

# The ‘woe’ speeches

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*The woe speeches of Christ expressed grief and denunciation at the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. They were motivated by the publicity gained from an outward show and neglected judgement, mercy, and faith.*

**T**HE LORD JESUS CHRIST was a teacher like no other. As the Son of God—Immanuel, God with us—he spoke with the authority of his Father. Those who heard him speak noted that “he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mt. 7:29).

## Ears to hear

This authority explains why his teaching also has a judicial aspect to it. In connection with his Parable of the Sower the Lord told his disciples, “Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand . . . Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved” (Lk. 8:10,12). Those “by the way side” were first and foremost the religious leaders of the people who, for the most part, were unresponsive to the teaching of the Lord, showing they were unfit for salvation. They brought upon themselves the condemnation of Isaiah 6:9,10 (as the words above in italics demonstrate).

The word that is preached requires a positive response; it must make its impact upon the recipient. The Jewish leaders in the New Testament, however, were much like Pharaoh in the Old, who “hardened his heart” and in consequence ate “the fruit of [his] own way” (Prov. 1:31). These examples, and others, remind us that preaching will not always be successful; there are those who do not have ears that are willing to hear the Word of God. The Lord experienced this, and of course so do we, in our far less able attempts to preach the Truth.

The judicial aspect to the Lord’s teaching is certainly evident in his many ‘woe’ speeches—the majority of them being directed at the religious leaders of the day.<sup>1</sup> He who “knew what was in man” could include denunciation as an element in his preaching without any possibility of being in error. The Greek word translated “woe”, *ouai*,

expresses grief or denunciation, and in the AV is translated as “woe” over forty times, and six times as “alas”. As his public ministry drew to a close, the Lord warned his disciples and the multitude about the scribes and Phari-

sees in a series of short speeches with devastating power. Repeatedly in Matthew 23 he says, “Woe unto you!”, and identifies their many failings that made them unacceptable to God and unfit to be leaders of the nation. Several times he calls them “hypocrites”, the term used here (*hupokritēs*) being the Greek word for an actor. Those who put on an act of being religious “to be seen of men” (v. 5), intending only to glorify themselves, will receive no future reward, as the Lord had made plain earlier in his ministry (see 6:2,5,16).

This sustained criticism, a short summary of which appears in the Gospels of Mark and Luke (Mk. 12:38-40; Lk. 20:45-47), follows his encounter with “the chief priests and the elders of the people” at the temple in Matthew 21, and then the question-and-answer session of chapter 22. This began with the Pharisees and Herodians taking counsel “how they might entangle him in his talk” (v. 15). They then asked the loaded question, “Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?” (v. 17). Significantly, Luke prefaces his account of this incident with the words, “And they watched him . . .” (20:20). This was not a matter of honest observation; their aim was to catch him out. Luke’s comment is surely an echo of the condemnation uttered by Isaiah many years before: “all that watch for iniquity are cut off: that make a man an offender for a word . . .” (29:20,21). The Jewish leaders were watching the Lord in order to find “iniquity”, and thus condemned themselves.

## Stern denunciation

After the encounter in Matthew 22, the following chapter begins with the Lord drawing attention

1. In Luke 6, in his sermon “on a level place” (v. 17, RV), the Lord delivers blessings and woes, the pattern following that of Moses to Israel. The term “woe” is also used in other places: for example, of Judas Iscariot; in connection with the suffering of the nation in A.D. 70; and the judgement on Chorazin and Bethsaida “because they repented not”. In this article, however, we are dwelling on the Lord’s words to the Jewish leaders.

to the superficiality and hypocrisy of the leaders, who “say, and do not” (23:3). Eight ‘woes’ are then pronounced between verses 13 and 36. It is interesting to note that just prior to this the Lord had told his Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen, which clearly echoes the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5. This also is followed by a series of ‘woes’ against a wayward nation, culminating in disaster (vv. 8-30).

In Matthew 23:13 the Lord says, “woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye *shut up the kingdom of heaven* against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in”. Earlier he had put it this way: “Woe unto you, lawyers! for ye have *taken away the key of knowledge*: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered” (Lk. 11:52). They monopolised the right of interpretation, obscured the meaning of Scripture, refused to accept the gospel proclaimed by the Lord, neither entering the Kingdom themselves nor allowing others to enter. By contrast, the Lord gave to Peter the keys to the knowledge of the Kingdom that he subsequently used to open the door of faith both to Jew and to Gentile.

The next denunciation, that they “devour widows’ houses, and for a pretence make long prayer” (Mt. 23:14), is omitted in many versions. However, it is included in the parallel passages in Mark and Luke (Mk. 12:40; Lk. 20:47). The Lord was concerned with motives, whereas the Pharisees were obsessed with externals. Widows were the most vulnerable members of society. The Law of Moses warned against oppressing widows, yet the unscrupulous religious leaders were quite prepared to encourage them to make gifts beyond their means.

The Lord’s reference to prayer is reminiscent of his warning in Matthew 6: “And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have [received, RV] their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father Which is in secret; and thy Father Which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly” (vv. 5,6). Again, it is the motive, and not the fact of publicity, that brings criticism. The Lord contrasts the hypocrite who seeks publicity with the disciple who desires privacy in prayer. The hypocrites “have received their reward” (vv. 2,5,16). The Greek verb used here was the technical and commercial word for receiving payment in

full. Here it consisted of the praise of men—but that is all they will ever get.

### “I desired mercy”

After giving further examples of the Pharisees’ blindness in relation to the swearing of oaths (23:16-22), the Lord denounces their neglect of “the weightier matters of the law”: “ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone” (v. 23). In the Lord’s earlier comment in this vein, he condemns them for passing over “judgment and the love of God” (Lk. 11:42). They had no excuse here, for Jesus had made every effort to encourage them in the right way.

In Matthew 9, when he dined at the house of Matthew the tax collector, the scribes and Pharisees looked on critically. The Lord responded by saying, “go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have *mercy*, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (v. 13). The rulers ignored the command that was given here, so the Lord returned to the same point in chapter 12: “If ye had known what this meaneth, I will have *mercy*, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless” (v. 7). Again they ignored his words; thus they are condemned for passing over “judgment, *mercy*, and faith”, or “judgment and the love of God”. Clearly, it is wise for all men and women to ‘go and learn’ while there is opportunity to do so.

In the passages quoted above, the Lord had specifically directed the rulers to the words of the prophet Hosea, a prophet to the ten-tribe kingdom of Israel. In his day the people were wayward; they had turned aside after other gods. There was “no truth, nor *mercy*, nor knowledge of God in the land” (4:1). God, through His prophet, declares, “I desired *mercy*, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (6:6). “*Mercy*” (Heb. *chesed*) is translated as “steadfast love” in the RSV/ESV, and seems to indicate ‘covenant-love’.<sup>2</sup>

The people in Hosea’s day were not offering this: “Your goodness [Heb. *chesed*] is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away” (v. 4). God’s love for His people, which was constant, was not being reciprocated. Of course He wanted sacrifices as laid down in the

2. For an exposition of this idea, see *The Teaching of the Master*, by Brother L. G. Sargent, chapter 6.

Law, but first and foremost He desired “mercy”, or covenant-love; and once the people had lost this their sacrifices became of no avail. Thus, in directing the scribes and Pharisees to consider the words of Hosea, the Lord was teaching them that their punctilious observance of the Law could not replace an absence of “mercy”. Yet the Jewish leaders failed to appreciate their position and their need, so their actions were nothing more than pretence and show. Like Israel in Hosea’s day, they were just going through the motions of worshipping God (see also in this connection Luke 18:9-14).

### “Fill up the measure of your fathers”

They boasted, “If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets”. On the contrary, says the Lord, “ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers” (Mt. 23:30-32). The last phrase appears to be an allusion back to Genesis 15:16, where God said, “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full”. When it became full, judgement came upon them and they were “cast out before the children of Israel” (1 Kgs. 21:26). In rejecting and crucifying the Lord Jesus, the Jews filled up “the measure of [their] fathers”—they filled the cup of their iniquity to the brim.

Remarkably, even at this point, the long-suffering of God allowed a further opportunity for repentance, and an appeal went out from the apostles at Pentecost (Acts 3:19). But in rejecting this, and in viciously persecuting the early ecclesia, the cup of their iniquity overflowed. Thus the Apostle Paul would later write about them “fill[ing] up their sins alway” (1 Thess. 2:16),

His disciples—*i.e.*, those who fully receive and faithfully re-echo his teaching, *which is THE TRUTH* as nothing else is—are “the light of the world” in so far as they reflect his light; for, primarily, it is he who is “the light of the world”, as he said (Jno. viii. 12), and away from the truth, all is the darkness of nature. Jesus therefore commands them to let their light shine *that men may see it*. Hence it is their duty to let it be manifest to those among whom they are situated, that they are children of the light—believers, lovers, and performers of the truth. This is done when the hope is professed according to seasonable opportunity, and its invitation pressed upon attention, and its power shown in the effect it has upon action. This attitude is intensely odious to those who are not disciples of Christ. It is the attitude of obedience and wisdom for all that, and will be acknowledged and rewarded openly at a time when the mightiest of natural men will be glad to stoop at the feet of the meanest of Christ’s accepted disciples.

and he added, “wrath has come upon them to the uttermost” (NKJV). When these words were written, national judgement was imminent. Jesus had warned that upon them would come “all the righteous blood shed upon the earth”—the blood of all the past religious murders—from first to last, Abel to Zacharias (Gen. 4:10; 2 Chron. 24:22, the last in the Hebrew canon).\*

### Avoiding pretence and show

The ‘woe’ speeches of the Lord, particularly those directed at the scribes and Pharisees considered in this article, ought to give us all pause for thought. The religion of the Pharisees was external. It focused on what they did “to be seen of men”; motives mattered little. They “[made] clean the outside of the cup and of the platter”, “appear[ed] beautiful” outwardly, but within were “full of hypocrisy and iniquity”. As with Israel in the time of Hosea, the Pharisees did not have that steadfast love, that covenant-love, that the Lord desired from His people. They succeeded in deceiving the multitude, but they never deceived the Lord, who “knew what was in man” (Jno. 2:25). In the same way, whatever other people see us to be, our true motives are known to our heavenly Father. Let us ensure that, as we endure this present time of probation, we keep ourselves free from the pretence and show so roundly condemned by the Lord, and with a pure heart look forward in faith to the coming of our Lord.

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\* As “the son of Barachias”, Zacharias in Matthew 23:35 may have been Zechariah “the son of Berechiah” (Zech. 1:1). Besides the Lord Jesus, he may have been alluding to his own violent death in 13:7 (see S. Palmer, “Zacharias whom ye slew”, *Testimony*, Apr. 1973, pp. 134-6).—*Nigel Bernard (editor)*.