Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Was Jesus Polite to False Teachers?
Scripture: Matthew 23
Code: BQ62411

Many Christians today are greatly concerned about the rising influences of communism, humanism, secularism, and social injustice. Yet those evils, great as they are, do not together pose the threat to Christianity that false shepherds and pastors do. Throughout the history of redemption, the greatest threat to God's truth and God's work has been false prophets and teachers, because they propose to speak in His name. That is why the Lord's most scathing denunciations were reserved for the false teachers of Israel, who claimed to speak and act for God but were liars.

Yet for some reason, evangelical Christianity is often hesitant to confront false teachers with the seriousness and severity that Jesus and the apostles did, and that the godly prophets before them had done. Today, more than at any time in modern history and perhaps more than at any time in the history of the church, pagan religions and cults are seriously encroaching on societies that for centuries have been nominally Christian. Even within the church, many ideas, teachings, and philosophies that are little more than thinly veiled paganism have become popular and influential. As in ancient Israel, the further God's people move away from the foundation of His Word, the more false religion flourishes in the world and even in their own midst. At no time have Christians had greater need to be discerning. They need to recognize and respect true godly shepherds who feed them God's Word and build them up in the faith, and they also must recognize and denounce those who twist and undermine God's Word, who corrupt the church and who lead lost people still further away from God's truth and from salvation.

In Matthew 23:13–33 Jesus relentlessly condemned the false spiritual leaders of Israel, in particular the scribes and Pharisees, who then held the dominant power and influence in Judaism. Jesus warned about them in His first sermon, the Sermon on the Mount (see, e.g., 5:20; 7:15), and His last sermon (Matt. 23) consists almost entirely of warnings about them and to them. In this final public message, the Lord wanted to draw the people away from those false leaders and turn them to the true teaching and the godly examples of His apostles, who would become His uniquely commissioned and endowed representatives on earth during the early years of the church. He also gave the apostles themselves a final example of the confrontational stance they would soon find it necessary to take in their proclamation and defense of the gospel.

The unbelieving scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus addressed in the Temple stood alone in their sin and were condemned alone in their guilt for misappropriating and perverting God's law and for leading Israel into heresy, just as the false prophets among their forefathers had done (vv. 30–32).

But they also stood as models of all false spiritual leaders who would come after them. Therefore what Jesus said about them and to them is of much more than historical significance. It is essential instruction for dealing with the false leaders who abound in our own day.

In the first twelve verses of chapter 23, Jesus had declared that the scribes and Pharisees, typical of all false spiritual leaders, were without authority, without integrity, without sympathy, without spirituality, without humility, and therefore without God's approval or blessing. Now speaking to them directly, He asserts they are under God's harshest condemnation. In verses 13–33 Jesus pronounces seven curses, or woes, on those wicked leaders.

The scene in the Temple that day had become volatile in the extreme, in some ways more volatile than when Jesus had cast out the merchants and money-changers the day before. At that time Jesus' anger was vented against what the religious leaders were doing outwardly, and that attack had outraged them (21:16, 23). Now, however, He attacked what they were inwardly, and that infuriated them even more.

In our day of tolerance and eclecticism, the kind of confrontation Jesus had with the scribes and Pharisees seems foreign and uncharitable. A person who speaks too harshly against a false religion or unbiblical teaching or movement is considered unkind, ungracious, and judgmental. Jesus' indictments in Matthew 23, as well as in other parts of the gospels, are so inconsistent with the idea of Christian love held by some liberal theologians and Bible scholars, for example, that they conclude He could not have spoken them. What Jesus really said, they maintain, was modified and intensified either by the gospel writers or the sources from whom they received their information.

But the nature of Jesus' condemnation of those corrupt religious leaders is perfectly consistent with the rest of Scripture, both the Old Testament and the New Not only that, but Jesus' words in this passage fly from His lips, as someone has said, like claps of thunder and spears of lightning. Out of His mouth on this occasion came the most fearful and dreadful statements that Jesus uttered on earth. They do not give the least impression of being the afterthought of an overzealous writer or copyist.

Matthew 23 is one of the most serious passages in Scripture. Jesus here makes the word *hypocrite* a synonym for scribe and for Pharisee. He calls them sons of hell, blind guides, fools, robbers, self-indulgent, whitewashed tombs, full of hypocrisy and lawlessness, serpents, vipers, and persecutors and murderers of God's people. He uttered every syllable with absolute self-control but with devastating intensity.

Yet Jesus was never cold or indifferent, even toward His enemies, and on this occasion His judgment is mingled with sorrow and deep pathos. It is not the Son's will any more than the Father's that a single person perish, because it is the gracious divine desire that everyone would come to

repentance and salvation (2 Pet. 3:9). At the end of His denunciation, Jesus extended by implication another last invitation for belief, suggesting that He would still gladly gather any unbelievers under His wings as a mother hen gathers her chicks, if only they would be willing (Matt. 23:37).

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