



“SMUG” – Matthew 23
 by **Pastor Tim Dodson**
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Mathew 23 Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. "Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. "For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. "But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge

the borders of their garments. "They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, "greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' "But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. "And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. "But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. "And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.' "Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? "And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.' "Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? "Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. "He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. "And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. "Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. "Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. "Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, "and say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.' "Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt. "Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? "Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, "that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. "Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! "See! Your house is left to you desolate; "for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!'"

One of the most commonly weaponized passages in scripture is Matthew 7:1... "Judge not lest you be judged." Even the most biblically illiterate pagan seem to be privy to that verse. They may despise the Bible, reject Jesus Christ, and be a slave to their flesh and Satan, but they know that verse! It's perceived as the "get out jail free" card. The "slam dunk" of the underworld. The "ok, and you can shut up now..." period at the end of the sentence and thus the end of the discussion.

Certainly I expect such torture of scripture and theology in general from such folks. However, it seems "our side" can be just as cocky most of the time. This chapter before us is commonly spoken of as the "7 Woes." 7 "woes" that are given against the "high and the mighty." The "religiously arrogant." The smug individual who has "arrived" at the self-declared finish line of religious status. Now the word "woe" has greatly lost its impact in our current culture of overuse and social torture of the vernacular. But when it was spoken by Jesus you can be sure **He** meant it with a punch! When the word woe was used in scripture, there was the idea of impending doom, condemnation and/or the wrath of God.

The word "woe" is often used to express such a level of grief, regret, or distress... such a great affliction or trouble, that an escape would at least *seem* impossible! Thus, sometimes a woe is almost beyond description and therefore "woe" may be the only thing we can say to express the situation.

Jesus had long attempted to alter the life course of these pious religious folks, but without much effect. There was such a level of hardening of the hearts and “blaspheming of the Spirit” that it seemed that they all were long past the cut off road. Long past the “point of no return.” So now it seems Jesus would take His case straight to the people.

While this scenario before us was a reality in the day of Christ, we know that things haven’t changed over the past 2000 years. There remains a real and significant number of these folks today and it seems little can be done to deter their scorched earth practices. Certainly the “Pharisees” are still amongst us. They have come to *just enough* knowledge of scripture that they can be moderately dangerous in certain circles of ignorance or amongst those seeking a big brother, have an ax to grind or desire a super-hero to admire and follow.

There has always been and no doubt will always be plenty of “sons-of-thunder” who will want to “*call down fire from heaven*” because they felt slighted or those who will brag like Peter “*I will never deny you Lord!*” (or church...or *pastor*, for there have been plenty of those!) Those with a self-righteous bravado and elitist swagger saying as Elijah “*no one else follows God like me...*”

Jesus had little time for these individuals. Luke 16:10 warns “*If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won’t be honest with greater responsibilities.*” These had *not* been “faithful in the little things” and eventually they would lose even what they had. Ultimately they would squander their positions, and would as be rejected as Jerusalem burned to the ground just a few short years later and the temple along with it.

Jesus here in this passage, as well as elsewhere in the gospel accounts, exposed the hypocrisy of the actions of such folks. It was not done in a spirit of vindictiveness, but rather it seemed it was sad resignation of their entrenched hearts. For the sake of the people, He would turn the light on. The scribes and Pharisees were doing social good works, but they were invariably doing so so people could see them. Their clothes may have *begun* with righteous design, but soon they were worn to simply imply status and denote prestige. Our generation...or at least the one recently past, would wear suits and ties to church...*not out of respect most often*, but out of religious status and church culture. We would give money and get a plaque with our name on it to mount below the stain glass window we financed or on the pew which was purchased. Even now there are folks from time to time that we have to reject their financial gift to the church because they need people to know about it. It isn’t enough to just put the money in the box in the back, they need to make a point of passing it to the church with pomp and parade. They need people to know about it. And that is just never going to happen here.

One thing that has been a stark reality in 25 years of pastoral ministry is that there is no greater sin enemy than that of pride. Pride is the most destructive cancer of the heart and mind, and it fuels every other sin we commit. And as the old saying goes...*in the middle of pride is “I”*. Without a doubt it has taken more people out of this church and out of faith than all other issues combined. No one leaves the church because of something that happened to someone else. They leave because they believe they personally were disrespected in some manner or failed to receive something they felt they were due: a position, or a public accolade, credit for something, or a pastoral or elder badge.

Jesus was uncompromising in this matter. He was adamant that he would “*share His glory with no one.*” (Isaiah 42:8) He says in this chapter not to call anyone “Rabbi”...or “*great one, master.*” He says to call no man “*father*”...for we have but one and that is God Jehovah. This is not meant to negate the authority that exists within the church as well as outside in the secular government. Such is not to be abandoned, abolished or ignored. Scripture itself clearly establishes such authority. (1 Thess. 5:12, 13; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17) But this rather was an issue of pompous titles that were meant to garner illicit esteem and demand unearned respect from others. It is that which we are to avoid and such is not to be found within the greater church, or the local one.

Verse 11 covers it all saying "...*he who is greatest among you shall be your servant.*" And such is a beautifully positive initiative. Once again we are reminded that the greatest position within the body of Christ is that of "servant." Thus seeking such a place in the church and in the world should be the greatest aspiration of all those who count themselves a part of the body of Christ and want to be used for His glory. Verse 12 says "*And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*" Those who seek that humility are the ones that God uses. Those that do not, *according to scripture*, will be humbled by God.

One of few benefits of growing older is that the years have a way of confirming scripture! I have witnessed those who consistently took the high road of moral standing and took the front of the line to lead others up the winding trail of spiritual living only to 'tap out' on a tantrum because things didn't go down in favor of their plan and what they felt they deserved.

Verse 13 opens with the first of what will be eight "woes." These eight warnings stand in stark contrast to the eight beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-11. This passage and its opposite in Matthew, are the blatant realities of two lives, both of which dwell in the knowledge of the true and living God. Yet they differ in their reactions to that truth, and thus receive in themselves a vastly different quality of life.

Jesus condemns not only the *actions* of such a life, but literally condemns the *individual from whom they come*. He does so not because He was void of love for these men, but rather because they were, more than anyone, *without excuse*. They knew better. *WE* know better! Everyone knew and knows the truth, and we yet so often refuse to be humbled by it.

Jesus bluntly calls them hypocrites. Literally, *play-actors*. They were posers who were playing at the game of religion, yet never knew God personally, nor did they respond to His directions and commands. They would literally shut up the Kingdom of Heaven by their actions. While pretending to be guides to the blind, they would ultimately deter others from the truth and would fail even to come into the Kingdom themselves.

Notice that "kingdom" was not something future, but something that was present for them and us even now. Despite their overt religious actions, these were the ones to whom Jesus would later say, "*depart from me I never knew you.*"

Sadly, it is often these folks who are the greatest deterrent to the gospel and/or discipleship. It seems that these individuals are not necessarily purposing in their hearts or scheming to work evil, but they have allowed compromise, pride, and self to push out the Holy Spirit, and now are just going through the motions of religion. Christ was indeed expressing anger, but also sorrow. The word "woe" has in it both the idea of wrath *and* pity. It no doubt broke His heart to have to condemn these individuals, but ultimately He was left with no other choice if He was to truly be a good shepherd.

Throughout this passage, Jesus uses the scathing term "hypocrite." This is the person who never gets around to looking at himself and his own heart, and would bristle with indignation at such a suggestion, all the while shooting back, "*ya... you need to take a look at yourself!*" Sadly, there are seemingly no limits to the length and depth an individual will go once he begins to harden his heart. It is a road that will lead down a trail that is littered with the lives of the individuals who got caught up in that individual's hatred and pride. This is because such pied pipers are never satisfied with their rebellion alone, but strike out to recruit the vulnerable, the spiritually immature, and the disgruntled; all to legitimize their actions. Jesus says in verse 15 that such folks will "...*cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell (as themselves)!*" They will take out the weakest of folks, even the likes of widows, while feigning a super-holy stance.

It seems inevitably so important to these individuals to recruit to their cause. In order to lend credence to their position, these that Jesus Himself calls hypocrites will go to great lengths to indoctrinate any and all that they might find and exploit for their cause. And today we have new tools of social media to see it happen! Lord knows they seek to find a bunker or a bush in which to hide while they lob verbal grenades into the gathering of saints. Never do they do so face to face.

Note the term is "*proselyte*." This is someone who held a set of beliefs, but were convinced to believe otherwise. These folks, which Jesus so radically condemns, were not in the business of winning new souls, nor were they interested in building others up in the realm of discipleship. The whole of their existence, whether they know it or not, is to empower their prideful and often disgruntled position. The bystanders thus become pawns in a religious power struggle, channeling 2 Timothy 4:3-4 "*For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.*"

This passage tells us that one of the great ploys that these hypocrites utilize is the "re-writing" of Scripture. They twist and shout, all in attempt to tell you that what God said He didn't really mean, what Scripture instructs is misinterpreted, that the plain words are misunderstood, and what is *really* meant is what *they* believe! Its revisionist Bible interpretation, and their forms and manifestations are innumerable.

Verse 33 "Snakes! Sons of vipers! How will you escape the judgment of hell?" Why would Jesus say such heavy things? Where is our Jesus "meek and mild?" Whether we accept it or not, Jesus said these things because He loved them, and He loved the people that were being adversely affected by their actions. Love, *real love*, must be a *righteous, truthful and holy love*. Love built upon tolerance to sin is not godly love! And it's not honest love! Love will not stand back and watch people go to hell for the sake of protecting fragile emotions and delicate religious protocols. Luke's account of this event tells us that Jesus *wept* over this issue, and no doubt many men of God have joined Him throughout the ages as they have tasted just a bit of such rebellion and hatred in their own circle.

In verse 38 Jesus says "*See! Your house is left to you desolate...*" I have watched those today who stand in such a circumstance, back themselves into such a place of desolation. Family and friends, long time *brothers and sisters*, all get pushed away from their lives and away from the self-righteous religious "box" into which they have exiled themselves. In the end, they are left "desolate." Empty, lonely, and humbled. Another wasted life, all at their own hands. Slow and deliberate spiritual suicide. This is the end result of unchecked pride.

James 4:6 tells us that "*God gives grace to the humble.*" And Proverbs 22:4 says that "*The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life.*" All of us who serve God need to regularly seek our motives behind doing so. Generally, the areas we serve in are a good indication as to what we think of ourselves. Many folks only show up when they can be on stage, be the boss, or receive human accolades for their work.

1 Peter 5:6 lays the responsibility of such a state squarely on our backs, saying "*Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you...*" Such requires an honest and concerted undertaking on our part to actually *take* the humble road and place others ahead of us. Colossians 3:12 says "**Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, *humility*, meekness, and patience...**" **Humility**. We must make it a **practice** of life. Self-evaluation is a very real scriptural ideal, and unless it is regularly practiced we are just as apt to be overcome by the spirit of pride that has been in us from the garden.

2 Chronicles 7:14 – "***If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.***"

“If...”