

## **Matthew 23:1-24:2:**

### ***Introduction:***

People of God! It's been awhile, you know? I'm honored to speak again.

I've prepared a very brief, seven-part, six-hour message on today's chapter. I'm kidding. Actually, just the opposite of something like that, we're going to have a very short message today.

We have to, you know? There's so much that could be said, each of these "woe's" Jesus gives, the introduction about hypocrisy that it begins with, Jesus own cry over Jerusalem's failure...each of it is worth all our attention, and each bit deserves our efforts to live up to what Jesus calls us to there.

So, instead of trying for that, I'm going broad, you know? General themes. And we'll see what comes of it. All we've got to lose is, what, 15 minutes of a morning?

But maybe--*maybe*--God will bless us with a deep clarity about what it means to be a privileged citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven, God's child in whom he is well-pleased, a member of a kingdom of priests, who reconcile others to God and one another. We might see the ways we fall short in this, we might see the ways we are good at this--each and all of us--and we might

be led, by the Spirit who is alive, and powerful, and deeply attentive to the troubles that distract and overwhelm us even in this moment, we might be led to live differently, just a twitch closer to Jesus' example. That'd be worth 15 minutes.

Fifteen starting now, though, I mean. Not counting from a second ago. I've got words to say, you know. Geez.

Let's pray!

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Outline:***

Let's outline this thing. Get your pack of colored highlighters out, everyone. Kidding.

We start with a broad condemnation of the Pharisees' & Torah-teachers' hypocrisy. It's a set-up for what's to come.

Jesus lays out seven "woes" that follow from this, each of which condemn the Pharisees basic practices, with more or less detail.

Then Jesus bemoans, grieves, over Jerusalem and the Temple, which because of the Religious Elites' rejection of him--and, we assume, most of the city's--it will all now certainly fall. We're never told the mechanics of

that; it's just a certainty laid out there. The Messiah was rejected; they didn't know they were rejecting their security at the same time.

So:

***Basic Condemnation:***

*(that highlights moral and religious hypocrisy)*

***Seven Woes:***

*(that build on the same theme)*

***Regret Over Jerusalem's Response:***

*(seen in the religious leaders' responses)*

Bam! Have a good morning! Kidding again; full of jokes this morning. We see this though, right? For all the words Jesus says, this is what's happening here. Let's talk a tiny bit more about each of the elements of flow that are going on here.

***Basic Condemnation:***

Remember, Jesus has just called us to live out two great commandments, loving God with all of ourselves, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. And then he goes on here. So he's going to set the Pharisees up as the opposite of what we're supposed to be, in so many ways, they're the opposite of what it looks like to practically love God and love our neighbor at the same time. We don't think about loving God and loving our neighbor at the same time, in the same

moment, you know, but you know who does? Pastors. Religious leaders. They do. I have this...friend...who is a pastor. It's a guy. When you're paid to try to position a group of people for holy living together, worshipful living together, you think about what love looks like in two directions at once, you know, up to the Lord, and outward in fellowship.

And while today's passage preaches really, really well to people who are, like my friend, pastors, to "vocational ministers." The truth is that on this side of the Spirit we're all part of what Peter calls "a kingdom of priests." We are each accountable for a life lived for the Lord, and we don't get to sub-let holiness, character, bearing witness to Christ to any one person. We all get that. We minister in the places where I time is spent, in the particular ways God has set us up in those places.

Jesus also sets up the Pharisees as our bad example of loving God and loving Neighbor at the same time because, honestly, I think we people just learn really well from bad examples. We get "don't do that" more easily than we get "do that." Negative behaviors tend to hold true in most places; "Don't punch your sister." just *stands*, you know? It's helpful, concrete. We can at least refrain; to improvise love is a more difficult thing. So the negative example of the religious leaders is just handy.

And Jesus' basic point is this: "Do not do what the Pharisees do, because they do not practice what they preach....Everything they do is done for people to see." He reminds us that "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted." He lifts up the truth that we're siblings together, not one of us intrinsically more special, more honorable, than another.

Jesus lifts up the Pharisees and Torah-teachers behavior to point out their character, which is, well, not there at all. They aren't virtuous, but full of vice. There are, basically, prideful, self-interested, hypocrites.

Prideful, self-interested, hypocrites.

But Jesus makes the point really, really well, you know? I mean, it's easy to say "Don't be a prideful, self-interested, hypocrite." "Okay!" I mean, we're not getting in that line, you know? But our loved ones know. Our journals know. Our consciences that whisper to us, and the Spirit that interrupts us, they know. We know.

If I were preaching to pastors, like my friend, I'd talk about the way even the tiniest position of power, like a pastorate, can be used to inflate a person's ego, rather than be used for service. I'd point out that Jesus says that the greatest among his followers is the

servant, not the leader, and our deep attraction to leadership, and our deep desire to be seen as some sort of thought-leader, influencer, organization-changer, to have impact--that desire to be recognized for the impact we have is character poison. We take it in little doses, you know, a bit of "Did you see what I did there?" now and then, and it's not a huge deal, maybe; like a single drink to our liver. But even a drink a day can give some kinds of people liver failure; for Christians, a choice a day for our egos--a prideful choice a day, a self-serving choice a day, a hypocritical choice a day--it destroys some faculty in us, shrivels it up. We become less than complete, or simply moral failures.

But since we're all pastors and missionaries in the place we find ourselves, citizens in a kingdom of priests, it's all relevant for us, too: Where, right now, are you prideful? Where, right now, are you self-interested? Where, right now, are you acting the hypocrite?

Hands?

### ***Seven Woes:***

Jesus builds on this, though, and does so even more specifically, by listing out seven woes.

And of course seven is significant. Let it be significant.

But it's not a magic number. Remember he's building to the third part of this speech, which ends with the promise Jerusalem and the Temple are coming down. These seven examples of prideful, self-interested, hypocritical behavior stand as witnesses against the religious leaders. And Jesus doesn't give two or three, which is all he needs; he give seven, to point out that, I think, just how beyond the pale these Torah-teachers and Pharisees have become.

And in these seven Jesus highlights the way that these religious leaders, who were meant to love God and love their neighbor all wrapped up in an integrity-filled religious life, they are doing the opposite. Their religion, their ceremony, their embodied faith, it's become, again, a vehicle for their own hypocritical, self-interested, and prideful actions.

When Jesus says "Woe to you!" He's saying, "You're going to be screaming in fear!" A fearful scream is coming your way. I love that the Spanish Translation is like "Aaahhhhhh at you!" It's the kind of sound you make when an avalanche is coming down on your head, and Jesus is giving them a verbal avalanche.

You're going to scream in fear (1) because you blockade people from the kingdom of heaven, even though you're not going in there! You're going to scream in fear (2) because you work so hard for

converts, and you ruin them when you get them, you make them into hell's children, not heaven's. My grandpa called all of us "angels," even now, "Oh, angel, you want some brandy?" That affectionate offer of liquor is different if you're called a demon, right? Pharisees and Torah-teachers, you'll scream in fear (3) because you don't recognize what's really holy, what you see instead is your own contorted theologies, ranks about what's lesser or more, and when it comes to the character of God, and what God's set-up for His people, there's no "lesser" category. But you're like a trail guide whose describing dangers and wonders he or she hasn't even seen. Valueless.

**23 "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. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.**

You should scream in fear (4) because you've raised up parts of a faithful life and made them equal to the whole, but they are not. What we can measure is never more important than the character we cannot measure. Scream in fear because you don't get that we are meant to live wholly faithful lives, faithful in the checklists and faithful in the immeasurable integrity of



a life lived for God.

Scream in fear, because your theology is fundamentally broken (5). The Pharisees, so concerned for purity, neglected their moral lives. Jesus says “You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.” (Ugh. These are the two evils at the heart of our contemporary market-driven life; our checkbooks, our calendars, and our waistlines all attest to them.) But integrity would undo this: “First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside would be clean.” A moral life leads to moral practices. And he says it again (6), in case they think he’s simply talking about cups and bowls:

***27 “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. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.***

Oof! Scream in fear, because everything about you is a lie. You present yourself as faithful, living up to all that God calls his covenant people to live up to. But you do not.

Look. God sees inside tombs. God sees inside our

hearts. God knows what is real and what is a lie, presented for our own self-aggrandizement. We can never, ever be judged for humility, for confession, for repentance. But once we avoid these things, and seek to avoid the judgment of others so that we can seem more faithful than we are, then we are judged and found wanting: not by people, but by God. And every person will discover that God's is the only voice of judgment that matters.

Jesus' last "Scream in fear, you Torah-teachers and Pharisees" is a charge to live up to who they really are, which is murderous descendants of murderers. He promises that his own disciples, "prophets, sages, and teachers" will be sent to them, and he prophecies:

***Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. 35 And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.***

"Upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth." Jesus includes his teachers, his sages, his prophets, along with some famously murdered People of God as righteous, faithful to what

God has asked of His People. And Jesus' final promise of woe ends with the final promise of judgment for all that they've done against the agents of God...and all that those they've aligned themselves with have done against God's agents.

**Regrets:**

And Jesus ends with regret, so heartbreaking I won't summarize it. Hear it. Imagine him, standing there, the Temple's shadow cutting across people, the crowds around him listening, the Pharisees, marching away, crippled people under the colonnade, hoping for help; pigeons and smells and the sounds of a city:

***37 "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. 38 Look, your house is left to you desolate. 39 For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"***

Jesus takes for himself the image of a sensitive mother hen who wants to protect her little babies. It sort of undermines the whole "Men should eat chunks of metal for Jesus" way of Christianity you find now and then.

But his regret is this: It's too late. It's too late. He

arrived in Jerusalem two days ago, and whatever might have been, whatever maybe could have been...wasn't. And Jerusalem's fate is sealed, and it will be terrible. Next week we'll hear about it. The only hope at all is that when they do see Jesus again, not just the crowds that followed him into town, not just his sages, teachers, and prophets, but everyone will recognize him for who he is.

### ***Conclusion:***

There's only one thing to really talk about when it comes to this passage, and it's judgment.

The Pharisees and Torah-teachers have screams of fear to look forward to, because they've called their evil good. All the different things that they've done, which at the heart are driven by pride, self-interest, and hypocrisy, they've been doing in God's name. They've ignored good in the name of God. They've been ignoring good, and doing it for God's sake. And you just can't do that and get away from it.

Worse than this, the Pharisees and Torah-teachers have somehow salted Jerusalem with their evil. They have so deeply saturated the city and its people with their prideful, self-interested, hypocritical way of living for God that the city itself is going to fall apart for it. They've empowered evil, used their influence and power to spread lies about a faithful life. And their response to God before them isn't to confess, to

repent, to own their failure and own Jesus' forgiveness; it's to double-down, and kill him.

We face judgment to, of course. All of us will stand before God and give an account for our lives and what we've done with them. We have nothing to fear in that judgment, because God's love overcomes it, forgiving us...but we don't get out of it, and there's no room for unrepentance there.

And while there are so many particulars that we could talk about from today's passage, I want to ask us this:

What are we salting our city with? What are we communicating about God as we use our power and influence in the world. And we are powerful and influential. We are people of connections, of relationships, of neighbors, of friends, of wealth and means, of standing and good reputation. What are people getting about God from us? You can only keep a lock on pride, self-interest, and hypocrisy for so long if you're interacting with people, you know? But we are watched all the time, and what are we communicating about God as we go?

Let's check ourselves. Are we setting those around us up to see God as God is--loving, forgiving, engaged, gracious, dependable? Does our pride shine brighter than our humility? Does our self-interest smell stronger

than our selflessness? Does our hypocrisy shout louder than our integrity? Does our faithfulness pass the smell test? And if we think no one is watching us, no one is learning from us, no one is being changed by knowing us, then we are lying to ourselves, and we need to get over the lie.

The religious elite of Jerusalem gave away what was good for God's People so they could get what felt good to them and their weak, insecure, needy egos, but in the end, they took down the whole ship, and brought a murderer's family tree worth of condemnation down on their heads. All because they couldn't see the Messiah in front of them, and practice for a moment humility, selflessness, and integrity.

Think of the communities you think you're a part of: What are you salting them with? What are people learning about God from you? If it's anything like the bad examples in today's sad passage, it's nothing like Christ. We're meant to be everything like him. So let's try for that, leaning into the flood of power that comes from God when we open ourselves up to power without self-protection, judgment without punishment, love without self-interest or qualification.

We are the ones who say "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," who recognize Jesus is who he said he was. And the Spirit still speaks to us, revealing to us who he is, and giving us what we need to turn

away from pride, self-interest, and hypocrisy in all the ways they express themselves. Let's listen, and receive the power of God to live for Him, not against him, just as he is for us, not against us.