



Matthew 23:29–32

29 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. 30 And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ 31 So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Go ahead, then, and

complete what your ancestors started!

Reflection

As far back as Matthew 12:14 the Pharisees began to plot as to how they might kill Jesus. In today's passage Jesus goads them publicly to bring it on. After all, they have a long history of it. For centuries God has been sending prophets to Israel, to warn them of God's displeasure at their wandering from his ways and worshipping idols instead of him. And for centuries, God's people have been killing their own prophets. The very last of them they killed was John the Baptist; Herod himself was a professing Jew.

It's just like the parable Jesus told them

earlier in the day (Matt 21:33–46). The tenants have taken over the vineyard. The owner sends servant after servant to claim his share of the harvest but the wicked tenants beat one and kill the other until finally the owner sends his very own son to claim what is his. But they say to themselves, ‘This is the heir, let’s kill him and the vineyard will be ours!’ The vineyard is Israel, the servants are God’s prophets and Jesus is his son. They’ve taken Israel for themselves, they’ve killed God’s prophets who were sent to warn them to repent of their ways and now finally they’re plotting in their hearts to murder God’s son.

It is fitting that this is the seventh and final woe that Jesus pronounces on the Pharisees and teachers of the law. This

is the climax, they're all leading up to this one, because it's the worst one, the one that sums up them all. In this their sins will be heaped up to the very limit. We must never forget the irony that it is the leaders of God's people who kill God's son. We must never forget that the ones who are supposedly waiting so expectantly for the Messiah are the ones who kill him. We must never forget this as a warning. It is a warning that reminds us that it is often those who profess most loudly to be Christians that bring the most damage to Christianity. And our hearts are not immune either.

Religion gone wrong, bringing death instead of life. Suffocating traditions, instead of breathing new life into a culture that is barely gasping for air. Driving people away from God instead of to him through

religious practices and routines that have been cut off from the source. How does this happen? Jesus has been teaching us since Matthew 23 that this happens through hypocrisy and pride. Hypocrisy and pride in 'the way we do things' that leads us to stop listening to Scripture and becoming blind and deaf to the rebuke and guidance of God's word.

Christianity isn't about building beautiful churches, it's about building beautiful lives. And this happens by listening ever more intently to God's word as he speaks into our hearts by the power of his Holy Spirit. This happens by giving ourselves over to his words and allowing ourselves to be changed by them. This happens by allowing ourselves to be renewed into the image and likeness of Jesus by embrac-

ing the work of his Spirit as we conform to the pattern of his words. But it often hurts. This is because God is tearing us down in order to build us up higher than we could ever imagine. But if we build ourselves up as the Pharisees have then we're destined to be torn down.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law have stopped listening to God's words. Their ancestors refused to hear God's words in the mouths of the prophets and they're refusing to hear God's words in the mouth of Jesus. Christianity goes terribly wrong when Christians stop listening to God's words.

Have you stopped listening to God's words? Or to some of them? It's an easy thing to do. Matthew 23 has been far from

enjoyable reading. And in fact much of the bible makes for far from enjoyable reading; all those parts that are a little too real, that shine a light on things in our lives that we'd rather keep hidden, things that we'd rather not think about and rather not have exposed. Truth often hurts. And so we often avoid what we need to hear the most. Instead of allowing God to deconstruct us so he can reconstruct us into something truly beautiful, we turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to what we need to hear the most, and we stall in our transformation. Ironically, we hold on to what is holding us back, we embrace what is stopping us from being truly satisfied and truly happy. And little ironies like this can lead to big ironies as we see in the Jewish religious leaders who go on to kill the son of God.

32 Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!

Jesus goads them, urges them on. His words on this Tuesday of the Passion week have sealed his fate. They will kill him because of these words. They will accept his challenge here in verse 32. They will kill him. The great irony in this passage filled with ironies is that the one commandment of Jesus that the leaders of God's people in Jerusalem will follow is the one in which Jesus tells them to kill him.

You see, in all of the events that are about to unfold Jesus is in complete control. He's engineering the whole thing. He is sovereign over all these events. He has come to Jerusalem to die and his death is playing out precisely according to his perfect

plan. His death will not only be the final condemnation of those who've led God's people astray but also the means by which God's precious flock will be re-united to him forever. Perfect.

Think

Cast your mind now back over the seven woes in Matthew 23. They make for uncomfortable reading not just because they are so confrontational but because none of our hearts are completely free of the hypocrisy that Jesus is speaking of. But instead of blocking our ears and gliding over the words that make us feel most uncomfortable as the Pharisees did, what is it that we need to listen to most carefully? What is stopping you from living a beautiful life? How do you need to be torn down

by God so that he can remake you into someone who is truly great? What hard work in the area of repentance and character change do you need to perform with the help of the Holy Spirit so that you can live the beautiful life needed to win people for Christ in this world? What is it for you? Is God showing you that the depths of your pride seem to have no limits like he is for me? Is the Holy Spirit cutting you to the heart by the way you love the material things of this world over the things of God? As counter-intuitive as it feels and as hard as it is embrace what God's words are doing to your heart. Don't recoil from them like the Pharisees did but embrace them. They may hurt but by them you are being healed and being remade into someone with the potential to be truly great.

Pray

Then spend what time you have left before you are caught up in the day ahead confessing your sins to God. Ask for God's help with whatever sin is most burdening you in this moment. Give it over to him and watch him take it away for good. Ask for the grace and strength that you need to leave it behind forever. But don't forget either to celebrate the work that God has performed in your life so far. And thank God for Jesus' words and example. Pray that you'd never stop listening to him and wanting to be like him, that you would love listening to him and that God would make you like him. Pray it in his name and know that God loves answering prayers like these.