

**Matthew 23:13-15**

13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. 15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves (NRSV).

Verse 14 is in the King James Version of the Bible. However, it is not in most of the modern translations. There are some that question why it was removed from the modern translations. It is not that it has been removed from the new translations; it is that it has been added to the King James Version. The newer versions are based on study, research, and information that was not available in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, the more accurate translations do not add a verse that was not in the original manuscripts. It's not that the verse was omitted; it is that for the sake of accuracy, that particular verse was not added.

Jesus was in Jerusalem. He had spent what appears to be about three and a half years preaching, healing, and fixing a broken religions establishment. The biggest problem that Jesus faced was that the religious establishment had distorted doctrine for selfish ambition. Religion is designed for the worship of God. Therefore, God needs humanity to stay true to God's doctrine. When people do not stay true to God's doctrine, it creates a big problem. People take what is meant for God, claim that they are serving God, and distort religion for their own self-serving means. They replaced the care for one another with selfish ambition. God urgently needed to fix this problem. Otherwise, organized religion would continue to pull further and further away from God. Only God can fix it and only the Son of God has enough authority and power to fix it. So, while care for humanity was neglected for selfish ambition God sent Jesus into the world to reeducate the world, fix the broken religious establishment, and get religion back on track with God's will for the love and care for humanity. There are seven woes listed in Matthew 23. We will not cover them all and they do not need to be covered in order. The point is that they are all directed to the scribes and the Pharisees.

The Scripture addresses a very serious problem. God's religion has been hijacked and is hopelessly corrupt. Jesus hits hard with a series of woes that represent the conflict. It's like he is pointing his finger at you. He calls the scribes and the Pharisees out and tells them exactly what they are – hypocrites. The problem is one of judgmentalism. They have hijacked religion for themselves. They lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. They say who is and is not righteous. They claim themselves to be righteous and everyone that disagrees with them is rejected. They are rejected by the scribes and Pharisees who claim that the people are rejected by God. This is the fallacy of appealing to a higher authority. They have claimed God's authority and righteousness for themselves. They convert people and hold them to their version of God's doctrine and make the converts like themselves.

The lesson is on hypocrisy, the inconsistency between one's faith and one's action. They placed more value on appearance, which is idolatry. Hypocrisy is a transgression and a lack of trust in God. By turning from God towards their own point of view, they distorted doctrine to serve themselves. They have orientated their lives to their own doctrine instead of God's doctrine. Jesus condemns the religious leaders and pronounces judgment on them. The scribes and the Pharisees judge others but Jesus judges them instead. Jesus places a divine curse on the

recipients of his rebuke. The root problem is evil. Due to the negligence of mercy, it shows up as hypocrisy as they think of themselves as righteous. Their fate is assured. They will not enter into the kingdom of heaven. They have made knowledge of the law so difficult that neither they nor others are able to come to God. They formed brotherhoods of those that strictly kept the law and excluded others that did not conform to the law. They led converts astray and only succeeded in creating duplicate vices and committed heresy.

My first position as a pastor was a part time position at First Christian Church in Vinton. There was a group of people that had gathered outside of the church. I remember during the conversation that someone paid a huge compliment to me. She said something to the effect that I am not like the other preachers that she has met, that I am more down to earth. She said that she could see through the appearance of piety. My response to that is that it is not the preacher that is to be different from the rest of the world; it is the Christian that is to be pious. The significance is in being a Christian. The pastor is just another Christian. We are all to have behavior that models after Christ.

The contemporary lesson is always a matter of how the Bible speaks to us and connects to us today. Judgment goes to those that reject others instead of accepting others as they are. Judgment goes to those that claim superiority, especially in the realm of religion. The problem is not a matter of what they teach; it is a matter of what they do. They do not practice what they teach; they place burdens on others and do not offer help. They are more interested in appearances than performance. A lot of people praise the Lord but do not live by the word. This turns people off from organized religion as people witness the discrepancy in the life they claim and the life they live. With attitudes of superiority, a lot of people condemn behaviors of others but fail to love others and accept them as they are. This turns people off from organized religion more than anything else. People experience organized religion as being more mean spirited than loving and accepting. The world today is off track from the will of God just like it was some 2,000 years ago.

The followers of Jesus are not to be concerned with rank and prestige. Christ is the one true teacher. We are servants of God. When Christians lord over others like the scribes and the Pharisees did, they presume for themselves an honor that is explicitly reserved for God.