

Week 35
May 31, 2009

Kingdom People Create Open Doors *Matthew 23*

Chapter 23 of Matthew is very much like some of the Psalms, the imprecatory Psalms where David shouts out to God with bad wishes for his enemies. It is unlike Psalm 23. Very few favorite verses are quoted from this chapter. This passage is all red lettered ... all the words of Jesus.

First let's see where we are in the flow of Jesus' life. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and raised in Nazareth. At around age 30 he began proclaiming the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom Quest series that we are engaged in looks at the concept of "kingdom" wherever it appears in the book of Matthew.

Matthew 6:33 "Seek first the Kingdom ..." Early on we studied the Sermon on the Mount, filled with many parables or stories Jesus told to help us discover a new way of Kingdom understanding and Kingdom living. This week we're looking at chapter 23 where Jesus is nearing the last week of His life, before facing the cross. The Triumphal Entry has occurred and people had hailed him as Messiah. As He came into Jerusalem the crowd shouted, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." When He came to the temple He cleared it by "... proclaiming my house shall be a house of prayer." (OK, if the religious leaders weren't upset before this, they were now!) Jesus continued to teach. We talked about the rich young ruler and Jesus' response. But today we get to the time when Jesus finally pours out His heart to the multitudes and His disciples. (Read Matthew 23.)

Jesus gives some warnings, a sort of show and tell. He has some hard things to say about the Pharisees in this passage. But look carefully and overhear words of tenderness, like a parent, declaring yes, this is wrong, but if you would just

Vs. 2 - They sit in Moses' seat. They have authority from God. Listen to what they say. It's solid ...but don't do as they do. (I remember my mom saying, "Don't do as I do, do as I say.")

Vs. 4 - They tie up heavy loads and put them on the shoulders of the people. They pile on the laws of Moses (small list). Then they pile on rules and regulations to help people follow the laws (big burden). But they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to help. In contrast, Jesus says "Here's the list of good things: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." But it's hard, so He says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me." Cast your cares upon Jesus. He will carry them. It's not up to you. The world of Pharisees tells us that we are to do the right things ... pray enough, read the Bible enough, share the gospel enough, give enough, take a stand enough. Jesus says, "No, you are not enough, but when your burdens are on me, I'll carry the load. You are free ... spread the grace!" It's not up to us, it's all on Christ.

Verses 11 & 12 declare a new type of leadership. Jesus went on to give seven woes. No, not like slowing a horse down and no, not like “Whoa, that’s awesome!”, but woe ... like a mixed cry of regret, compassion, sorrow, and denunciation.

#1 (vs. 13) You shut the door to the Kingdom of Heaven in men’s faces, and you yourselves never enter. Now in that time the Pharisees were the gatekeepers to God, but something had changed and they were, in a sense, going through motions. The substance was gone, kind of like the Emperor’s New Clothes, or like the Wizard of Oz hiding behind his curtain ... all talk and no substance. The biggest blind spot was that they didn’t recognize Jesus as Messiah.

#2 (vs. 15) Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees. You reproduce poorly. What do you expect? Galatians 6:7 says, “Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.” If you plant apple seeds, you get apples. If you plant orange seeds, you get oranges. If you plant garbage, you’ll reap garbage.

#3 (vs. 16) They had this incorrect swearing going on. They were telling white lies. They were adjusting the rules to make sure the outcome was in their favor, hedging the bets. But what does Jesus say earlier about this? (Matthew 5:33-37)

#4 (vss. 23, 24) OK, so are we supposed to give a tenth in tithe before or after taxes? What if I’m unemployed? Wait, don’t miss what Jesus is saying. Don’t major on minors and don’t neglect the most important matters of the law – justice, mercy, faithfulness. You are to practice them:

Justice – being fair, righteous

Mercy – compassionate, kind, forgiving, alleviation of distress

Faithfulness – loyal, reliable, representation of faith in God

The real question we need to ask ourselves is, are we more known for our rules and regulations, or for our justice, mercy, faithfulness. The weightier issues get ignored in favor of an easy fix. It’s like discovering your ship is sinking and you decide it’s too hard to stop the sinking, but perhaps you could paint the ship before it goes down ... hmmm?

#5 (vss. 25 & 26) There was a failure to examine their motives of greed and self-indulgence. This woe is described in Luke 11 when the Pharisees attacked Jesus for not ceremonially washing in a particular way before He ate with them. This shows how the Pharisees separated their lives into segments, where only what is seen is important ... what is put on, not what is unseen. This is where we get the word “hypocrite.”

We’ve been programmed to think that image is everything. God is not so impressed with what is on the outside. God looks at the heart (I Samuel 16:7) Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. Clean up the inside, then the outside will also be clean. Again, we don’t do this alone, we ask the Lord to come alongside and help.

#6 (vs. 27) This woe is similar to an earlier reference, but now Jesus is talking about white-washed tombs. Why tombs? First remember the setting, Jesus is approaching the Passover. It was so important to be clean before Passover, otherwise people couldn’t go into the Temple. One way to be unclean was to accidentally touch a grave or a tomb. This would make someone ceremonially unclean for seven days. (Numbers 19:16) As a

protection, people would boldly mark the tombs or graves with a whitewash, so as to warn those going into Jerusalem. Jesus uses this practice as a metaphor. You've been white washed and look good on the outside, but inside you are carrying the decaying bones of death, and that makes you really unclean. You have secret identities. This reminds me of a time in New York City when the garbage collectors went on strike. It seemed like months that garbage was left out to rot in huge piles. Some wise New Yorkers got an idea ... they put their garbage in boxes, wrapped them in beautiful Christmas wrapping paper and left them on their porches. By morning their trash had been stolen!

#7 (vss. 29-31) Woe to you who say, if you were around when your forefathers killed the prophets, you would have protected them. The truth is you will kill kingdom prophets, including the Christ, the Son of God and his followers. Like father, like son. You destroy anything that points to the real God and his kingdom.

After all these woes, does Jesus turn away, throw up His hands and say "I'm through?" No, he gives one final lament. (Vss. 37-39) He is taking these very defiled people on an imaginary journey into the holy of holies and he describes the wings on the Ark of the Covenant. Just as Yahweh would provide protection for his people under his wings, "... so I, Jesus, have longed to gather you and your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you are not willing." Then he tells them that they will not see this side of him ... his tender kingdom teaching side ... until he returns and fulfills that triumphal entry cry... "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Resources to recommend:

- *12 Steps for the Recovering Pharisee (Like Me)* by John Fischer, Bethany House Publishers
- Rob Bell's messages on the Seven Woes, September 2007, Mars Hill Bible Church