

I reckon you lot are all way too nice, to read today's Bible Reading, because I reckon Jesus was pretty harsh, when He said this... I however, am not as nice as you lot, so I'm going to give it a go... Is that alright????

Matthew 23 (ESV)

Seven Woes to the Scribes and Pharisees

23 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, ³ so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. ⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, ⁶ and they love the place of honour at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷ and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. ⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. ¹⁰ Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. ¹¹ The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

¹³ “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. ¹⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

16 “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ **17** You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? **18** And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ **19** You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? **20** So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. **21** And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. **22** And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. **24** You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. **26** You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. **28** So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

29 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, **30** saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ **31** Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. **32** Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. **33** You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? **34** Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, **35** so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. **36** Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Lament over Jerusalem

37 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! **38** See, 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.’ ”

If you’ve still been wondering “Why Jesus was crucified” . . . , that should have removed every doubt. . . Being on the receiving end of Jesus' judgment, is not a place I want to be.

Let's pray,

Heavenly Father, we've just heard some hard and judgmental words from Jesus. Lord, open our hearts and our minds, so that we will receive your word, and know how You would have us apply it in our lives.

Lord, through this message of judgment, help us to value and understand, the precious nature of Your grace and Your mercy, that we've received in Christ, making us free of your judgment.

Amen.

A number of years ago, there was a movie called "Shallow Hal" ... Hal was shallow because he was looking for a girl friend, but he wasn't at all attracted to nice girls with good personalities – he was just looking at their external appearances.

And so he'd start up a relationship with a gorgeous chick, and it wouldn't be long before it all ended in disaster, because on the inside they were just awful.

Anyway something happens to Hal, and he changes. To Hal, their external appearance, becomes a reflection of their personality. And so a woman with a really nice personality and a loving heart – to Hal's eyes, he sees a super-model...

But a woman with a really nasty personality, and a dark heart –.. to Hal's eyes, they seem ugly, emaciated, repulsive, ooow....

Hal's condition only lasted a little while, but his lesson was learned – not to judge people by external appearances....

When God gazes upon you and I, He doesn't care so much what we look like (and I'm thankful for that)... And when He scrutinises who we are, and how we behave, He looks way beyond any **external** show of righteousness, that we might be able to project... God looks right inside the heart – nothing is hidden from God... Hebrews 4:13 says: **Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.**

That's scary isn't it???

If that bible verse doesn't give us cause to repent, and seek God's mercy and forgiveness, well I don't know what will... *The thought that everything I have ever done, everything I have ever thought, everything I have ever said, is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of God...* Well, that makes me shudder... And it makes me fall on my knees before God, and thank Him, for He has forgiven me, through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ...

And because nothing is hidden from God, that's why Jesus got stuck into the Scribes and the Pharisees.

You see, they were **masters**, at telling others what to do... They were very skilful at presenting an air of holiness and purity... They called themselves the separated ones, and they were...

But Jesus could see right through it... **Hypocrites!**...

7 times, He called them “hypocrites”... 7 times, He said “Woe...” Now, the meaning of that word “woe” is, “How terrible it is for you”... It’s actually usually an expression of sympathetic sorrowⁱ

So, it’s like saying “Oh no, how bad it’s going to be for you – you make an external show of righteousness, but on the inside... – you’re filthy...”

And I’ve listed 8 things here, that Jesus challenged them on:

1. Number one, was their Symbolic holiness –

Jesus said, “⁵ **They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long**”

The phylacteries are what today they call “tepillin”ⁱⁱ.

In Deuteronomy and Exodus, it talks about the Law of God, and how Israel should live by that law, and know that law, and love God’s Law:

Deuteronomy 6: 8 **Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.**

Exodus 13:9 **This observance will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that the law of the LORD is to be on your lips. For the LORD brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand.**

But they took these passages quite literally, and they made these little leather boxes, and wrote tiny little copies of certain scriptures, and put them into the boxes and tied them onto their head and their left arm....

Now, that's a bit bazaar, and I'm not too sure that God intended them to literally do that... But it then became sort of a pompous status symbol, and (reading between the lines), it appears they started making bigger boxes to hold more scriptures, and the bigger the box, the more pious the person...

And what Jesus criticised them for (I believe), is their symbolic holiness.

When I was at Bible college, a discussion that would come up every few months amongst the students, was "Who was going to wear an alb, and who wasn't". The alb is the white dressing gown that ministers wear... And I gotta tell ya, it was about half and half. Those who wore them had their reasons, but I just couldn't even consider it. Why should the minister dress up all special, like he was different to everybody else...

And then of course, there's a hierarchy of ministers and preachers and so on, and sometimes along with that goes more and more complex and resplendent regalia, with smells and bells and nice frocks and tall hats and colourful scarves....

A **symbol** of holiness is pointless – it's the state of the heart that counts. And if you have confessed your sins to Jesus Christ, and asked for forgiveness, you **are** holy. You don't need any religious garb (I very nearly said garbage) to show that you are holy...

The bigger the bible you carry; the bigger the cross around your neck; ... none of that stuff matters – it's what's in your heart that matters to God.

2. The second thing He challenged the religious leaders on, was Status Seeking –

He said this: “⁶ they love the place of honour at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷ and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.

And for some religious leaders today, this **is** a constant temptation. I'm not tempted by it (I'm tempted by other stuff), but some are tempted by this.

I was actually quite disturbed when we visited Tonga. In Tonga, to be a minister is a very highly regarded position. I think a minister is just below a chief. They get a nice house, nice clothes, more food, more pay than most workers.... And I'm pretty sure that quite a number of ministers are ministers because of the status and the benefits they receive, and not for the call of God. They are put into the place of honour, and for some that's exactly where they want to be....

And I was even a bit embarrassed – I think they designated me as a 'missionie' "Missionary", and with that comes honour and status – I was much more important than an ordinary tourist... And I was embarrassed by that.

I guess in our culture, most people don't honour ministers at all... I have a seat reserved for me at the front of the school awards night, but that's about it...

And some people want to call me "Father", and I say "No. No. – I don't have a title." The church I used to work for, insisted that I have the title "Reverend" and I used to refuse it.

Jesus said:

- Don't let them call you teacher, because God's your teacher
- Don't call anyone "Father", because your Father is in heaven and we're all brothers
- Don't let them call you "instructor" – Christ is our instructor
- He said, "If you want to be great, be a servant – you don't need titles"

It makes you wonder, doesn't it, how a church could go right against these things, and insist that its ministers or priests wear robes (that set them apart from the people), and insist that they be called father, or reverend, or probably even pastor, or 'senior pastor' for that matter...

Humble yourself – don't go looking for a title, or for the best seats in the house....

The first will be last; and the last will be first.

3. The third thing Jesus judged them on, was Being a barrier to others coming to faith –

It's bad enough getting it wrong yourself, but it's a whole lot worse when we prevent others from coming to faith.

Jesus said “**you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces....**”

You know (don't you?), the only way to come to Jesus, is with a simple, child-like faith. And it's only sinners, who know they're sinners, who **can** come to Christ... And God forgive us, for when we have made sinners feel “unwelcome” in our churches... God forgive us, for when we so cut ourselves off from those who need Christ, that they no longer have anyone to share the good news with them.

The word “Pharisee” means separated one... And their aim was to make **more** separated ones... And anyone who didn't come up to scratch – “You're filthy – God doesn't want to have anything to do with you – and neither do I”...

Jesus said, “**you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces....**”

God forgive us, if we've ever done that. – if we've ever presented the gospel as a whole heap of rules and regulations you have to satisfy before you can be part of the in-crowd – God forgive us.

Our God is a welcoming father, who takes us as we are, and saves us sinners, from our sin...

Invite – Don't shut out.

4. The fourth thing on the list, is they were not men of their word – they created legal loopholes to get them out oaths they had made... _

Sort of like making a promise with your fingers crossed behind your back...

I hope you are the sort of person that you don't need to take an oath for people to believe you...

Let your word be as you say – always tell the truth. And don't try and wiggle out of an oath you have made.

5. The fifth thing Jesus challenged them on, was they were fastidious in getting all the little things right, but they neglected the big areas – Justice, mercy, faithfulness

They'd keep all their little rules, but they didn't act with justice. They didn't show any mercy. They were not faithful to God.

Last week, me and the boys went along to see the movie "58". It takes its name from Isaiah 58. And in Isaiah 58, Israel are perplexed, why God doesn't answer their prayers, even when they fast:

⁶ "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?"

7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and
blood?

I wonder how many church meetings have gotten bogged
down in the little things, like the colour of the seats, or the
position of the memorial vase, or the century our hymns are
drawn from???

I think God wants us to care about the big things

- like getting the gospel out into our community
- like acting justly ourselves
- like caring for the poor, and the widow, and the orphan

Let's keep the main thing the main thing.

6. The sixth woe for the Scribes and Pharisees, was the fact
that they were Greedy and Self-indulgent –

Greed and Self-indulgence can be a trap for all of us, and
church leaders aren't excluded. I know you all like to think
that church leaders are above such things, but we're not...

*Somebody once said "The three traps for ministers, are the 3
G's (The gold, the girls, and the glory).*

And the Scribes and the Pharisees were greedy and self-
indulgent.

7. Their seventh problem, was they were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness –

Jesus said, “they’re hypocrites” ...

*I have here, a picture of the Ayre and Homehill Cemetery –
Has anyone ever been there?...*

It’s a very big Italian population. And it’s amazing, some of the intricate and beautiful mausoleums that they’ve built for their loved ones... Some of them are very expensive, with bricks and marble and glass... But what’s on the inside??? Putrefying flesh and decomposing bones.

And that’s how Jesus described the scribes and the Pharisees: Like a beautifully painted up tomb stone, but on the inside you’re full of dead man’s bones.

You see, they didn’t do what they said – they were hypocrites. They judged others (very harshly) by the law, but they were lawless themselves.... And so the outside looked holy, but the inside was rotten.

8. And finally, they were full of self-righteousness (and that would be their undoing)

Their forefathers had rejected God’s prophets, and they said “But we would never do that” ... But of course they did. They

rejected John the Baptist; they crucified Jesus Christ; they persecuted the early church....

And Jesus said “Woe, for your self-righteousness – you are doing exactly what you said you wouldn’t”

That’s the things Jesus judged them on... - but that leaves me with a bit of a problem.

- Symbolic holiness
- Seeking Status
- Being a barrier to others coming to faith
- Not being men of their word
- Neglecting justice, mercy, faithfulness
- Being greedy and Self-indulgent
- Hypocrisy & lawlessness
- Self-righteousness

A lot of those words could describe me. Maybe a lot of these words could describe you...

Praise be to the Lord Jesus Christ, who forgives repentant sinners.

Verse 37 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Jesus' lament (his sorrow), was not that the religious leaders were sinful (we're all sinful) – His lament was that they were unwilling to do anything about it.

If we look (with our hind-sight) at these religious leaders and say “Well, thank God that we're not like them”, well that makes us exactly like them...

Jesus longs to gather sinners to Himself, just like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings... The question is, “Are we willing?” ...

Are we willing, to repent of our:

- Symbolic holiness
- Seeking Status
- Being a barrier to others coming to faith
- Not being men and women of our word
- Neglecting justice, mercy, faithfulness
- Being greedy and Self-indulgent
- Hypocrisy & lawlessness
- Self-righteousness

Let's pray:

Lord, I guess the challenge for us today, is there's a little bit of those religious leaders in all of us.

Sometimes we do the wrong thing, if we think we can get away with it.

Sometimes we put on an external show of righteousness, but on the inside, and when nobody's looking, well we're actually pretty bad.

We have neglected justice, mercy and faithfulness.

We have not been men and women of our word.

Sometimes, we have been the ones who have turned people away from you.

Yes Lord, sometimes we are hypocrites...

God, forgive us....

And Lord, I thank you that you do forgive us. – that when we confess our sins, you are faithful and just, and forgive us of all unrighteousness.

Lord, as we follow you as your disciples, please change us. Make us pure. Give us true holiness – Your holiness, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

ⁱ Brown, C., 1986. *New international dictionary of New Testament theology*.

ⁱⁱ Nolland, J., 2005. *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.