



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“The Science of Hypocrisy and Christ’s Thunderous Wrath Against It”

Matthew 23:13-36

TRANSCRIPT

The Scripture reading is again in Matthew chapter 23, and we are beginning with verse 13 and reading through verse 36 which contains a passage that contains the seven woes that our Lord Jesus announced upon the Pharisees. So beginning with verse 13 now we read,

“But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither permit them that are trying to go in.”

Now I have added the words “trying to,” because that present tense in the original text is a tangential present, and may be rendered in that way. If you study Greek with us this fall, you will be able to do that for yourself. Now the 14th verse does not have the support of the ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of Matthew, and for that reason, if you have a modern version, it probably is not contained within it for that reason. We are

going to skip verse 14 which, incidentally, is probably derived from Mark chapter 12, but we will read verse 15 in the Authorized Version next,

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves. Woe unto you, ye blind guides, who say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is debtor! That is he is bound to keep his oath. Ye fools and blind: for which is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is bound. That is bound to observe his oath. Ye fools and blind: for which is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? Whosoever therefore sweareth by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things on it. And whosoever shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth in it. And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him who sitteth on it. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faithfulness or faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, who strain out a gnat, and swallow a camel.”

That’s a very interesting uh text in the Authorized Version if you have an Authorized Version. It has, “who strain at a gnat.” That was not a mistranslation. It was a misprint in the English or the English editions of this ancient version. It was intended to be, strain *out* a gnat, and one of the printers of the early edition of the King James

Version had, strain *at* instead of *out*, and it has been preserved in the English text since that time.

“Ye blind guides, who strain out a gnat, and swallow a camel. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye are witnesses against yourselves, that ye are the sons of them who killed the prophets. Fill up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?”

You’ll notice that the person who preached hellfire and damnation more than any other person in the Bible was our Lord Jesus himself. Men like to say today that if you preach hellfire and damnation that shows that you are an ignorant preacher of the word of God,

but the Bible does not support that opinion. Then we conclude, verse 34 through verse 36,

“Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.”

Now let me say just a word about verse 35. You’ll notice that our Lord looks back over the whole of the Old Testament, and beginning with Abel, the first of those murdered in the Bible, then on to Zacharias son of Barachias, slain between the temple and the altar (the account of which is given us in 2nd Chronicles). And do you remember perhaps that in the Hebrew Old Testament the last book of the Bible is 2nd Chronicles? For them the order of books is different from the order in our English text, so that what our Lord has done is to begin in the first of the murders in the book of Genesis and has ranged through the whole of the Scriptures, as he knew them, to the last of those that were murdered unrighteously, Zacharias son of Barachias, and has in a sense characterized the whole of the divine revelation up to that point as being a situation in which the righteous men were crucified by the religious men. It’s a remarkable statement, a remarkable summary of the attitude of religious men, hypocritical men to the reality of the truth of the word of God. We can then understand very easily how he should say, “Verily I say unto you, all these things shall come upon this generation.”

Now we are inclined to look at that as, now, if we had been there it would not have been so. But if that is so, then we are saying the very same things the Pharisees said in their day. If we had been there, we would not have crucified those prophets and wise men and righteous men of the Old Testament. The chances are they would have made all of us very angry at times. Let us hope that we should not have within us such enmity to the truth of God that we would crucify them, but the chances are we would not have enjoyed their preaching until there came repentance and true faith in the God who had unfolded to us our wicked and evil heart.

“This passage,” one well known commentator has said, “contains the most terrible words which ever fell from the lips of the king,” and with that of course we cannot disagree. The seven woes that our Lord Jesus hurls at the Pharisees and the scribes are like seven thunders hurled against the religious leaders of his day, and yet when the seven thunders are over, we find a strange blending of sternness and pity manifested in the fact that when the seven woes are finished, our Lord speaks in tones of the most intimate and tender sorrow.

The section which we are to study reminds us of the passage in Matthew chapter 5 and verse 20 when the Lord Jesus said in the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter into the kingdom, and when we look at this particular section, we learn the ways in which the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees had fallen short.

Of course the thing that comes out immediately is the fact that they made great pretensions, but at the same time were barren of spiritual reality. We are inclined to think that these are things that are true only of the Pharisees, and they are not true of biblical Christians, but after all in the day of our Lord Jesus, the biblical Israelites were the scribes and the Pharisees. It was they who studied the Scriptures. It was they who said we have the word of God. It was they who contended for the Scriptures and Scriptural teaching against the Sadducees and zealots and the Essenes and others, so that on the spur of the

moment, just looking at this at first glance, we should be very careful what we say about the scribes and the Pharisees, because their position in Israel is very similar to the position that biblical Christians have within the professing church of Jesus Christ.

We do make great pretension. We do also defend the truthfulness of the word of God. We are especially anxious to be sure that men know exactly what the Bible teaches concerning the great doctrines of the faith, and it is just here that we are liable to fall into the sin that our Lord Jesus so speaks about here.

Just before I came into the meeting this morning, Mr. Pryor came into the office where we were having a word of prayer before the meeting, and he said, did you know what Abraham Kuyper said concerning Phariseeism in the book, *The Work of the Holy Spirit?* And I did not. And then he read me a quotation in which Mr. Kuyper said that “Phariseeism was like was the like the mildew on the noblest fruit that the earth ever saw,” and went on to stress that Phariseeism most often appears where the truth appears, and so we ourselves – if it’s true that we do have the truth of God in Believers Chapel – it is we of all people who should beware of the sin of Phariseeism: hypocrisy and the pride and arrogance that so often goes along with it.

The key thought of the section then is the thought of hypocrisy. The word itself is very interesting and gives a clue with regard to its meaning. The word hypocrisy is derived from a Greek word *hupokrinomai* which means literally to judge under, to make a judgment under. It was used in connection with the dialogue that actors might engage in on a stage, and in fact, the noun *hupokrotase* came to refer to an actor. He was called a “hypocrite.”

Now the reason that he was called a hypocrite was simply this that he played a part. And frequently, the actors in those days put on masks, and in that way acted their parts out on the stage, so that they literally spoke under a mask. What you saw on their mask was not the real person, So they gave judgments under it and therefore the term came to refer to someone who masked his true thought, and his true being, and he put

on an outward show. He said in effect, that he was one thing as he played his part, but really he was something different underneath.

So the Pharisee, whom our Lord called a hypocrite, was a person who played the part of meticulous observance of the law of Moses, but underneath, inwardly he was proud, he was arrogant, he was iniquitous, he was evil, he was devastatingly depraved, and yet if you looked at him, you would think that he was the religious paragon of righteousness in the community.

Thomas Adams once said that a hypocrite is a secret atheist. There’s a great deal of truth in this, and he went on to say he was a secret atheist because if he did believe that there was a God, he dares not be so bold as to deceive him to his face. The very fact that he thought that he could deceive God by putting on this appearance was evident that he really didn’t believe in God. A person who believed in God would never so attempt to deceive this God whom he knew could not be deceived. So the hypocrite, according to Thomas Adams, one of the Puritans, was a secret atheist.

“Hypocrisy,” La Roche Foucault said, “Is the homage that vice pays to virtue. When a man is a hypocrite, he admits that to be virtuous is very good, but out of his vice, even in the midst of his sin and iniquity, he pays the worship and homage to that which is good by his sin of hypocrisy.

When I read this, I think of the parable of the prodigal son, because the prodigal son was the son who went off and wasted his substance in riotous living, finally came to himself and came home.

Now the elder brother had remained there all the time. The elder brother our Lord Jesus uses as an illustration of the scribes and Pharisees. He objected to the way in which the father treated the son who had come to himself, and I do think it is providential that when the son, the prodigal, came home having been brought through the experiences of life to recognize what he really was and what his father was, it was providential that he saw the father before he saw the elder brother, because if he had seen the older brother,

he might have wanted to go back. No one can be more distasteful to a man of God than a hypocrite, and it is evident in our Lord’s words.

Now you know in the Christian church today, we have things backward. We talk about the fleshly sins as being the real sins, but the sins of envy, why that’s practiced in the Christian church and no one does anything about it, or thinks anything about it.

Or gossiping. Gossiping has almost been canonized. You’re not really a good saint unless you gossip a little bit, and you get on the telephone. I have a friend who calls it Alexander Graham Bell-itis, [laughter] and you get on the telephone and you rip the saints up and down and then you have the nerve afterwards to say to one of your friends that you were just having a little fellowship with another Christian, calling gossip Christian fellowship. And so the sins of the mind, the mental sins, we have raised to the power of virtue, and the sins that are fleshly, the sins that most of us would not commit, why those are the Christian sins or are sins.

Now when we turn to the Bible, we find the strange fact that while the fleshly sins are still sins, the mental sins are just as much sin as the fleshly sins, and envy and gossiping and hypocrisy and pride and arrogance – these are the things that the apostles and our Lord mention in the same breath that they mention adultery and murder and fornication.

And in the Christian church, we have so reversed things that it’s very difficult for a prodigal to find a place in our assembly. He comes in and he’s looked down upon he’s had a true Christian conversion, but we look at the fleshly sins and we say he really doesn’t belong in our midst, but those who are hypocritical and arrogant and proud, well we vote them into office as elders and deacons and pastors of churches. This is the way in which we have so twisted the biblical morality.

Now the Lord Jesus speaks these seven woes against the Pharisees just after he has spoken about some of their aims and some of their attitudes and some of their actions. He had said concerning them that they are characterized as men who say and do not, and

then he said they have there as their aim the doing of things in order to be seen, and furthermore, their actions are characterized by binding heavy burdens and grievous to be born upon men’s shoulders and when it’s evident that men cannot really keep these numerous regulations which they have added to the law of Moses, they do not move one finger to lift the weight of them. They love the upper most places at the feast. They like to sit in Moses’ seat over here, or over here, and they like the chief seats in the synagogues, and when the banquets take place, they like to be at the head table.

Now then he turned to the apostles and disciples and said to them, but I don’t want you to be like them. I don’t want you to be called Rabbi. You shouldn’t be called reverend. I don’t know why anyone wants to be called reverend. In the Bible reverend is a virtue that is applied only to God, and why anyone should want to steal an attribute that belongs to God I do not know, but nevertheless the Christian church has fallen into this, and so we speak about the Reverend Mister so-and-so. The Lord Jesus said, don’t be called Rabbi or teacher, don’t call any man upon the earth your father, your spiritual father, for you have only one spiritual father, and furthermore, don’t be called professors, because one is your Professor, even Jesus Christ.

So the Father, the Son and the Spirit are our spiritual leaders and professors and rabbis and our teachers, and consequently we do not need to call any particular person here on the earth our spiritual guide. Our spiritual guide is not any man here upon the earth. I am not your spiritual guide, so don’t think of me as your spiritual guide. Don’t call me your father and don’t call me rabbi and don’t call me your professor, because this belongs to the Trinity in heaven.

Now he says, if you want to really know who’s great, the great one is the servant. The great one is the one who serves the saints, the one who loves the saints and serves the saints. This is my great one, and he concluded with the proverbial saying, whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased, like the Pharisees, and whosoever shall humble himself shall be exalted. But, and here he turns in contrast to these words to the disciples

to speak to the Pharisees and scribes, these seven woes, these seven sad words of lightning-like severity.

Now I don’t think we understand these if we do not grasp the fact that the term, woe, is a term that does contain not only denunciation but also sorrow and sadness. It’s the word that frequently is rendered in the New Testament in, for example, Revelation chapter 18, alas, so we should not think of this as only denunciation. It is an expression on our Lord’s part of denunciation, because he calls them snakes. He calls them generation of vipers. But at the same time he does it in a voice of sorrow and sadness and pity for the moral condition of these men.

Now it would be impossible for me to expound all of these seven woes in detail. What I want to do is just go through the seven of them and touch the high spots of them and I’ll call them a certain kind of woe and that’s not really in order to thoroughly expound the text, but at least identify them and point out the important things that our Lord seems to be saying. They are like thunder in their unanswerable severity. They are like lightning in their unsparing exposure, but let us remember as we go through that our Lord is speaking them in tones of sadness. Someone has said *corruptior optimi pessimior*, a Latin expression which means, the corruption of the best is the worst, and the corruption of religion, or the corruption of spiritual things is the worst form of corruption.

Now the first of the woes which has to do with the Pharisee precepts is the woe of obstructionism set forth for us in their verse 13: Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men you neither go in yourselves nor do you permit others who are trying to go in to go in. In other words, in doctrine you are proclaiming the righteousness of good works. This, I think, is fulfilled very perfectly in spirit by men who stand in the pulpit today, and say one does not go to heaven through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. That may be a way for you to go, but there are other ways to go.

This is a beautiful picture it seems to me of the man who says that we are all going to the same place, we are just taking different roads. This morning, coming to this meeting, I heard again over the radio this same kind of approach to spiritual things. It doesn’t really make a bit of difference what we believe. We believe what is most suitable for our own culture and environment, because we are all worshipping the same God.

The Pharisees are those who shut up the kingdom of heaven against men by their doctrine. They proclaimed a righteousness by virtue of human works – their own particular kind, of course – for them it was the meticulous observance of the Mosaic law and also the traditions which they had added to it.

And then they also shut up the kingdom of heaven against men in their personal conduct which was evil and deceptive. They took their own personal prejudices, and they erected them into universal principles and applied them to everybody. No wonder our Lord spoke against them, woe unto you scribes and Pharisees.

Then the second woe in the 15th verse is the woe of proselytism, desirous of winning for themselves converts—not winning them for Jehovah mind you—but winning them for themselves. What the Pharisees wished, as they compassed land and sea— incidentally, historically this was true. In the 1st Century, Judaism was very vigorous in its proselyting men of other faith. Today, Judaism is not proselyting at all, because Judaism is on the defensive, and Judaism makes the strongest remarks against proselyting today. But in the 1st Century, and characteristic of Judaism in the early days, was this spirit of proselytism. It is historically true.

But they didn’t want to win disciples for Jehovah. It was for themselves. They wanted the individual to become one of them, to become a full-fledged, legalistic, ritualistic, hair-splitting Pharisee under the full yoke of the law as they understood it. The Lord Jesus said – just as Erasmus said – out of bad heathens they have made worse Jews, for they have made them twofold more a child of Gehenna than yourselves. It is characteristic, of course, of people who are converted to something that they usually

become very strong adherents of it. We have all seen that as a characteristic of human nature, and that is what is found here.

Now I think there is something, two things, that ought to be mentioned in connection with this. There are people who believe that if a person is sincere, everything ultimately will turn out all right. You constantly hear this. You constantly hear people saying, well there they’re not so straight in their knowledge of Scripture, but they are very sincere in what they believe, as if that’s a virtue. Well now sincerity by itself might be considered a virtue, but sincerity for that which is evil, is evil according to the Bible. “I bear them record,” Paul said of the Jews “that they have a zeal for God but not according to knowledge.” They were men who did not have the truth as it should have been had by them, and as a result Paul considered them to be lost and in need of salvation. He himself gave himself for his brethren according to the flesh, that some of them might be saved.

But they were very sincere. Sincerity is not enough. And today there are religions characterized by sincerity. Jehovah’s Witnesses are characterized by a great deal sincerity. The Mormons are characterized by a great deal of sincerity. But sincerity for that which is evil is evil, not good, and the fact that a person is sincere does not mean that he is in the will of God. Our Lord makes that very plain here.

The third woe is the woe of sophism. Hair-splitting reasoning, usually of a fallacious character. He speaks about blind guides who swear by the temple and swear by something that is in the temple, who swear by the altar, and who swear by something that is upon the altar. The scribes and the Pharisees were masters in the art of evasion. So an oath was binding upon them, they thought, if the name of God was involved, but an oath was not binding if the name of God was not involved. In other words a person’s word didn’t really mean anything, providing he didn’t mention the name of God. But if he mentioned the name of God, then that was a binding oath.

Now this had worked out in such a way that if a person came and in conversation made an oath by virtue of the gold that was in the temple, that was considered to be a binding oath, but if he swore by the temple itself that was not considered to be a binding oath. If he swore by something upon the altar of sacrifice, why that was a binding oath, but if he swore by the altar, it was not a binding sacrifice. Now our Lord Jesus sweeps away all of this fallacious reasoning by saying first of all, that anything in the temple partakes of the character of the temple. It is the temple that sanctifies the gold, not the gold that sanctifies the temple, and it’s the altar, the ceremonial altar of the Old Testament that sanctified the gift, not the gift the altar. And then finally he concludes by saying after all everything belongs to God, and if you swear by anything, you swear by that which belongs to God and therefore every oath is binding.

That’s why he says back in chapter 5, it’s a good thing not to swear. Shouldn’t have to swear. The reason men swear on a Bible – if they still do that in some places – swear by the Bible in the law of courts, is because everybody knows that men are untruthful, naturally. Our Lord occasionally stooped to swearing. It was a stooping a condescending to the characteristics of men who never tell the truth. God is a God who doesn’t lie, and he likes for his children to be people who don’t lie and tell untruths.

Now I wish I could apply this, because I think there’s a great deal of application needed among Christians, and I think one of the ways in which this most manifests itself is in the subject of marriage and divorce. The Bible is so plain in what it has to say concerning marriage and what it has to say concerning divorce.

Now I’m not suggesting the Bible touches every particular difficulty in which we can find ourselves now in 1977, but it’s marvelously plain about the kinds of people Christian ought to marry, and also it’s marvelously plain on the basis of divorce. But the sophistry into which we can ourselves enter and fall into in seeking to explain our evil action is amazing. Amazing.

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Now the fourth woe is a kind of transitional woe. “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” he says in the 23rd verse, “for you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, who strain out a gnat, and swallow a camel.” Scrupulosity at the expense of morality. In other words, pay tithes of the most minute products of your work.

Incidentally as far as I can tell it is not taught in the Old Testament that they should tithe the mint and the anise and the cummin unless they were true products in a commercial sense. It was the responsibility of the Jews to pay a tithe of ten percent of the produce that they raised. Now this was done in order to support the Levites who were engaged in the material work of the tabernacle and temple, and that tithe, which incidentally was not a gift at all – it was an income tax paid for their benefit – just as we pay a lot more than ten percent, many of you, in order to support those fellows in Washington and throughout the rest of the country. So they were responsible for paying the tithe.

But now the scribes and the Pharisees tithed everything that they produced, and even the mint and the dill and cummin which were really little plants that women used for their kitchen cooking, which they may have grown in a little plot outside the back of the house in order to use for seasoning of the food. The scribes and Pharisees required them to tithe that. Now that would not have been so bad, I guess in itself, were it not for the fact that they combined that with the omission of the weightier matters of the law: justice mercy and faith.

Perhaps our Lord would not have spoken so harshly about it if they were just as anxious to be just, just as anxious to show mercy and faith, as they were in tithing these infinitesimally small plants. So what we have here is the gigantic inconsistency. It’s so often manifested among Christians.

I’m going use one that’s out of date; you can make your own application. But about 25 years ago, it was very common in evangelical churches to use as a general taboo the statement or the doctrine that a true biblical Christian should never darken the door of a theater. Now we have all seen such gigantic inconsistencies as a fat person condemning people who go to the theater. One who does not observe the requirements of the word of God for self control in one area, attacking others who have no self control in another. If our area of weakness is one thing, we tend to cover it up by attacking areas of weakness in others which are, relatively, areas of strength in ourselves.

Or we have unethical churchgoers, men who come into the church on Sunday and sit in the pew and look extremely pious, and in the midst of their piety they go out of the church, and on Sunday even in their homes do not act like believing Christians. And then on Monday become just as rapacious, and just as much a prosecutor of extortion as others in their business world. Now incidentally, I don’t believe all businessmen are extortioners, and I don’t believe all businessmen are rapacious, but I do believe some were. In fact I know some were, because I was in business myself. I used to work. You understand that don’t you? [Laughter] And when I said that, I was speaking about myself, because I know what it is to be in business and to seek to make as much money as you can, and I also know how easy it is to cut corners in order to do it, and I know also the conflicts that came when I became a Christian, and I had to face the question of whether I would cut the corners a little bit here or a little bit there in order to be successful in business. Who doesn’t want to be successful?

But it is a gigantic inconsistency to come into church on Sunday and look very pious and then on Sunday, on Monday and Tuesday and throughout the week, live like the world. And it also is a gigantic inconsistency to plaster all over the church, the title is the Lord’s, and then to not be concerned about the preaching of the gospel in the pulpit – of which many churches are guilty and, incidentally, since we have brought up the subject of tithes, the Bible says nothing about Christians in this age tithing.

Now if you will just take a concordance out and take a look at it and see what the New Testament has to say about the word, tithe, you will see that tithing is an Old Testament practice an income tax. In the New Testament, Christians are exhorted to give as God has prospered them, proportionate to the ways in which God has prospered them, to give cheerfully to give out of gratitude for that which Jesus Christ has done for us.

Now the biblical injunctions are most productive of the spirit that our Lord speaks about when he speaks about giving out of gratitude and thanksgiving, and that’s why we don’t have an offering at our Sunday morning service because there are a number of people in this audience, from time to time, who are not believers and whose idea of the Christian church is that it simply is an organization that is just as rapacious as the Internal Revenue Service – maybe more so – because it parades under the banner of religion and righteousness, and we want you to know that your first responsibility before God is not to put money in the collection plate. That will not advance you one step toward heaven.

Your first responsibility is to believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, and then if God moves in your heart, you can give out of gratitude for that which He has done. The supreme illustration of this particular woe is the chief priests themselves, who plotted with Judas for thirty pieces of silver to betray the Lord Jesus, and after he had done it and Judas came back and threw the thirty pieces of silver into the temple said, take them away, because we cannot defile the temple with that money; it’s blood money. Murder was alright, but defiling the temple was all wrong. Couldn’t be worse than that.

Then he speaks about the woe of hypocritical ceremonialism, and he talks about ritual purification of kitchen vessels in verse 25 and verse 26. He said you make clean the outside of the cup and the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. What he means by that simply is that you observe all of these rules for the cleansing of the plates and the cups in the kitchen, but the contents of the plates and the contents of the cups, the food and other niceties which you are eating have been obtained by the wickedness and evil practices of your business dealings with other Israelites.

And then he speaks of the woe of hypocritical externalism in verse 27 and 28. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like whited sepulchers. Now you must understand the situation in which this was said to catch it full force. It was the time of the feast, and of course particularly at the Passover feast, which was held once a year. People came from all over that world to Jerusalem in order to participate in the Passover festival.

But there was a rule or a law in the Old Testament, part of the word of God, that if you should happen to touch a grave, you were unclean for seven days – could not participate in the feast. So let’s just imagine a person who saved up money for years in order to make a trip home to the land of Palestine and happened to come into the land and walk near a cemetery and accidentally stumble against a tombstone which was almost invisible amid the overgrowth or undergrowth, and discovered that he was now ceremonially unclean for seven days, and therefore could not enjoy the time which he had intended to have as vacation.

So they were very cooperative with them, and they whitewashed all the tombs before the time of the feasts, so you wouldn’t stumble over them and therefore be ceremonially unclean. The Lord Jesus uses this as an illustration. He says you blind Pharisees, why you’re like whited sepulchers which indeed appear outwardly beautiful, but just as inside that grave there are bones and corruption, so inside your outward exterior of religion and righteousness and observance of the details of the Mosaic Law, there is inside of you hypocrisy and inequity, and I think also he implies by this that just as you ought to avoid those graves in order that you might not become unclean ceremonially, you ought to avoid these men, these scribes and Pharisees, who are so wicked within but who appear so righteous and beautiful outside.

That’s a word for preachers. Some time, a long time, well a long time ago, now, fourteen years ago, I heard a man speak at one of our commencement services at Dallas Seminary, and he said, “It is my observation,” as he spoke to the crowd, “That when you

see a man who always looks pious you had better watch him. He’s apt to lie about other things too.” [Laughter] Now that’s right in the spirit of what our Lord is saying here.

Whitewash.

Now finally he speaks of the woe of hypocritical veneration. He says in verse 29, Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchers of the righteous, and you say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. So they honored the dead prophets but killed the living, Great Prophet who was in their midst at that very time. By the very fact that they did what they did they proved themselves to be exactly what they were saying, but in a sense which they did not understand, the sons of their fathers who were before them.

There is a Latin proverb that says it’s permitted that he be divine while he’s not living. That’s what we tend to do. We tend to see a person who was not very popular while he was living after he has died as a rather remarkable and unusual man. And so they did.

And incidentally in the Bible you can see some evidence of this very practice, and if you travel in the land of Palestine or in the East today, you will know that’s true, because they love to venerate the place of burial of the ancient saints. And so you can go to the places where David was buried. Peter when he was preaching on the day of Pentecost said in the midst of his sermon, when he mentioned David, his grave is still with us today. They honor David, and honored him by whitewashing his tomb, building memorials about it. You can see where Abraham is supposed to have been buried and so on. It was characteristic.

But these men who were doing this, honoring these great men of the Old Testament by garnishing their tombs, at the same time were killing the prophets down through the ages. And now in the person of our Lord Jesus, the Prophet is before them. So here was a generation that was ready to honor—we’ll I’m sure that they would they

would have rejected this—but what they were doing is they were ready to kill the Lord Jesus in honor of Moses, and if they had lived in the day of Moses they would have killed Moses in honor of Abraham. Just as today, in honor of the apostles, they desire to put to death those who preach the apostles’ doctrine. It is characteristic of our human nature to do that.

Now does that have any application to us? Why it certainly does. When I was in Scotland, the land of the Scottish Reformation of John Knox, 1960, four hundred years after the event in which the Scottish Reformation really came to its own, 1560, Reformation Sunday, honoring the four hundred year anniversary of the Reformation, was held all over the land of Scotland.

But if you went into churches of Scotland, one after the other, there are some fine churches still that are preaching the gospel there, but generally speaking if you went into church after church you would not hear the gospel of the Lord Jesus spoken at all. You would not hear the doctrine that John Knox proclaimed. We can have Reformation Sundays, and say we are Reformed in our doctrine, but we don’t know anything about the doctrine of total depravity and the bondage of the will which the Reformers proclaim. We say this is Reformation Sunday, we have Reformation theology, but we don’t proclaim and do not believe often the unconditional election of the saints of God.

We say we are following the reformers in doctrine, but we do not say anything about the fact that that atonement was definite and purposeful and designed to save a certain group of people. We do not say that we believe in the efficacious working of the Holy Spirit by which he alone brings a man to faith in Christ, and that if that does not take place, he cannot come. No man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me. Draw him, but at the same breath, in the same breath at which we deny that doctrine we can say we are Reformed in our teaching. You see, we are really the sons of, not the fathers, but we are the sons of the Pharisees. We are the sons of the fathers who murdered the prophets too often.

Well, there is a climactic condemnation. Our Lord announces that he is going to send unto them prophets. Incidentally, he assumes the position of Jehovah when he says that, because Jehovah sends prophets. But he is the Jehovah of the Old Testament, and so he says wherefore behold I send unto you prophets and wise men and scribes, and some of them you shall kill and crucify, and some of them you shall scourge in your synagogues, and you’ll persecute them from city to city, in order that upon you may come all the righteous bloodshed upon the earth from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zacharias. Verily I say unto you, to emphasize this, verily I say unto you all these things shall come upon this generation. No wonder he calls them snakes and a generation of vipers. How shall you escape the Gehenna of fire?

If our Lord should say that it’s evident no one can who has the same spirit that the fathers and the scribes and Pharisees had. Well this is the lesson of the crime of externalism in spiritual things. You know, I think this particular sin is the sin of which we in Believers Chapel have most to fear. It is from this that we have most to fear, because so often we think of ourselves as those who have the truth of God, and not only the truth of God, but we interpret it in the way in which it should be interpreted, and the danger for every one of us is to become so enamored of the truth that we hold, and the way in which we hold it, that we forget justice and mercy and faith.

The true saints are characterized by justice in their dealings with men, mercy in their dealings with their fellow Christians, love in our relationships one to another, and faith and faithfulness. It is true the hypocrite is an atheist, really. He is a man who does not really believe that there is a sovereign in heaven. He’s man who sets his watch not by the sun, but by the town clock. Instead of setting his watch by the Bible and what the word of God says, he sets his clock by the things that men do, so that *vox populi*, the voice of the people, what everybody does, is *vox dei* to him – the voice of God. May God deliver us in Believers Chapel from the sin of hypocrisy and pride and arrogance that go along with it.

If you’re here today and you’ve never believed in the Lord Jesus, the only way to eternal life is through him. He’s the way, the truth and the life, no man cometh unto the Father but by the Son who is the only Mediator between God and man. He has offered a sacrifice, an atoning sacrifice for sinners, and if you’re a sinner, that means that you’re a hypocrite, today, if you’re a hypocrite and you know you’re a hypocrite, if you’re guilty of that sin, then you need this Savior you are under divine condemnation. You are heading fast for divine judgment. May God the Holy Spirit in his grace and mercy bring you to faith in the Son of God. That transaction’s something very easy to accomplish. It takes place when the Holy Spirit brings us to the sense of our lostness and also to cry out to God to have mercy upon us on the basis of what Christ has done for us. May God work in your heart to that end. Shall we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] Father we are so grateful to Thee for these wonderful words that our Lord has spoken which are so convicting and condemning, and if there should be someone here without Christ, O God, give them no rest nor peace in their self righteousness until they recline upon the Son of God and his cross for everlasting salvation.

And for those of us, Lord, who name the name of the Lord Jesus, help us to so live that men may glorify our Father in heaven and not reproach him because of our weakness and sin.

May grace mercy and peace go with us.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.