



Luke 11:43–46

43 ‘Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the market-places. 44 ‘Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it.’ 45 One of the experts in the law answered him, ‘Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also.’ 46 Jesus replied, ‘And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you

load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

Reflection

Earlier in the day the Pharisees and experts in the law had publicly accused Jesus, the Son of God, of being in league with Satan. It is hard to imagine a deeper insult. Then they've invited him over to lunch, no doubt with malicious intentions aimed at further insulting and discrediting him. They might as well have invited an uncaged lion into their midst. Jesus is no shrinking violet. And in Luke 11, like the great prophets of old, Jesus uses the strongest possible language to warn these wayward leaders of God's people of imminent judgment. He's

using the language of 'woe', pronouncing six woes on the Jewish religious establishment, and in particular, the Pharisees and so-called experts in the law.

As we discussed yesterday, a 'woe' is akin to a curse that warns against catastrophe. Catastrophe looms should their current behaviour continue. Doom can be averted but only through swift repentance. The situation is dire, the wrath of God is incited, and destruction is imminent. These six woes represent one last act of mercy before the judgment of God is poured out. The harshness of Jesus' language is like a slap in the face, to snap them out of these eternal-life-threatening behaviours. Turn and repent before it is too late.

Yesterday, woe to you for tithing your

herb garden yet neglecting justice and the love of God. Today, Jesus pronounces three more woes on the Jewish leaders that also echo down through the ages into contemporary Christianity, your life and mine. Reading from Luke 11:43–46,

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Three woes; let's take each in turn. The first one,

43 'Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the market-places.

In Matthew 23, right in the heart of the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus' levels the same charge,

5 'Everything they do is done for people to see: they make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the

place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; 7 they love to be greeted with respect in the market-places and to be called “Rabbi” by others.

Woe to you because you love the stage. You're in this for the praise of men. You're proud. You lust after the approval and acclaim of others. The lavish way you dress, the way you claim the place of honour at banquets, the most important seats in the synagogues, this isn't about God or his people, your religious practice isn't about glorifying God its become all about glorify you, about your self-righteous, self-centred faith. Woe to you.

Jesus moves on. The second woe,

44 'Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it.'

In Judaism coming in contact with a dead person or a grave defiled a person for seven days. Graves were carefully marked for this reason. Woe to you Pharisees. You're like unmarked graves. Like doctors with a contagious disease. Like servants of Satan disguised as servants of God. People come to you in search of God and you lead them away from him. You're like white-washed tombs – all shiny on the outside, but inside you are filled with uncleanness and decay. You're like an unmarked grave that people walk over without ever knowing it has defiled them, rendering them unwittingly unclean. You presume to be religious leaders and models to the peo-

ple but those who are attracted to you or would pattern themselves after you are rendered unclean and defiled in the sight of God. Woe to you.

And finally,

‘And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

Woe to your religious rules that you have layered on top of the word of God. Woe to your endless additions to Scripture that you claim are as important as the word of God. God’s words are lost beneath your endless additions. And the widows, the orphans, the vulnerable and those gen-

uinely seeking him are crushed beneath your false teaching. And worse still, you don't lift a finger to help them. Your take-it-or-leave attitude is callous, heartless. Teachers of God's word must do far more than simply inform people, they must help people. They must show people what to do but also support them in doing it, as they live out what they teach and walk alongside their brothers and sisters helping them to do the same. You crush them with your additions to Scripture and turn your back on them. Woe to you.

Think & Pray

We sense Jesus' anger in these admonishments. But his language, like a slap in the face, like a bucket of cold water poured over your head, is meant to make the Jew-

ish leaders (and us) sit up and take notice. And so let's do just that. Is Jesus warning you in these verses? Have you found a little bit of yourself in these three woes today? Firstly, pride. Loving the praise of men. Lusting after the approval of your peers. Outward display. Boasting. Mixed motives in your ministry at church. Seeking the praise of men more than the applause of God. Practising your righteousness in public instead of in secret. This is a dangerous path. It can prove to be deadly. What is the stage on which you love to shine? Are you doing it for yourself or Jesus?

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Are these words for you today? Or these ones,

44 'Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it.'

Who is it that looks up to you? Who are you influencing? Who might be quietly trying to model the pattern of their life off you? And where are you leading them? Towards Jesus or away from him? Towards the kingdom of God or the kingdom of this world? What are you modelling to your children? What do people see in you at work? Are you moving people at church closer to God through your conversation, your actions, your example or is it your career and lifestyle that most impresses them?

Or perhaps these words are the ones that God would have you think most deeply about this morning,

woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

You may not feel like you're enforcing any extraneous religious rules on people (although it is certainly worth thinking about this and the culture at your church). But how are you going at helping people? At carrying other people's burdens? And extending a helping hand to the vulnerable in your community? Jesus was tireless in this. It's why he came. To help the helpless. Perhaps you think you have your life

together; but if a significant part of it is not helping others in their walk with Jesus and in this thing called life then something is very wrong in your priorities as a follower of Jesus.

Strong words from our Lord this morning. Pray now that you and I would take them to heart and where needed be changed by them. And that we would do this to the glory of God, through the power of his Spirit, following the example of his Son, out of love for him and his people.