

Part 41: Hypocrites and the Hero

Tyler Velin | Matthew 23:1-39

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The text we are going to look at today in Matthew is a text which probably has shaped our cultural understanding of Christianity in ways we will never know.

Seven times we see Jesus use the phrase, "Woe to you!" And I imagine that for some of you in here that might be your understanding of who Jesus is and what the center of Christianity is about: Jesus has come to rebuke me for my sins, and Christianity and the church is a place where I go to get beat up in hopes that somehow it will make me feel better.

We also hear him six times call the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites. This has done two things in our culture, the first is that it has armed us with an idea of hypocrisy as something we can weaponize against anyone who claims to follow Jesus. The word hypocrite in the Greek literally means, "one who wears a mask, a pretender." Because of that we are quick to call ourselves hypocrites when we struggle with sin, or we are quick to call other Christians hypocrites when they struggle with sin. The secular world even uses this idea, "I've seen people in your church, they aren't any better than me. The church is just full of hypocrites."

Additionally, it means that just about anyone who hears the word "Pharisee" hears it as an evil word. It is synonymous with the hypocrite, the liar, the legalist.

And while there are bits of truth in each of these, when we begin to look at this text we are able to have a clearer understanding of who Jesus is, who his rebuke is directed at, and what some alternative applications may be in our own life.

This text is a little more nuanced than we would initially imagine and that's largely because Jesus is going to speak to three groups of people in this text. He is going to speak to the crowds, to his disciples and to the Pharisees and scribes. But his tone towards each of these people groups is going to be distinct.

So instead of providing a harsh blanket statement of rebuke for anyone who wrestles with sin, Jesus is going to get at the heart of the hearers. And what we are going to see is that those who are contrite and humble, Jesus is going to comfort with the gospel. And for those who are confident in their own righteousness, Jesus is going to crush with the law.

This means that depending upon where your heart is today, there will potentially be different points of application in this text. Most of us will hear ourselves somewhere in this text, but if we want to understand this text fully we must also hear Jesus in this text.

What we are looking at today is the last message of Jesus' public ministry. And because of that he is going to speak to the hearts of those who follow and to the hearts of those who lead. And what we are going to see today is this: **Jesus exposes the heart of leaders and the hope of followers.** What we are going to see in our text today is helpful leadership, hurtful leadership, and hopeful leadership

What you hear in all three of those points is the idea of leadership and that's because leadership has a universal application. Everyone to varying degrees leads, and everyone in varying degrees is lead. And this text begins by speaking to those who are lead.

This is how our passage begins: **Matthew 23:1-12**. This is our first point today: **Helpful Leadership**.

I'm not sure how many of you have had a similar experience, but it seems like Netflix is filled with movies about foods and diets. If you were to take a day and watch all of the food based documentaries by 10:00am you'd be meat only, by noon you'd be Keto, by 2 you'd be plant based, and by four you'd be resolved to eat Ben and Jerry's until the confusion subsides.

I've watched a number of these films, and what's interesting is that all of them has one specific theme: they want to show you how you've been deceived. Some want to convince you that the healthcare systems we look to for healing are the same ones pumping our foods full of sugar so that we keep having health problems. Others take a less political route and simply reveal to you the kinds of food and products you are eating at fast food restaurants.

If you're like me you've probably seen someone pull back the curtain on your favorite fast food restaurant and you felt upset. Upset that they would do that to you. Upset that they betrayed your trust.

Have you ever felt betrayed by someone? Have you ever been let down by someone you put your hope in? While we may not as easily be able to identify what it feels like in our lives to act hypocritically, we can all point out places in our lives where we have experienced a loss of trust in a way which devastates us.

This is where we need to understand the heart of the crowds that Jesus is talking to before we understand this text. Like I said earlier, for most modern individuals the word Pharisee is not only associated with hypocrisy, but is equivalent to it.

No one wants to be called a Pharisee. However, for the crowds in this story, the Pharisees and scribes were their hope. These men were the people who not only taught the words of Moses, but were supposed to help lead God's people into a greater understanding and application of them.

Their idea of Pharisees was generally positive. That's why Jesus was able to say this back in **Matthew 5:20**. This was shocking because everyone knew they couldn't be as righteous, as obedient, and as holy as the Pharisees.

So when Jesus begins to attack the heart of the Pharisees, he is not joining in the critique of a common enemy, he is exposing a massive betrayal of trust. These Pharisees, these men you are looking for to help you, they tie up burdens on your back and do nothing to help you bear them.

They don't care about you, they care about how they are seen. They don't care about you, they care only about themselves. They bind scripture to their bodies [phylacteries] not because they follow it, but because they want to be seen for it. They have long tassels on their robes not because they are holy, but because they are gaudy. They hang out in the marketplace not because they want to associate with the average Joe, but because they want to be treated as royalty in public.

These men do not want to help you. Can you imagine the sense of betrayal and helplessness this crowd may have felt? Can you imagine the nervous glances the Pharisees were giving each other?

And then Jesus turns to his disciples in verse 8: **Matthew 23:8-12**.

Jesus just ran a primetime expose on the most common hero of the time, and now he turns to this group of men who have never had any official training and he says, "Help them." But he calls for their leadership to have a different tone than the leadership of the Pharisees.

He says, "Do not see yourself as the Rabbi, for there is one teacher. Do not call yourself Father, for there is one Father who is in heaven. Do not call yourself instructor, for there is one instructor, the Christ."

This is so beautiful and weighty. Because at this point the crowd doesn't understand who the Christ is. But the disciples do. And Jesus is saying to his disciples, help them. Lead them by leading them to me. You see Jesus condemns one set of leaders and then replaces them immediately with another set but the paradigm is so different.

Instead of placing burdens and doing nothing, God's leaders will help by using their leadership to serve. They will come down from the temple mount and give their lives to the service of others by pointing others to Jesus.

Not long after these disciples would die off we would read the writings of one of the early church pastors named Ignatius. And when Ignatius wrote to the church in Ephesus he said this: "I do not issue orders to you, as if I were some great person. For though I am bound for His name, I am not yet perfect in Jesus Christ. For now I begin to be a disciple, and I speak to you as fellow-disciples with me."

It is an honor of mine to sit on the elder board with seven other men who hear this call to help. Men who do not ignore the commands in scripture for elders to rule and lead, but who are not deaf to the posture of leadership that Jesus provides here. We lead by serving others to Christ.

Helpful leadership always leads people to "the one." The one Father in heaven, the one instructor who is Christ. So let me practice this right now. If you are one who has felt the disappointment and betrayal of people, or objects you once hoped in, look to Jesus.

Have you felt the burden of performance, or the crushing weight to measure up? Look to Jesus. It is Jesus and Jesus alone who comes and is the true shepherd. The one who was ultimately humbled for your sin on the cross, and exalted for your salvation. You see we live in a world where there is the promise of another person or another product around every corner. The appeal is do this program, follow this lifestyle, like this figure and they will care for you and grow you. But it is only Jesus who can do this at the highest level.

Jesus promises the crowd and shows the disciples what helpful leadership is. But now he is going to turn to the Pharisees. You see the woes that Jesus gives are not woes given to the crowd, or to the disciples. Jesus' ministry is not yelling at anyone who is sinful. Time and time again we see Jesus being approached by people who are laden with sin, and he offers them rest not rebuke.

But there are some people, people who are so hard hearted, and so harmful to those around them that Jesus speaks very firmly with. And that's what Jesus is going to do in the second picture of leadership: **Hurtful Leadership.**

These are what are famously referred to as "The Seven Woes." And a woe is an emotional expression of displeasure. Jesus is expressing his deep displeasure with the religious leaders at that time. And what's interesting is despite how offensive the hypocrites were to God, Jesus actually emphasizes how harmful hypocrisy is to others. Hypocrisy is not just a public offense, it is a public hazard. It is dangerous to others.

I would imagine that most of you in here would consider yourselves to be followers. Those who don't still probably don't consider yourself to be a religious leader. But at some level followers are also leaders. We reflect and portray the value and vision of what it is we follow and that has an influence on those around us.

Very few of you work for Apple, and yet many of you want those around you to see the joy you get out of Apple products, and that has an influence on people. You might be the follower of a sports team, but when you wear a shirt with that logo, that logo by nature forces other people to form an opinion on that team: do they like it, do they dislike it, do they know who it even is. The point is that followers exhibit the influence of who they follow in important ways.

All that to say is that when we listen to this we all need to be aware not only of what this text is saying about false hopes and faux leaders, but also what this text says about the influence of our own lives. We need to consider this text as both the crowd and the Pharisee.

We are going to look at these rebukes as four thematic groups, and the first group is in **Matthew 23:13-15.**

In woes one and two we see a rebuke concerning false gospels. Did you hear the harshness of the pictures Jesus used? He is saying to these Pharisees that they slam the door of heaven in the faces of those who need it.

The Pharisees saw and taught that it was up to you to work your way into heaven. You had to become pure enough, holy enough, righteous enough by your own actions to warrant eternal life. But in preaching these very things they were shutting off any potential of people ever reaching heaven, including themselves. They went to great lengths to preach this gospel of works, but once they found someone willing to believe it, they made them twice as much a child of hell.

Our righteous acts are never good enough to enter into the Kingdom of heaven. If the gospel you believe and the gospel you give away is: Do good, get God, you are damning those around you, especially those who believe you. Look at what Paul says in **Ephesians 2:8-9.** When you consider the gospel you are giving away to your kids, or to the people at work, which gospel is it? The gospel of works which kills, or the gospel of grace which saves?

The second group of woes shows the vanity of the Pharisees worship. Look with me at **Matthew 23:16-24.** Where woes one and two show how the Pharisee's don't understand grace, woes three and four show how they also don't understand the law. Jesus makes this point by showing how they have made the law about their own comfort and not God's holiness.

First he talks about oaths. The Old Testament, and Jesus himself back in Matthew 5 talk about keeping your oaths. And for many people what would happen is they would swear an oath on something holy (like the temple or the altar) so that God would act as a kind of witness to the oath.

However what was happening with the Pharisees is that they were letting their oaths slip because they said, "Well the temple really isn't that valuable, but the gold on the temple, that's the stuff. You pledge on the gold and now you really have to keep your word."

In doing this what they did was show what they valued. They didn't value the God of the temple, they valued to gold of the temple. They didn't see the altar as valuable in its ability to cover sin, they saw the altar as valuable because of what was put on it.

Same thing with the spices. These men were so diligent to keep their tithes that they even tithed off their groceries. The law called for people to give a tenth of their resources to God, and here these men are so holy that not only are they giving of their income, but they are giving of their spices. But they totally neglect the other parts of the law: justice, mercy and faithfulness.

It might seem sacrificial to give of your pantry, but it's far more sacrificial to give out of your heart in these areas. The Pharisees put gold before God and spices before sanctification. Are there places in your life where you are able to take confidence because you obey the surface commands of God, but your heart remains absent of worship? Are there specific actions which make you look holy, but at the same time you are unwilling to do the hard work of Christianity by laboring for the justice and mercy of others? Jesus is going to continue to push on this idea in the following verses.

Look with me at the next group of woes: **Matthew 23:25-28**. In this third group of woes we actually see how devious the heart of the Pharisees were and we see the sort of public health crisis that it brought with it.

Both of these illustrations Jesus use show how the inside of the Pharisees heart is full of dangerous and toxic desire. These are probably the two woes which are most easily seen as hypocritical. And with it comes some very harsh words.

The second example is easier to understand. You look pretty, but you are full of the stink of death.

But it's actually the first illustration that I find to be the most interesting here for two reasons. First, we see the desires of hypocrisy. How many of you have washed a plate or a cup before? Now in thinking about that, how hard would it be to wash the outside, but not wash the inside?

Do you think that maybe the only way you are able to do that is by intentionally not wanting to wash the inside? Look back at **Matthew 23:25**. Jesus isn't looking at those people who are trying to clean up their life and still wrestling with the dirt that remains. He is writing to the people who have a cup full of greed and indulgence and go to great lengths to keep the inside the same while washing the outside clean. Have you ever done something like this? Is there an area of your life where you would not like the waters of grace to reach? Maybe you cover it up because you don't want to give up what's really inside.

And this woe gets more unique in **Matthew 23:26**. No do you hear this disruption? Pharisee. Not Pharisees. The nouns in this verse are not plural, they are singular. Jesus is talking to one Pharisee. And

we don't know who it is. He isn't named for us. I imagine Matthew might not even know who he was. But Jesus did. And you can bet that this Pharisee did as well.

You see here is the thing. Not all Pharisees were like this. Not all Pharisees were like the other woes either. But the ones who were like this, they knew it. Consider today the idea that Jesus may be speaking today with such direction to your own heart. Do you hear him?

I pray you hear this because the next woe warns of what may come if you do not heed this: **Matthew 23:29-36**.

The final woe expresses the false hope of the hypocrite. The Pharisees bragged that if they were around in the Old Testament, they would have been the ones to listen to the prophets. But the irony is here they are rejecting the true prophet. And because of that instead of fulfilling the law of righteousness, all the righteous blood which would be spilled would fall on their heads.

Jesus uses the example of Able and Zechariah to express a sort of A to Z of guilt. In the Hebrew Old Testament order Able was the first man killed for his faith, and Zechariah was the last one killed.

To reject God's word is ultimately to reject Jesus. And if you fail to listen to Jesus, his blood is on your hands. You might say you love God, and worship God, but to not hear Jesus, this Jesus, is to face the full punishment of your sins.

This is Jesus final public word to the Pharisees. And what we should see here in summary is how the wake of hypocrisy is not only disobedience, but it is spiritual abuse of all those around you. Hypocrisy is not a private matter. All of the Pharisee's hypocrisy weighed against the wellbeing of their own people.

But this is why Jesus concludes where he concludes: **Matthew 23:37-39**.

While it might not seem like it at first glance here we see our last point: **Hopeful Leadership**.

Jesus just pulled back the curtains on the heart of the Pharisees, and here he pulls back the curtain of his own heart. Speaking to the collective whole of Jerusalem he says, "How I would have gathered you. How I would have loved to give you everything you needed? How I would have loved to care for you, and serve you, and lead you? But you were not willing."

Now what's interesting is even though Jesus just revealed the Pharisees wicked heart, there was no massive repentance by the crowds here. Why? Because the problem wasn't just they had bad human leaders. The problem for each and every one of us is that our hearts are led by something far worse than a Pharisee: **Ephesians 2:1-2**.

We are all following someone, someone who promises to give us what we want. Just like Satan did to Eve in the Garden of Eden, and just like the Pharisees promised to do for these Jews. But it is only Jesus who we can follow and know that he is good, and that he and he alone cares for us. Only Jesus disarms the rulers of your heart and calls you to himself in freedom.

Where every other hope seeks to prey on you, Jesus has promised to die for you. Do you follow him? Then take heart for Jesus will come again for you.

To those in here who are struck by ways in which their own heart has been hypocritical, I want you, Jesus wants you to feel that weight. But he also wants to show you the way forward.

The solution to hypocrisy is not to rely on yourself to fix your heart. For the first time you might be able to realize that there is someone who wants to remove that burden for you. There is a leader who loves you and wants to move for more than a finger in order to save you.

Jesus in this text is called a teacher and an instructor, God is called the Father. That's because Jesus is the only leader fully able to not only relieve the burden but to change you, to grow you, to make you more like him. Because it's only Jesus who can change your heart and free you from sin.

Look to Jesus, and live. Go to him and ask him for the relief that only his grace can bring and begin to say what all who hope in him will one day say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"