

Good morning everyone. Some of you have heard of or even read the children's book series by CS Lewis called Chronicles of Narnia. One book in the series, which was made into a decent movie, by the way, has Mr. and Mrs. Beaver telling the four children that Aslan, the Christ figure, is a lion. One of the children named Susan replied,

"Ooh!... Is he quite safe?" I shall be nervous about meeting a lion." And Mrs. Beaver answered Susan, "That you will, dearie, and make no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, "if there is anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly." "Then he isn't safe?" asked Lucy. "Safe?" said Mrs. Beaver... "Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Those few lines of Lewis hit on a theme that is, sadly, far from the church today. We want to believe in the goodness of Jesus. He is good. He is good all the time! We want to believe in the Lordship of Jesus. "He is the king, I tell you." But I'm not sure we have it in our heads or in our hearts that a good king doesn't always mean a safe king. When was the last time you came before Jesus, the Lion King, in private prayer or public worship with your knees knocking?"

If there was ever a text to get our knees knocking before the fearful and good presence of King Jesus, it is Matthew 23. I say fearful for obvious reasons. A.T. Robertson in his classic Word Pictures of the New Testament called Jesus' condemnation of hypocrisy and the seven woes of judgment he placed on the religious teachers and leaders, "The rolling thunder of Christ's wrath." Like thunder in severity and lightning in their exposure. They illuminate while they strike.

Our story picks up in the last week of Jesus' life on earth. We are three or four days from his crucifixion. These are the last words Jesus said to Israel and in particular their religious leaders. It might be our tendency to imagine ourselves hiding behind Jesus' coat as he stands firm and confronts them. Only for us to pop out every couple of minutes and say, "Yeah, Yeah, listen to Jesus, you hypocrites! Way to crush them, Jesus!" But if that was all we did as we read through this passage, it wouldn't be right. We are wrong to think nothing Jesus said here applies to us. There are principles that relate to all of us. There are reasons we should look inside and address our own pride and hypocrisy. And there

are reasons our knees should knock as we come before the good and fearful king.

Jesus Exposes Hypocrites

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:

"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat." Matthew 23:2

To start out, it's important to acknowledge that chapter 23 of Matthew has been used by racists throughout history in a terrible way to support their anti-Semitism. The racist Nazi dictator, Hitler, referred to chapter 23 in his hate speeches. But we must remember Jesus was a Jew and all his followers at this time were also Jews. Matthew 23 is not a condemnation of Jews, or even of all Pharisees. I think of John chapter three when the Pharisee, Nicodemus, and Jesus had their late-night talk about being spiritually born again through faith in Jesus. This chapter is an indictment against the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem at that time, those who sat in Moses' seat, who had the teaching authority in Jerusalem, who were about to have Jesus arrested and condemned. Chapter 23 also shows us the opportunity to repent and escape the coming wrath of God Jesus gave to those in the crowd who followed the bad leaders.

So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. v3

Literally, they speak but do not do. They do not practice what they preach. They do not walk their talk. To boil it down, they were big mouths.

They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. v.4

Notice Jesus did not say they are not able; he said they are not willing. Hypocrites don't walk the path, and hypocrites keep others off the path. They place burdens and requirements that don't reflect the heart of God.

This is not the heart of God. The heart of God is a relationship with him, which lightens our load. A relationship with him lifts our burden. The heart of God is for us to embrace just two commands: love God and then love people. The heart of God is that we come to him honestly and admit we all fall short and need God's grace. The heart of God is for God's leaders to help relieve the heavy loads people carry. God's leaders are to teach their

people they are forgiven sinners. God's leaders teach Christians should see the church as a hospital for honest and transparent Christian. Christians see the church as an encouraging place to celebrate what God has done in their lives, and a place to learn God has changed them on the inside. A place where they can surrender to God's will, which is to continue to transform us into who God intends us to become.

And all of this can happen in a church, which strives to be free from the weight of condemnation and guilt that comes from religions and traditions. In a church where people are set free to follow Jesus. In a church where people offer assistance. In a church where people even sacrifice their own comforts to help others.

These hypocrites didn't just have big mouths; they also had big heads. In verses five through seven, Jesus used very Jewish words like phylacteries, fringes, feasts, and synagogues. So, what did they do? What did they love? They did all their deeds to be seen by others. The loved being seen as super spiritual, so they wore God's word on their foreheads and on their wrists, little boxes held on their heads and wrists by leather straps. Also, Jesus pointed out, they had extra-long, extra ornate fringes on their prayer shawls. Why? To be seen by others.

Right after New Year's, I made a trip to Colorado to see my dad and some other relatives. One of my relatives doesn't go to church anymore. Because when he was a young man, he saw a great deal of hypocrisy in the church leaders. He saw big mouths and big heads, and that sadly turned him off from church. As I thought about our passage, I thought my relative needed to know his disgust for hypocrisy actually aligns him more with the heart of Jesus than he ever thought. My nephew hates hypocrisy, and so does Jesus.

The ancient Greeks help us understand the word hypocrisy. The word comes from Greek theater where an actor would play a comedic part and hold up a mask with a smiley face. And when he played a tragic part, he would hold up a mask with a sad face. The word literally means "One who hides behind a mask."

So, Jesus condemns big mouths and big heads. But he exalts small talk about one's self and small thoughts of one's self. In other words, he exalts those who know their need for him.

Jesus Exalts the Humble

Jesus said to forget titles like Rabbi, Father, and Teacher. He said to the crowds and his disciples gathered around him:

The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. vv.

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Simply put, those who only go after human rewards and honor in this life now will be humiliated before God. And those who

are led toward big thoughts about God and small thoughts about themselves in this life, and those who are led to do big things for God and small things for themselves in this life will one day be exalted before God.

In the rest of the chapter, Jesus lists seven woes that roll out like thunder and strike like lightning. And today we won't hide behind Jesus' coat. Today as we will read the woes, we will examine ourselves. We will read God's Word as the writer of Hebrews said, "...as a living and active word" to us (Hebrews 4:12). I will break out the next section into warnings.

Jesus Warns Us Against Zeal without Knowledge

"Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. vv. 13

The word "Woe" is hard to translate. It includes the wrath of God, or anger of God, but it is also sorrow. It's righteous anger, anger from a heart of love. The heart of Jesus that is broken because of their stubborn human blindness.

With each woe, Jesus paints a picture. Picture a door. It's the door to the Kingdom of Heaven. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees stand at this door, and they themselves won't get through it, and in their zeal, they close the door in people's faces because they think they are doing something good, protecting people from Jesus. They ignore the truth that was right in front of their faces through three years of Jesus' ministry.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. (V. 15)

Jesus said they would go out far and wide to win a convert to their religion, and then they shut them out of heaven, put their burdens on them, and these single converts go to hell right along with them.

What's our application? Every outreach we do, every mission trip we take, every Love Works project we join up with, in fact every good work we perform to bless our neighbors, must start at the same place. It must start at the cross of Jesus Christ. Any good work must begin and be motivated by the good news that Jesus loves all people, Jesus is the Son of God; and Jesus loves us so much he came to earth to die as a sacrifice for our sins.

It begins with knowing that everything we do for God comes from believing what Jesus said about himself. Jesus said,

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6

Our motivation for everything we do comes as a response to what Jesus did for us. Our zeal is based on these truths: Jesus

died for our sins, was buried, and three days later he rose from the dead. And our zeal comes from these truths: God loves us and sent his Son, Jesus, to die as a sacrifice for our sins. Jesus is God's Son, God in the flesh, and the Son has all authority to forgive sins and take us to heaven.

Our zeal comes from the truth that all good ministry out there begins when we bow before Jesus our Lord. Good ministry happens when knowing the little things we do for our neighbors can become great things. When those little things lead someone to glorify God by accepting his Son Jesus as their Savior. Here is another heartfelt woe from Jesus.

Jesus Warns Us Against Majoring on the Minors

In the next nine verses, Jesus calls the teachers and Pharisees blind four times. Two of those times he calls them blind guides. That's the key. Guides are to be followed. Why would I follow a blind guide? Jesus wants us to realize blind guides are strange, so don't follow them.

Jesus is saying, "God cares about the big things like justice, mercy, and faithfulness, and you talk incessantly about what makes an oath valid or invalid? Or what makes an offering sanctified or not sanctified?" He said, "You talk and talk, and what God really wants is for you to love Him and love your neighbor."

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. vv. 23-24

You divide and measure the little things like spices and neglect the important things of the law. He is saying, "Keep giving your offering but do it with the right attitude." Without a heart for justice, mercy, and faithfulness, our offering doesn't really matter. You work very hard to pay attention to the unimportant things like filtering out a gnat from your wine before you drink it, and then you don't pay attention to the big things like the camel in your glass.

Majoring on the minors can really trick us up. I remember packing and moving from one house to the next. My job was the big stuff, get the beds moved and set up, and make sure the big furniture was loaded and unloaded. My job wasn't in the kitchen. I think we all agree that moving is stressful, and it can bring out strange behaviors. For some reason, I started packing the spices. I went through our spice cabinet and pulled out each little jar and looked at each one closely. As I was emptying the cabinet, I noticed that we had two jars of paprika. I said to Julie, "Who needs two jars of paprika?" Why did we have two jars of paprika? What a waste! I kept digging, and I found a third jar of paprika. Who could even use one jar of paprika in a lifetime? I expressed

how troubled I was that we had three jars of paprika. Finally, she had enough and said, "Don't you have something else you should be doing?" As I walked away still troubled by the waste, I heard Julie's mom say to her, "Is Dan okay? I worry about him."

We all have paprika moments. We need to gently remind each other when we are majoring on the minors, and the trouble we can get into when we overlook the big things. Like the big things Jesus reminds us about - justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Don't get tripped up or entangled in the paprika issues of church practices.

Jesus Warns Us Against Outward Appearances

Jesus again thunders and strikes:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. vv. 25-26

Jesus used the image of spotless dinnerware. Imagine, last night, you ate a delicious bowl of split pea soup, and after dinner, you spent hours cleaning only the outside of the soup bowl. Tonight, you will prepare a delicious batch of minestrone, and you reach for last night's bowl, which looks clean on the outside, but it has decaying chunks of green peas stuck on the inside.

The point: We can look pure, healthy, and spiritual from a distance. But it may be a mask. Because behind that mask we may be caked with sin and guilt as thick as pea soup. Jesus goes on to say,

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. vv. 27-28

The warning from Jesus to us should be obvious. Watch out. You can keep up appearances and yet neglect the inner life. It's not that outer appearances don't matter, but inward holiness matters more.

I like how one person put it. "May your Sunday best be your Monday best!" Christians are Christians 24/7. I am to be the same whether I find myself in church on Sunday or I find myself in a secular place on Monday. I am to be inwardly righteous whether I am at church or at a Warriors game. Whether I am on my computer while at my place of business, or whether I am at home looking at websites on my device late at night. And this lofty challenge toward a pure life can only be met through surrender, so God's spirit feels free to move in us and change us. Surrender to want what he wants, to hate what he hates, to love

what he loves. Surrender our will and align under Jesus' will for us.

Jesus Warns Us Against the Excuse of Unbelief

In verse 29, Jesus gives the seventh and final woe. The number seven throughout scripture is the number for completeness or fullness. In Revelations alone, we have seven seals, seven plagues, seven golden bowls and more. Here we have seven woes. It's certainly a picture of Jesus' patience running out for them. Now in verse 33, Jesus said:

"You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" v. 33

I picture a courtroom. The religious leaders are the defendants on trial for unbelief and murder. They didn't come to Jesus to find life; instead, they are planning his death.

Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. v. 34

Did you notice the "I" statement Jesus used? It means Jesus has been orchestrating the entire narrative from the beginning of God's story. Jesus said, "I sent you prophets, sages, and teachers to point you to the one who can truly save you. And some of these messengers you killed. Others you had flogged in the synagogues and others you chased down. Your actions are inexcusable, and you are guilty. Judgment is rendered."

Is he safe? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe, but he is good. In Matthew 23, we saw Jesus' anger over injustice and unrighteousness. We saw Jesus' sadness because those he loved so much scorned him, rejected him, and were about to kill him. In this final recorded word to his beloved Israel, we see his sorrow, and his grief over the judgment to come.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, 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. vv. 37-39

We see Jesus, the lion. Now we see Jesus as a hen and the people, who rejected prophet after prophet, who compounded guilt upon guilt, and stoned the people who came to warn them of the danger, as his chicks. But behind all this, we know today, is

the compounded guilt the whole human race has who rejects the only one who can save them.

What does Jesus mean here in these final verses? The fire of judgment that was due a guilty world was about to descend on Jesus on a cross at Golgotha right outside of the city gate in Jerusalem.

The whole human race continues to play with fire, and the fire is now raging out of control. But Jesus is the mother hen who longs to gather all her defenseless chicks under her wings. Jesus took the full wrath of that fire on himself. A wrath so fierce it killed him. And for all of us who put our trust in him, for all of us who recognize the coming wrath and have cried out to Jesus in faith, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." And we who have chased after Jesus, and have followed him and who seek shelter under his wings; we are miraculously spared the wrath of that fire.

In fact, we are saved. And Jesus triumphed over the wrath that we deserved. In three days, he was resurrected, and through God's grace to us and through our faith in him, we too have been resurrected into a new life. We are permanently changed on the inside, changed so we can follow and serve our King Jesus.

May God give all of us a knee-knocking response to who he is and what he has done for us.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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