out of sight, out of mind.
- Rome wasn't built in a day.
- The more, the merrier.
- There's no fool like an old fool.
- Two heads are better than one.
- You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.
- You can't see the woods for the trees.

Let me add one more saying written down by Heywood that is appropriate for this message: "There are none so blind as those who will not see. The most deluded people are those who choose to ignore what they already know."

In John 5 Jesus was speaking to a group of Jews who wanted to kill Him because in their view, He was breaking the Sabbath. That sure sounds like something the Pharisees would do. Listen to what He said to them:

³⁹ You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

We come to one more group and reason for whom judgment awaits.

III. JUDGMENT AWAITS THE SERPENTS FOR THEIR MURDEROUS ACTIONS.

Look at Matthew 23:29-36. Although neither Jesus nor Matthew ever mentions him by name, within this passage there is a subtle comparison of Jesus with John the Baptist. In Matthew 3, John the Baptist referred to the Pharisees and the religious leaders as a "brood of vipers." John asked them, "Who warned you about the wrath to come?" That is similar to the question Jesus asks in v. 33.

Earlier, back in Matthew 17:12, Jesus mentioned that John was martyred, and He too would suffer a similar fate.

Like venomous snakes, a brood of vipers, the religious leaders are guilty of murdering

those whom God had sent to His people. Not only was it a part of their past, it would be a part of their future. Look at v. 34. As a result, judgment was coming. It was coming soon (v. 36). Within 40 years that judgment came in the form of the Roman army marching upon Jerusalem, knocking down their wall, destroying their temple, and murdering an untold number of Jews.

You might say, “Well that was back then. Today, we live in a more sophisticated age. We are more tolerant.”

Oh, really? The only way we are more sophisticated is that through technology, we can inflict more violence to more people in less time with a much higher body count.

Everywhere we look, there is violence. There is domestic violence, workplace violence, school related violence. Every TV drama or big screen blockbuster will involve multiple people getting beaten or killed. The best-selling video games are getting more and more violent. Turn on the news, and you will see violence. Open up your newspaper, and you will read about violence. There is violence between individuals, violence between races, and violence between countries.

What does God say about violence and the violent? We are read in Proverbs 6, “There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to Him . . .” The third thing listed is, “hands that shed innocent blood,” and the seventh is, “one who sows discord among brothers” (6:16-19).

We read in Psalm 11:5, “The LORD tests the righteous, but His soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence.”

We find a great word of hope in Isaiah 2:4, “. . . and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

This has not been a feel-good sermon. There is, however, a ray of hope that shines forth from the realization that judgment is coming. I close with a quote from N.T. Wright:

The word *judgment* carries negative overtones for a good many people in our liberal and postliberal world. We need to remind ourselves that throughout the Bible God’s coming judgment is a good thing, something to be celebrated, longed for, yearned over. It causes people to shout for joy and the trees of the field to clap their hands. In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be. Faced with a world in rebellion, a world full of exploitation and wickedness, a good God *must* be a God of judgment.