

Blind Guides
Matthew 23:13-33

At Valdosta Junior High School, most of the classrooms had a wall of windows on the outside and a door to the long, locker-lined hallway on the inside. Because the whole building was made of cinderblocks, the hallways were echo chambers, amplifying every sound, and thus requiring the assistant principals to roam those halls between class periods to make sure we didn't make too much noise. "Just get on over to the right," Mr. Price would rumble as he towered over us seventh-grade boys.

But because their patrols continued once class was in session, teachers could tell exceptionally unruly students to stand outside the classroom and wait for either Mr. Price or Mr. Finland to come by. And it was not at all unusual for a student to get a paddling right there in the hall before being sent back to class – while leaning up against the lockers, in the echo chamber. Everyone in the whole building could hear it. So a hush would creep over every classroom, as our fear of punishment combined with the relief that it was someone else who was getting it.

And that may be our initial reaction to today's passage – awe at the power of Jesus' words combined with relief that we aren't the ones in His crosshairs. For aren't you glad you're not one of those He describes in verse 34, people who persecuted and beat and killed His prophets? In fact, aren't you glad you weren't standing with those scribes and Pharisees some 2000 years ago, plotting against Jesus, and eventually engineering His crucifixion?

Now make no mistake – that sort of open hostility to Jesus continues to be alive and well in the world today. In many Islamic countries, for example, it's illegal to convert to Christianity, and the Saudi Arabian government doesn't allow any church buildings to be built. But opposition to the Christian faith has also been growing here in the United States, especially where it comes to Biblical teachings about marriage and family issues. In fact, about a quarter of all Americans deny holding any religious faith at all, and increasing numbers of those folks are trying to "cancel" out anyone who disagrees with them, anyone who insists on the existence of any absolute truth, and especially anyone who claims that the Holy Scriptures speak with the voice of God Himself.

No, when we hear Jesus' words of woe directed at the scribes and Pharisees, it's easy to feel that same combination of terror and relief that washed over us junior high boys when we heard someone else getting it out in the hallway. For haven't we all declared our allegiance to Jesus? Don't we claim His name and worship Him as the Son of David, the Son of Man, the Son of God? Oh, no. We would never express the sort of open hostility to Christ that the scribes and Pharisees displayed.

But remember this – they didn't think they were enemies of God either. No, in verses 29 and 30, Jesus echoes their insistence that they would never have been involved in the kind of persecution that prophets like Zechariah endured. Instead, Jesus admits that they built and adorned the tombs of the prophets, many of whom their ancestors had murdered because they had dared to call God's people to account because of their sins.

No, just as we distance ourselves from their open hostility to Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees sought to distance themselves from the ignorance and brutality of their ancestors. But isn't it ironic? Even while they were fixing up the tomb of Zechariah, the scribes and Pharisees refused to believe what he had said about the coming Messiah, a prophecy that Jesus had fulfilled earlier that same week, during His entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout *in triumph*, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, Humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah. 9:9).

And so, no matter how godly and faithful they claimed to be, because they rejected their Messiah, because they turned on the greatest Prophet Who ever lived, the scribes and Pharisees had

indeed earned all the woes that Jesus pronounced over them. For they had indeed done all those things of which Jesus accused them in today's passage.

Yes, by seeking God's favor through following their man-made code of ethics, they were spreading false religion, preventing themselves or anyone who listened to them from entering the kingdom of heaven. And so, no matter how elaborate were the tombs they may have built for the prophets, and no matter how earnestly they may have tried to spread their message of works righteousness, anyone who listened to them was therefore doomed to be cut off from God's presence, just as they were.

But let's face it. This kind of hypocrisy, claiming to be the people of God while rejecting the gospel of grace, is all too common among those who call themselves Christians today, isn't it? After all, this congregation knows from personal experience how some mainline Protestant denominations have drifted away from the clear teaching of the Scriptures in order to place their faith in either Marxist materialism or in the Romantic sensibilities of the sexual revolution. And we've all heard the false teachings of those "health and wealth" preachers on TV, telling us to "name it and claim it," because God wants all of us to be rich and happy in this world.

And the ancient scribes and Pharisees were just as faithless, just as worldly. For why does Jesus pronounce His fourth woe on them in verse 16? Because as they took oaths, they considered the golden objects and decorations in the Temple to be more important than the Temple itself. And in verse 18, Jesus condemns them for being more interested in the offerings sacrificed on the altar than they were in the altar itself. In short, their focus was not on the God to whom the Temple and its rituals pointed, but on the material things of this world.

And the sad fact is that Jesus' sixth woe applies to the modern social justice warriors and sexual revolutionaries and prosperity gospel peddlers who claim to be Christians just as it did to those ancient scribes and Pharisees. For practicing any form of robbery or extortion, engaging any form of excess or self-indulgence, putting our faith and hope in wealth or power or sex while claiming to be the people of God is just like washing only the outside of our dirty dishes: it preserves the illusion of godliness while hiding the hypocrisy that remains within. Worse yet, such hypocrisy makes those who practice it little better than the tombs of the prophets in which those ancient Pharisees took so much pride: for however beautiful they may have been on the outside, the only thing inside was a rejection of the gospel that leads to death.

That's sobering stuff, but couldn't this woe apply to us as well? For when we pray, where is our focus? Are we more interested in giving God our thanks and praise, or do we jump right into a list of our needs and the needs of others? Do we really desire to increase the glory of God or are we more interested in getting the comfort and pleasure that we want out of Him? While we worship, is our attention on the gifts or the Giver, the creation or the Creator? And if we find ourselves to be too interested in the wealth and power and pleasure that this world has to offer, are we really so different from the modern Marxists and libertines or the ancient Pharisees that we love to despise? Are we really safe inside the classroom, or do we deserve to be out in the hall?

But there's one more woe that Jesus pronounced on the scribes and Pharisees, and it may just be the most dangerous of all. For it points to the first step on the road to hypocrisy, the road which leads to open infidelity. In fact, it's not even something we do, but instead something very important that we simply leave undone.

For what do we find the scribes and Pharisees doing in verse 23? Paying their tithes, giving a tenth of their income to the Lord. After all, God's Law made it clear that the people were supposed to support the Levites in such a way, and that the Levites were in turn supposed to support the priests to the same extent (Numbers 18:26). The scribes and Pharisees took this commandment very seriously, applying it even to the smallest of their possessions, the tiniest seeds in their spice rack. And notice that at the end of the verse, Jesus says that they should not, in fact, have neglected this duty.

So, what's the problem? Well, even though they were so determined to keep God's Law concerning tithing, Jesus says they neglected much weightier, much more important matters – ideas that are central to the whole point of the Law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.

And come to think of it, isn't that what another one of the prophets said, the prophets whose memory the scribes and Pharisees claimed to revere? For what did Micah tell us in our responsive reading that the Lord wanted most from His people? Was it their material things, their burnt offerings of cattle or sheep or goats? Was it the firstfruits of their orchards and vineyards and fields? Did the Lord go so far as to expect His people to make human sacrifices to atone for their sin? No – God said He wanted basically the same things from us that Jesus emphasizes in verse 23: justice and mercy and humility.

So, why are those things so important? Well, the term translated here as "justice" includes more than just making sure that our court system runs smoothly. It also includes what we would call judgment, the ability to discern God's will in any particular situation. And of course to have truly sound judgment ourselves means that we must obey all of God's judgments, bringing all our thoughts and actions into line with God's Word. Is that true of us? Can we really say we have such judgment?

So, what about the command to love mercy? Well, it turns out that this means loving in a merciful way, which in turn means loving the way that God loves. And how has God loved us? In a faithful way, keeping the promises He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In an unconditional way, holding us close to Him in spite of our sin. Micah alludes to this kind of love in chapter 6, as the Lord reminds His people of how He brought them out of slavery in Egypt – even though in the previous chapter He condemns them for putting their faith in their armies and their fortifications, and for bowing down before the works of their own hands, the images of false gods.

And of course we have seen this kind of unconditional, covenant-keeping love even more clearly in the Person of Jesus Christ, the One Who called twelve disciples that He knew would abandon Him, the One Who taught and healed the Jerusalem crowd that He knew would turn on Him, the One Who kept trying to convict the scribes and Pharisees of their sins, even though they continued to reject Him. Yes, the very embodiment of God's gracious love stood before them, but their judgment was so poor and their love for God was so cold that they couldn't recognize Him.

And why not? Because they weren't obeying the third of the commandments Micah gave us: they were not walking humbly with God. Instead, the Pharisees had set themselves up as arbiters of right and wrong, substituting their own legalism for the grace God offered them. And as they were proud of the way they tithed even the smallest of their possessions, and as they taught other people to try to save themselves through their own efforts, they inevitably fell into hypocrisy – for who is able to keep even our own codes of ethics, let alone God's perfect standard of holiness? But the constant attempt to justify themselves through their rituals and practices inevitably led them into conflict with the prophets who insisted on justice, mercy and faithfulness, and thus into rejection of Christ Himself.

So, no, we aren't openly hostile to Christ and His Word the way those ancient Pharisees were and the way those modern Marxists and libertines are. And however inconsistent our Christianity may be, I doubt any of us have descended to their level of pride and self-justification. But unless we keep our focus on justice, on merciful love and on humble faithfulness, loving the Lord our God and loving others the same way that Jesus has loved us, we may very well find ourselves following those blind guides down the road to legalism, and then to hypocrisy, and then to open defiance of Christ.

So, this week, let's not go down that road. Instead, let's keep the main thing the main thing, remaining faithful to Christ and His gospel. Let's keep confessing our own sin so that we may be able to extend mercy to those we might consider to be undeserving. Let's turn away from pride and self-justification, and depend on God's grace alone to save us. For it is only by God's grace that we can hope to obey Him without becoming either proud or censorious. It is only God's grace that can keep us

walking humbly with Him, being faithful to Him and faithful to our obligation to love and serve others as self-sacrificially and unconditionally as He has loved us.