

Matthew 23:13-36 **Hallmarks of hypocrisy**

You will have noticed that hypocrisy is the big story in this week's news. One MP recently said that they had received more than 200 irate e-mails complaining about those now infamous and undeniable **parties in Number Ten**. And of course that alone is not hypocrisy. It is the fact of those "parties" - I'll at least put that in quote marks, because I'm not sure how many of them *might* fit under a heading of "drinks at the end of the working week", even if the news media have chosen to label them "parties" ... it's the fact of them happening at a time when national policy and law *coming from that very location* banned such gatherings.

We all recognise inconsistency and unfairness - even if we don't always recognise it rightly, and especially in ourselves. Hypocrisy, we all intuitively think, stinks to highest heaven. It is a word - and the kind of action - that we instinctively react very strongly against.

And, to judge by what Jesus says in this passage here in Matthew chapter 23, it incenses him, too. We should expect that, if Jesus himself embodies certain virtues. John tells us, remember, he was ...

... the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John 1:14)

... whereas hypocrisy is at its core *anti-grace* and *contrary to truth*. Jesus identifies a particular set of people who excelled in this awful characteristic - such that the word "Pharisee" nowadays is almost an alternative word for "hypocrite". And yet Jesus does not simply launch into a tirade of mounting fury against this particular batch of hypocrites. That word that introduces, over and over, these devastating accusations ...

"But woe to you, ..."

(Matthew 23:13)

... is not just a gleeful statement that "God will get you for that". It's an appeal, too, and a warning, of the devastating consequences if these people do not come to their senses and turn from their ways and attitudes. And "woe", I think we see by the end of the chapter, also has tones of grief and lament in it. In the section that we're going to zoom in on next week, you can see that Jesus is heart-broken by this state of affairs:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

(Matthew 23:37)

So folks, as we go through this long passage today, I think we need to guard our own hearts, too. We can become too much like Pharisees ourselves, savouring this denunciation of the original Pharisees, convinced of our own superiority. Folks, we should be like those disciples of Christ around the table when Jesus warned that one of that group would betray him, ...

And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?"

(Matthew 26:22)

As we gasp at the astoundingly appropriate cutting imagery that Jesus employs here, we mustn't revel in how comprehensively he verbally wipes the floor with them, or wonder at how incisively perfect his choice of words is. We must take a look inside ourselves, too, and allow the Holy Spirit to apply that same question to our souls. *Yes, that was them, Lord. They were like that. But am I, too? Am I myself far more of a Pharisee, deep down, than I care to admit or dare to consider?*

And rather than just look at this passage under the obvious seven headings, working through the woes, I'd like us to just pause and remember where we are in Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus says this, because that's also relevant here. But then I'd like us to consider the picture Jesus gives us a whole.

How do Pharisees ancient *and modern* behave and think? What are the big mistakes that they - or that could even be "we" - are making? Rather than just break this passage down into separate little discussions about how to do tithing or whether it's legitimate to use oaths nowadays, what does what Jesus says here about the Pharisees and their oaths and their tithes, and all of that, ... how does that warn us about faulty foundations that we could be building our lives upon, too?

Picking up the passage

The faulty foundations of the Pharisee

Negative or positive?

Rules or principles?

Submission or manipulation?

Appearance or reality?

Religion or righteousness?

- **Picking up the passage**

28 chapters in Matthew's account of Jesus' life. And the last *quarter* of that book deals with the last week leading up to the Cross and the Resurrection. Jesus is no longer the wandering rabbi doing miracles out in the backwaters up north in Galilee. He has come back - down on the map, but *up*, in Jewish thinking, to Jerusalem. The capital city. The place where the Temple was. The centre of the nation's religious life, and the centre of its political life, too.

And in Jerusalem Jesus is seen as a distinct threat. It's the week leading up to Passover, when things are most volatile. It's officially the Roman province of

Judea, but the Jewish people resented that subjugation. The Roman authorities would pounce on any political liberation movements, with consequences possible at the national level. I don't think I would have liked to live through a Lockdown instigated by the Romans if they were trying to suppress not a pandemic, but a revolution.

And yet it looks as if Jesus is set on a confrontation with the national leadership. Of all the most sensitive places he could go to, he comes to Jerusalem, and his entrance is acclaimed by enthusiastic crowds.

And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

(Matthew 21:9-11)

And of all the places he could go to in Jerusalem, he goes to the Temple. First of all, he drives out the money-changing racketeers who have set up their stalls there again:

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons.

(Matthew 21:12)

And then he starts speaking ... but is intercepted.

And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

(Matthew 21:23)

In the next couple of chapters Matthew records the interactions between Jesus and those chief priests and elders, and scribes and Pharisees who also pitched in. We hear some parables that are very pointed indeed, Jesus challenging his accusers about where this would all lead - and what that said about their hearts:

"Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.'"

(Matthew 21:37-38)

They try to trip Jesus up with all the toughest theological questions, as loaded as they could make them. *Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?* Stuff like that. And Jesus just **knocks the ball** back out of the park. They realise that they're on a stickier wicket than even England down under in the current Test Match series!

And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

(Matthew 22:46)

That's the point at which Matthew records these words from Jesus that we're looking at today:

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice."

(Matthew 23:1-3)

But among the crowds it seems that there were some scribes - the experts in the Jewish Law - and some Pharisees. And now, in front of the crowd(!), Jesus turns and speaks to *them*. To them *and* against them. Publicly.

Folks, you can see what is going to happen here. This has absolutely got to go incendiary. Those scribes and Pharisees are either going to finally be cut to the heart by what Jesus says, or they are going to go absolutely ballistic about things like *this* being spoken publicly against them. It is beyond merely the casually insulting. It is a total denunciation of everything that they stood for.

They would be totally outraged - and all the more so in that they cannot do a thing apart from blush and stutter as the master surgeon with a few slices of his verbal knife dissects publicly dissects their whole being, and shows that it is full of darkness.

Folks, this is what the Gospel does to people. It is what the Gospel did at one time to you and me - though we might have forgotten the force with which it hit us at the time. And people will find this kind of thing insulting. They will find it offensive. That's why the Gospel will always encounter persecution: people do not want to hear such embarrassing truth about themselves - and certainly not in public.

And it will mean we will very likely be nervous when we're sharing the Gospel with someone: eventually, it will hit on a raw nerve. It's relatively easy for me to say things from the front like this, but when it's on the one-to-one level it will mean risking that relationship as we do what people may well consider to be overstepping the mark.

So remember, even the one who was ...

... the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John 1:14)

... was rejected for sharing that grace and truth. It's probably relevant that this was Jesus' last opportunity to speak to these people, and therefore, humanly speaking, he has to risk it all on one last throw of the dice. There's no easy road back when you've said something like ...

“You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?”

(Matthew 23:33)

So don't we feel the pressure sometimes ramping up through life, if we're friends with someone - and we value that friendship - but there seems no interest in anything of the faith you have in Jesus. When do you finally risk it all by daring to say something? I'm not sure I have a good answer to that, and I'm pretty sure there is no *one* sure-fire answer. It calls for wisdom and sensitivity - to the Holy Spirit as well as to your friend.

I remember hearing that the wife of my college's chaplain was outraged when someone in the Christian Union asked her if she was a Christian. On reflection, I think it was a *fair* question, based on the things she didn't make any claim to believe. But even if it was a *fair* question, I'm not sure it was necessarily a *wise* question at that time. Though, on yet more reflection, I'm not sure, either, that I'd necessarily call it *unwise* either.

But that is not the real focus of this particular passage. We can see that “people” - here, the scribes and Pharisees - are obviously going to take offence at Jesus' accusations.

But what about *us*? What if Jesus' accusations are true of *us*? What if the slice of the scalpel shows a similar kind of darkness lingering within *us*? Folks, as we go through this passage today, are we going to take *offence*, or are we going to take *warning* ... if we find that that question ...

And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, “Is it I, Lord?”

(Matthew 26:22)

... has to be answered with a *yes*? Folks, are *their faulty foundations* also present within *our own* lives, the kind of thing that Jesus speaks about here?

- **Faulty foundations: negative or positive?**

And even if we're not working through these seven “woes” in systematic order, this is a good enough place to start.

“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.”

(Matthew 23:13)

I always thought that the phrase “**like a dog in a manger**” was a bit odd, but I think this is the kind of thing Jesus is talking about here. I'm presuming that it works in that a dog is not going to be inclined to eat the straw or whatever in a

manger, but the presence of a dog in a manger would also scare off sheep or cows or whatever *would* like to eat the stuff. So the dog gets no benefit from its location, and it prevents other animals from finding any benefit in it either. It is just the ultimate in negativity.

How does it fit with the people Jesus was speaking to? Pretty clearly *they* were rejecting Jesus' message for themselves. And that's really sad. But what is worse is that they worked to try to prevent others coming to Jesus. The translation of v13 is hard to nail down in English. The precise word that Matthew uses could not just mean "**would enter**", but could also be translated as "are starting to enter", or "are in the process of entering". They are not just trying to sterilise the soil, but cutting down any plants that are already at any stage of growth there.

And there certainly are some people around for whom faith in Jesus seems to be mainly about a whole lot of negatives.

Have you heard some people's approach to parenting? Mum and Dad notice the house is quiet ... so one turns to the other and says, *Find out **what the kids are doing** and make them stop!*

I remember being told that as parents, *Say yes to your children whenever you can* - the reason being that there will be so many times that you *need* to say no (moral, financial, practicality, fairness, all sorts of reasons), that saying Yes when you can is really necessary if you want to avoid giving a totally negative impression.

And I wonder if that doesn't apply as regards faith, too. It's coming onto our next point, too, saying this. There are times when we have to say *No*.

For the grace of God has appeared, ... training us to renounce ungodliness ...

(Titus 2:11-12)

But the Christian life is not about just saying No to all sorts of things. The same man who wrote *that* also wrote *this*:

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

(Romans 14:17)

There is nothing intrinsically noble about negativity.

Just in passing, you might notice that our ESV Bible skip straight from v13 to v15. The intervening verse that appears in the AV and probably a few others ...

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.

(Matthew 23:14(AV))

It certainly fits, with the very graphic and exaggerated word, “devour”, but it’s most likely imported from either Mark’s or Luke’s Gospel. And that means that we’ve only got seven “woes” here, which throws out the supposed balance between eight beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, and *eight* “woes” in these other versions. But I think the seven we’ve got are still plenty be getting along with. So, next point ...

- **Faulty foundations: rules or principles?**

A bit of business-speak for you. Back in my lab days, there was a push to measure the efficiency of the chemists in the labs. But they couldn’t work out just how. So they decided on a very simple rule. How many **chemical reactions** did we do per month? It didn’t matter whether you were working on hard chemistry which took a lot of time and effort for each reaction, or whether they were dead simple and you could do dozens in a day, they all counted the same.

But what could they do? Could you grade reactions by difficulty, and give a different score to easy, medium and difficult-level reactions? Who’s to say what counts as easy or difficult? And what even counts as a reaction? Sometimes you do one thing directly followed by another. Technically, that could be one or two ... or even more ... so who says how many you score for that one day’s work?

Eventually some kind of sense started to reimpose itself, though not after a lot of unhappy lab time for lots of my colleagues. And a bit of business wisdom started to surface: ***we need to measure what we value, rather than simply valuing what we can easily measure.***

But the Pharisees would have felt wonderfully at home in my lab in those few years. They *loved* hair-splitting rules. And Jesus gives us some examples of the kind of nonsense they got into, with oaths and with tithing. So they had fancy rules about whether oaths were binding or not.

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’”

(Matthew 23:16)

Now we’ve looked at the details of this one a couple of years back, in the Sermon on the Mount, and I don’t have time to repeat all of that this morning. But you can see where it leads. Not to a system of truth and dependability ... but to give a veneer of religious respectability to a web of deliberate evasion and deceit. If you know the rules of the game really well, you can run rings around anyone trying to pin you down to a commitment or statement they thought you were signing your name to. Technicalities and exception clauses rule. And honesty and integrity are thrown out of the window.

Or think about the rules for giving God one tenth of your garden produce. That could be meticulously adhered to. You can create a list of **tick boxes** for each herb, and savour not just their taste but the self-righteous satisfaction of ticking them off your list.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, ...”

(Matthew 23:23)

But what about what Jesus goes on to call **“the weightier matters of the law”** - things that can't be easily confined in tick boxes or determined ten percent of? What happens to **“justice and mercy and faithfulness”**? What about those things that you can't easily count or measure, but which have so much more value? Even as human beings we see the greater importance of things like this. The protestors in Australia are asking for *justice* for Djokovic, not 10% of the country's mint harvest delivered to his hotel room!

Folks, are you more bothered with rules that can be easily written down - skirts must be below the knee (girls), and hair above the collar (boys) - or for boys and girls of all ages to be people of honour and purity and integrity, things that you will never be able to devise a **lateral flow test** for?

If not, look at the absurd picture Jesus gives us, referring now to the food regulations the Pharisees also insisted upon. Gnats were unclean, and so you have to **sieve** your drinks in case you accidentally swallowed one by mistake. But ...

You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

(Matthew 23:24)

The camel, by the way, is also religiously unclean. But it's not a question of swallowing inadvertently, something you could not even know you'd done. Matthew uses a wonderful exaggerated word there. Not swallowing, but **gulping** it down.

Folks, could it be that we have simply set our radar to detect gnats? That we spend far too much time worrying about comparatively little trifles. And miss ... *what?* What counts as a camel, in this context? Perhaps we should think that through this afternoon and talk it through this evening.

- **Faulty foundations: submission or manipulation?**

And here's something which I think underlies the attitude Jesus is commenting on here with regard to rules. Not that he's supposed to be any religious paragon to look up to, it was Mark Twain who said something like this

It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand

I think he has hit on something there. And it is a question of our hearts. What happens when we come across something in the Bible which we do not like - for whatever reason? Do we let that shape us, or do we try to knock it into shape?

For the Pharisees, what the Bible said about oaths - individual commands or verses - and also the huge principle of truthfulness *because God is a God of truth* - were inconvenient. Instead of submitting to the Scriptures, they developed a system to manipulate it, to tame it, to subvert it - to make it say what they wanted it to say.

The technical term for this that you might have come across is *casuistry*, derived from the Latin word for “case” or “occurrence”. And you can see exactly the same kind of thing happening nowadays too. So many people consider themselves special cases - in which the standard rules don’t apply.

Folks, I’m not saying that we won’t sometimes find it really tricky to determine the most ethical way to proceed on a particular issue. Whether it’s ethically acceptable to have the Coronavirus vaccination, based on something to do with a questionable medical development some decades back, is or at least was a live issue in the States.

But for the vast majority of us, the vast majority of the time, it’s not a question of bits of the Bible we don’t understand, but bits that we do but just don’t like. We find it inconvenient. We claim it’s restrictive. We argue it’s for another age and another society. We’re different now. We have privileges and knowledge now that they didn’t have then. Or maybe it’s not us as a whole, it’s *me*: God has given *me* special assurance, I claim, that the normal Biblical rules about relationships, for example, don’t apply: I’m a special case.

But no, the question is much, much more, *will you bow before Jesus Christ as Lord*, or require him to be the servant of your preference or convenience? Will you submit to the Word of God, or will you try to subvert it to your own agenda?

- **Faulty foundations: appearance or reality?**

Passover time, and the local cemetery would have been repainted. Of all the times of the year, people must not be permitted to become ceremonially unclean by bumping into a tomb in the dark. Slap on the **whitewash**, good and thick!

And follow all those ceremonial rules about eating. Make sure the crockery is properly cleaned where you will touch it ... on the outside. But what about the contents ... the food you’re about to eat? Or what about the contents of those tombs - does the whitewash on the outside purify the corruption within?

Folks, Jesus is talking about people here, not pottery. No literal vessel can contain the things he goes on to speak about.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.”

(Matthew 23:25)

It’s even more obvious when it comes to those tombs. Paint does not equal actual purity.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

(Matthew 23:27-28)

Folks, it is all so possible that we do things - especially religious things - for sake of show only. We’ve read together today our Church Covenant. Are those just good words, or are those promises to one another that we are really committing ourselves to deliver on? Are we going to show our love for Jesus Christ by loving the people *he* loves, in practice, in deed, and not just in word alone. As we will read on and hear Jesus say in a parable only a couple of chapters further on,

“And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”

(Matthew 25:40)

Folks, are we like what they say beauty is? *Skin deep* only. Are we about appearances or a deeper-seated reality?

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, ...

(1 Peter 1:22)

Which, I guess, could just boil down to this last point.

- **Faulty foundations: religion or righteousness?**

Look at that awful second “woe” here. What are we really about? If we teach someone to be like us, do we actually damn them? Are we talking to them about simply religion - man’s vain attempts to reach God and tame him - or

... the righteousness that comes by faith.

(Hebrews 11:7)

Jesus’ words to the Pharisees are awful. It must have shocked them to their core.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”

(Matthew 23:15)

All this zeal ... in the cause of death. All this time, all this effort, all this expense ... to promote mere religion - and to delude ourselves:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, ...”

(Matthew 23:29)

But we can still refuse to come to the one who is speaking, not a monument to the righteous people of the past, but the one who can become *our* righteousness.

... Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ...

(1 Corinthians 1:30)

Folks, let us learn from these hallmarks of hypocrisy that the Great Physician has diagnosed and laid bare for us to see. And should we fear that there is still some taint of these infections in ourselves ... if we find ourselves on the wrong side of the questions ...

Negative or positive?
Rules or principles?
Submission or manipulation?
Appearance or reality?
Religion or righteousness?

... come again to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Plant your feet again on the one who is our Rock, and our Redeemer.