

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“On Being Religious”

Matthew 23

October 30, 2005

Don't you just love it when Jesus rips into the Pharisees... or at least the self-righteous ones. It's just one of those moments in the story where the bad guys get what's coming to them and we always like it when that happens.

And these moments do sort of jump off the page... because you have Jesus, “Mr. Meek and Mild”... “Mr. Compassion”... just wailing on these folks. When someone known for their temper busts out on someone... we don't pay much attention. But when Jesus does it, “Mr. You Aren't Going to Get Me Riled Up,” when he does it, then we really do take noticed.

Just doesn't sound like him... **“Woe this and Woe that.”**

Now, when I grew up, **“Woe.”** Was what we said to horses... and sometimes kids... It meant stop. **“Woe.... Heeeeeahhh... Hippy Hay Oh.”**

Biblically speaking, Woe doesn't mean “stop” it means, you should have stopped along time ago and you're going to wish you had stopped real soon.

“Woe to you,” means, **“I'd consider taking out a life insurance policy if I were you.”** It means, **“God is about to lower the boom on you and you've deserve every bit of boom He lowers.”**

And on this day, Jesus is saying woe to the self-righteous among the Pharisees. Now, to be sure, like any community of faith there were differences....

Some more mystical than moral...

Some more mature than immature...

And some more authentic than hypocritical...

But the self-righteousness seemed to be enough of a problem so that Jesus doesn't discriminate and qualify... he just “woes” them all...

In all of their egotistical... obsessive... oppressive ways. This group lived tightly puckered lives. They'd taken the core of the law... the Ten Commandments and expounded and defined and refined them, until there were 60 volumes.

And these folks, these Pharisees (which means “separated ones”) spent a lifetime, memorizing and trying to keep every last detail of the expanded, new and improved, law.

And Jesus, who keeps saying, the kingdom is within you... it's all around you... is attacking, not simply their hypocrisy, but their obsession with the external. It's not just that they don't walk the walk... but their talk... is wrong.

There all worried about the externals...

Whether or not someone brought a tittle of their spices to the temple... Never mind that they had no compassion for the beggars they passed on the way to the temple.

They worried about ritual purity and contamination...

what they could eat and how they could eat it...

and how it was washed and prepared.
It was an OCD's nightmare.

But they're good at it. They love getting all the externals down... But Jesus nails them and says they're dirty and dead on the inside. Like a germ infested drinking cup... like a tomb, beautiful on the outside, full of nothing but bones on the inside.

And what's worse, totally blind to it. **"You think,"** he says, **"You think you would have honored the prophets had you lived back then... but the truth is, you'd never have heard them... You would have cheered at their lynchings."**

Jesus is so angry here. **"Woe to you... for making faith such a burden for everyone to bear. It isn't supposed to be so heavy... Woe to you."**

And we love this moment... where the self-righteous are exposed. We love it that he's mad and he is. But he's also sad. The word "woe" means someone is mad and sad. It's about wrath and about sadness.

Jesus ends the tirade with, **"Jerusalem... Jerusalem... you who kill prophets... How I've longed to gather you in."**

Origen, the great Church Father once wrote, *If Jesus had good reason to weep over Jerusalem, he will have much better reason to weep over the Church. It was built to be a house of prayer, but shameful greed and the hateful stupidity of some people... have made it a "dean of thieves."*

So, if Origen was right... We in the church shouldn't laugh too loudly when Jesus dresses down the Pharisees. I suspect he's had some woes for us throughout our spotted history.

"Woe to you, you who elevate your teachers and pastors to emperor status and put crowns on their heads, rather than naming them as servants."

"Woe to you who got in bed with political power."

"Woe to you... you hypocrites... you who pretend to sell the grace of God, taking money from the gullible to finance your kingdom."

"Woe to you... who turns the gospel of love which must be freely received into dogma that is coerced into my children."

"Woe to you... for your use of fear and guilt."

"Woe to you for killing people who didn't believe what you believed. For invading countries in my name... for burning those who stood up to you... for forcing your culture on others... for insisting my world was flat. Woe to all of you."

"Woe to you... you who justified slavery with my Holy Word."

"Woe to you... denied the rights you claimed were given by the Creator to those who were different than you were."

"Woe to you... who were so afraid of education and learning."

"Woe to any of you who ever shut the doors of my church to people of a different race."

"Woe to you who rejected those dealing with the pain of divorce."

“Woe to you... who’s large egos and loud voices and huge media budgets... pray upon the vulnerable.”

“Woe to you who told my daughters they couldn’t preach.”

“Woe to you, who would suggest that I would slam a city with a hurricane and kill thousands of innocent people.”

“And woe to you preaches who have shrunk my mystery down to something small and un compelling.”

“Woe to you who fussed and got ugly over the color of the carpet or the kind of music or the location of a building or who would chair the library committee.”

And Jesus could go on and on and on... Our story is full of woe and reasons for woe as was the faith community in his day. We have been as human as we have been holy... and as sinful as we have been sacred. And such is the nature of religion. Some of it’s good and some bad.

Some is healthy and life giving and some of it is a burden.

Some religion helps us see... some of it blinds us.

Some of it challenges us...

some of it shields us from challenge.

And you’ve known all of this. The church has bored you and burned you... but... it’s also blessed you. There is a great mystery... a deposit of faith... a witness to what is infinite... though those of us who bear witness are so very finite.

And now it’s time to return to the text. Jesus wails his woes on the Pharisees but the first words of his sermon were to his disciples... and some of us aren’t going to like them. Jesus says, **“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees (those he’s about to call “sons of hell) they sit in the sit of Moses... so you must obey them and do everything they tell you.”**

What? Jesus, I thought we didn’t like these guys? Aren’t they evil... aren’t they lying, egotistical, hypocritical, sons of hell. You want us to learn from them.

Yes, I do... the messenger never negates the message.

I’ll bet that didn’t go over so well with Peter and the other disciples... anymore than it goes over well now. Folks these days are sort of down on institutional religion, especially if it feels self-righteous. I hear that a lot.

Thursday, the guy fixing my whirlpool and I were talking. After finding out what I do for a living... he said, **“Well, I believe in God... but I don’t do the church thing.”** He’d been raised in Catholic schools and once he got out he never went back.

Why?

“Oh... didn’t really work for me... felt shoved down my throat.”

Lots of folks have lived that story. Either the church was too something... Too condemning, too demanding, too narrow... or it was not enough of something. Not intelligent enough or open enough or creative enough or loving enough... So, they left thinking what they experienced was all there was to experience in the church of Jesus Christ. I thought that for a long time... didn’t leave... but thought about it a lot.

Do you ever hear this? This notion of... folks resisting the institutional. It's sort of vogue in all areas now but especially towards the Church. ... Don't think they need it... are bored by it.

I hear a lot of people say, **"I'm spiritual just not religious."** And I don't really know what that means...

I think maybe it means they like to light candles
and watch movies like "Ghost."

And they believe in things supernatural... perhaps.

They like to say things in whispered voices like, **"it was just meant to be."** It tends to be very subjective... sentimental... and small. But who can blame them for not being religious ... if the religion they got at church along the way was sentimental and small. But spirituality without religion is like a computer without software... no good to you... but we try.

There are a lot of us who have spent a lot of time getting "freed up" from institutions and all things institutional.

Being "independent" though, is a tricky and deceptive thing. Typically, what happens is... in our run to *so-called freedom*, we trade one tyrant for another. We leave the church as our authority and hand the strings of our life over to the culture. We reject another's teaching and become a slave to our ego. We leave closed-minded fundamentalism and give our allegiance to our own small mindedness. All the while, of course, feeling free... but not really being free and on our best days we know it.

We aren't really transformed... we've just traded one set of bags we drag around for another. We haven't really become what we were intended to be. And that's the point.

I love the way Saint Paul says it, **"Circumcision or uncircumcision,"** and by that he means, religion or the lack of it, **isn't the point. Being religious and proud of it or irreligious and proud of it, isn't the point. The only thing that matters is a new creation. All that matters is that we are being made knew."**

The question is... how are we to be made new? And I think, if we're listening to Jesus at all, it begins for us in a humility before what has been revealed. **"Listen to and learn from those who know... who have come before you... who sit in the seat of Moses."** Listen to what someone has called, **"The living faith of the dead."**

Transformation... salvation... isn't something done well, for the most part, in isolation. There is a communion of the saints... past and present.

I suppose there have been a few folks who miraculously come forth from the womb as saints. But generally speaking, saints are made, not born (as someone said). We all have work to do as we cooperate with the grace of God at work in our lives. Those who are truly free and truly loving have not arrived there by accident... they've been on a journey.

And Jesus wants us to begin that journey with a kind of humble submission to the past... to what has been made known. For sure, those who bear it too us will not always live it, as we have noted, but that does not mean the truth of it has changed.

So... if being a new creation... a disciple of Jesus matters to you at all, then we begin with an obedience to and an honoring of what has been made known... and how will you do that as a Christian a part from the Church.

Now, to be sure, we need churches that are alive spiritually and ethically... churches that are pointing to the great mystery and creating an awareness that all things are sacred. We need churches that are restorative cells in society (Clement). ... That engage us at the level of heart and mind and soul to live joyfully in the world. We need religion that leads us to reverence (a thought from Helminski).

We need those kinds of churches. And we need to be a part of them... but so many are not. And there is a sadness for all of us who have found religion lacking... and punted. It was suppose to help us put things together, that's literally what the word means. **To put back together**, that's what the church was supposed to do for us... but maybe it didn't.

Or maybe no one ever introduced us...

Or maybe our mind has been too closed to honestly search...

Or we just got tired of being on too many committees...

And hearing the same ole' thing.

So... there are many... needing what the church can be who are wandering through the forest... with no path to walk. And I say, **Woe... woe to them...** not with any sense of anger or wrath... but with sadness and compassion.

Woe to those... who will not know the lifting of their spirit and consciousness each week by worshipping the Source of All that is.

Woe to those... who do not hear the gospel and are not reminded of how much they are loved and how good they can be.

Woe to those... who must only search their own small experience for ultimate truth... and whose only source of identity lies in performance and possession and pleasure.

Woe to those... whose children are not cradled and taught and led by a community to see the world and themselves as wonderfully sacred.

Woe to those... who are never challenged by God's Word to mend their lives or respond to a calling.

Woe to those... who do not know that there is so much to learn about knowing God and that there is a path to Christlikeness... to transformation.

Woe to those... who have no one to bring them casseroles or no one to whom they can say, "Will you pray for me."

We could go on and on. There are plenty of reasons for woe. And so too plenty of reasons for the church to be what Christ hoped it would be. I don't know what he saw... dreamed of... Did he really come to start a religion? ??????????

I think mostly he came to set us on a path... and... and to call us to be together on that path in a certain way. Humble... awake... loving... revering... fully alive. Jesus came for that... Christ cared about those things. And I pray we will too. Amen.

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