



Matthew 23:13–15

13 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. [14]

15 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

Reflection

On Monday Jesus cleansed the temple, on Tuesday Jesus is cleansing Judaism of its wayward leaders, and on Friday Jesus will cleanse the world of its sins by his death on the cross. Today's cleansing has been going on since Matthew 21 verse 18. And the temperature continues to rise. The forum has been the temple courts in Jerusalem. There has been public debate, thinly veiled parables and outright condemnation. And it has all been very much one-sided as you'd imagine in a debate with the Son of God. Jesus has been devastating in exposing the hypocrisy and corruption of the leadership of God's people. He's turned them inside out, exposing the inner motivations of their hearts,

in full public view, on centre stage in the temple courts in the lead up to the Passover festival. He's been devastating and the temperature only continues to rise.

It's hard to imagine what the crowds and Jesus' disciples must be thinking and feeling as they watch this exchange. The crowds are made up of zealous pilgrims, Jews and converts to Judaism who've travelled from the far reaches of the Roman Empire to celebrate the Passover festival in Jerusalem. It's the busiest week of the year for the temple. The huge Court of the Gentiles in which they're standing is approaching capacity. At first they would have enjoyed the debate. They'd heard rumours about this prophet, but to see him in action has been something special. But then they'd noticed the temple guard

shifting uneasily in the background. And the tone of what was going on. They can read the hatred in the eyes of the chief priests, Pharisees and teachers of the law. Somehow this has turned deadly. In a culture that values honour and shame more highly than even truth and falsehood Jesus has completely upstaged the Jewish religious leaders and is publicly shaming some of the most esteemed men in Judaism right in the middle of their own temple. He clearly has a death wish. And yet that didn't stop John the Baptist. Or in fact any of the prophets of old. And this man speaks with such authority. You can't tear your eyes away from him. And what he says penetrates so deeply.

Impossibly, the temperature continues to rise. In the remainder of this chapter Jesus

will pronounce seven woes on the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. He'll repeatedly call them hypocrites to their faces. And children of hell, blind guides, blind fools, blind men; he'll parody their religious practices and liken them to white-washed tombs, clean on the outside but filled with corruption. He'll goad them 'Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started' correctly reading the murder they're plotting in their hearts, just as their ancestors murdered the prophets in the Old Testament. 'You snakes! You brood of vipers!' Just like Satan, the Serpent, their true father, who was a murderer from the beginning.

Jesus is furious with them. Why? This isn't about them not recognising him as the Messiah, it's not even about them plotting

to kill him, it's about them leading God's people to hell. It doesn't get any worse than that for Jesus. We can see by where Jesus begins in our passage today.

13 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Jesus has used this imagery before. Broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it, but small is the gate that leads to eternal life, and only few find it. But those precious few are having that small gate slammed in their faces by the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. They've left the broad road, made sacri-

fices. In many cases they've left behind the religion of their culture, been cut off from their families and are despised for converting to Judaism. And on the precipice of eternal life, just a couple of steps away, the very leaders of God's people on earth are slamming the door in their faces and condemning them to hell. It's one thing to choose hell for yourself says Jesus, but another thing entirely to take as many people as you can there with you. There's another whose made this his life's work, his name's the devil.

And Jesus is only beginning.

15 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have

succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

Not only do you bar the gate but you intentionally lead people to hell. You go out of your way, move heaven and earth, travel over land and sea, so distorting the Scriptures with your onerous traditions that people are crushed under their weight. They trust you. And so they put their faith in your rules instead of placing their faith in God. But keeping rules isn't the way to heaven, that way only leads to pride or despair. And those that haven't fallen away in despair have become champions at following your religious rules at the expense of entering into a relationship with the living God. They think they're saved, all the while being twice as much children of hell as you are, and all this is to be laid at your

feet.

Think

It's so easy to read a passage like ours today and say to ourselves, 'Phew, I'm glad I'm not like them.' But can anyone of us truly say that? Who amongst us is not guilty of failing to practice what we preach? Who amongst us isn't guilty of being zealous for the wrong things? Praising things in front of other people that we shouldn't? Posting things on Facebook that may well have the effect of leading our brothers and sisters away from Jesus and into the arms of the world? Consider who it is that you influence most. Are you leading them closer to Jesus or further away from him?

Take some time also now to examine your

heart. We have a forgiving and gracious God who loves us no matter what but that doesn't mean that he turns a blind eye to inconsistencies in our lives and neither should we.

Where does your hypocrisy lie? Where is it that you are saying one thing and doing another? Not practicing what you preach? Not living out what you believe? Perhaps in your relationship with your sister? Or in a compromise you are making at work. Or maybe there's a whole compartment in your life that isn't really Christian at all. Uncover it today. Confess it to your Father. And let Jesus get to work in cleansing you too by the power of his Holy Spirit. And see how good it feels finally being free of this and more like him.

Pray

Pray for both these things. Pray that you would be a light to our world who draws people near to Jesus, who welcomes, ushers and encourages them along that small and narrow path and finally through the gate that leads to eternal life. Pray also that the Holy Spirit would continue to refine you, purify you, and expose and remove forever even your most hidden sins. Pray that you and I both would practice what we preach and that God would use us to bring many people to glory.