



## Matthew 23:25–26

25 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

### Reflection

It's still Tuesday. Matthew, the most Jewish gospel, has slowed right down to focus on the events of this Tuesday of the Passion week. 'Tuesday' began in Matthew 21:18 and will be still going in the first couple of verses of Matthew 24. That's two and half chapters of Matthew's gospel, known for its Jewish character, focussing on just one day in Jesus' life. And devastatingly, that one day is spent denouncing the entire Jewish religious establishment, all their leaders and most respected figures, in the heart of their turf, the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus' words have been scathing, sustained and they're escalating.

Chapter 23 contains Jesus' strongest words yet against the leadership and personal hypocrisy of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. In the Sermon on the

Mount Jesus spoke of blessing, here he speaks of woe. He pronounces seven woes on the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. Today's passage is the fifth woe. Here's the four that lead up to it. One. Woe to you, you hypocrites, for slamming the door to the kingdom of heaven in people's faces; not only do you not enter yourself but ... Two. You lead those who are genuinely seeking the kingdom of God to hell with you. Three. Woe to you, you blind guides, you blind fools, you blind men! You're so caught up in gold and gifts that you've forgotten about God himself, his temple and the meaning behind the sacrifices. Four. Woe to you, you hypocrites. You carefully tithe everything down to even giving a tenth of your herb gardens to God. In these tiny things you excel, and yet you're so caught up

in them, in the small stuff, that you're neglecting the great foundations of the faith: justice, mercy and faithfulness. You major on the minors, and completely disregard what is most important. It's like you strain out tiny flies from your cup and then drink a camel! And today, the fifth woe:

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Today's indictment follows quite closely on from yesterday's fourth woe. You can almost see how Jesus' mind has moved

from one to the next. Because they are very closely related. To their credit the Pharisees and teachers of the law seem to have been very faithful with their giving practices (their tithing). You'll notice in yesterday's passage that Jesus commended their giving one tenth of the herbs that they grew in their gardens to God. But Jesus was so scathing because while they were excelling in this small area, they are utterly missing the bigger picture of championing justice, mercy and faithfulness, which are far more important aspects of our faith. It's exactly the same with ceremonial cleanness, which is the subject of Jesus' fifth woe.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were highly committed to their purity laws that require external ceremonial purifi-

cation. They'd added many laws of their own to the already very stringent Old Testament food laws and laws about what is religiously clean and unclean. And so they were meticulous in terms of their ceremonial washings, the way they would wash before a meal, and who they would eat with, down to even the careful washing of bowls and utensils. 'Hypocrisy,' says Jesus, 'Do you really think that all these ceremonial washings make you clean and pure in God's sight?'

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Once again, just like your herb gardens, you are majoring on the minors and completely and utterly failing at what is important. You present yourselves as clean and pure to the world and yet inside you are filled with greed and self-indulgence instead of generosity and self-sacrificial service. You hypocrites, first clean your hearts, and then all of your outside actions will be counted pure by God.

Greed and self-indulgence covered up by outward display. Not for the first time Jesus is turning them inside out for the world to see. He's exposing their hearts, showing the religious leaders and the crowds who look up to them, that they need new hearts. In fact, the whole religious system is broken beyond repair. It's time for a new one, a new and better way to relate to God

that deals with sin fully and finally, once and for all. Not sacrifice after sacrifice and rule after rule, not constant reminders of sinful, broken hearts; but an all sufficient sacrifice and the free gift of a new heart. The old way of relating to God is broken beyond repair, it's time for a new and better way. That's why Jesus has come.

## **Think**

Not for the first time on this Tuesday our passage is asking us to turn inward, to weigh the thoughts and motivations of our hearts. I'd like you to do so now. Jesus is, in particular, bringing to our attention this morning the hypocrisy in a Christian who is greedy and self-indulgent. The opposite is what should characterise people seeking to become like their Lord. Not greedy,



but generous, and abundantly so; with our time and our gifts and also with our money. Jesus would have us use every good thing God has given us to advance his kingdom on earth. There is no room for self-indulgence either. The opposite of self-indulgence is self-sacrifice, giving of yourself over and above what is comfortable for the good of others, laying down your life in service of them, just as Jesus has done for us.

Close our time today by thinking about your generosity. How can you be more generous with the time you have? Less self-indulgent and more generous? And what about your professional skills and your gifts and passions? Are there ways you can use them to bring glory to Jesus? What skills has God given you that you

can use to do great things for Jesus and great good in our world? And then there's your money. Are you supporting the work of your church? Are you sending some of your money overseas? It goes so much further over there. Out of your abundance can you spare a few extra dollars (or even a lot of extra dollars) to support the poor, widows and orphans in our world? Imagine if God were to use your money and your prayers to bring a whole village in Africa to him. Sanitation, education and eternal life. He can, and he does, when we're generous.

The antidote to greed is generosity. And in a society like ours greed can be the undoing of many people. But in truth, it's always been the same. Here's Jesus condemning the Pharisees for their outward show that is

covering up greedy hearts. But there was another standing there, who should have been cut to the heart by his words. Another, one whom no-one would suspect, so addicted to money that he would soon commit an unspeakable sin that would ultimately result in him taking his own life. The Pharisees didn't listen to Jesus this morning. And neither did Judas. Will you?

## **Pray**

Pray that it would be so. Pray that God would keep us from being overtaken by greed and self-indulgence in a culture and period of human history in which they rule the world. Instead, pray that we would be characterised by abundant generosity and that God would use our generosity to powerfully advance his kingdom on earth.

We have been blessed to be a blessing to this planet. May it be so in your day today, Amen.