

**Eight Woes of the Religious Leaders**  
**Matthew 23:13—33**

Jesus has been in the Temple interacting with the religious leaders in full view of the great crowd of people who congregate there each day. After Jesus handily answers each question given to Him by the leaders, to the astonishment of the crowd, He gives them a question they were not able to answer concerning the Messiah. How can the Messiah be both from David as his son and above David as God? It was with this that the leaders quit asking any more entrapping questions. At this point Jesus turns to the crowd to warn them of the evil, hypocritical leaders of Israel.

**The woes**

A woe in Scripture is a great condemnation. Woe is pronounced upon the man who betrayed Jesus (Luke 22:22). Woe is also pronounced against the cities who rejected Jesus as Messiah (Luke 10:13). Woe was pronounced in Revelation 12:12 upon the inhabitation of the earth when Satan was cast out of heaven to the earth. The specific woe that will beset them can be physical or spiritual. In this passage, Jesus is condemning the scribes and Pharisees for their evil hearts and in so doing is warning the people that they shouldn't be following their lead.

**Woe 1 (verse 13)**

The scribes and Pharisees condemn themselves for keeping people away from the Kingdom of Heaven. Their actions and teachings lead people down the wrong path away from eternal life. The Pharisees turn away even those who are on the right path and are set to enter.

As a side note, this verse seems to contradict what many teach about election. If the scribes and Pharisees are able to “shut off the kingdom of heaven from people” then they are keeping people from attaining eternal life. If people were truly elect to be saved then nothing done by these temple leaders could turn people away from salvation.

**Woe 2 (verse 14)**

These leaders were not only extremely pious but were also moneygrubbers. They would plot how they might make themselves richer by using their religious position. They would take money that was to be used by their elderly parents, dedicate it to God (the temple) and then take it for themselves thinking they were now not obligated to take care of family members (Mark 7:9—13). In this verse, Jesus accuses them of stealing widow's houses, perhaps in a similar manner as they were doing with their parent's money.

While stealing family money in the name of God, these Pharisees were impressing the people publically with their long, eloquent prayers. Since they were so overtly sanctimonious while enriching their coffers with assets from those who were struggling to survive, Jesus says their condemnation will be greater. Obviously, if they will see greater punishment then there must be different degrees of punishment in hell. Luke 12:42—48 probably is the clearest indication that those who knew right from wrong will be held more accountable for their disobedience (see also John 9:41; 15:22, 24).

**Woe 3 (verse 15)**

These religious leaders should have been able to identify Jesus Christ as their Messiah and then they were to announce Him to all of Israel. Instead they were out converting people to their way of thinking. Each sect (Pharisee, Sadducee, scribe) stayed busy recruiting the best and the brightest to join their “team.” These new recruits were then taught to be even more self-righteous than their teachers.

**Woe 4 (verses 16—22)**

This whole section emphasizes the importance that money played in the lives of these religious leaders. They were consumed by the means of acquiring wealth. These were probably the people James had in mind

as he wrote about the evils of wealth. James praises the humble and the poor man while blasting the rich and puffed up person. When James 2:1—6 speaks of the person dressed in fine cloths and seated in the best seats it seems he was thinking about these religious leaders (Matthew 23:5—7).

**Woe 5 (verses 23—24)**

These leaders were so obsessed with getting the people to obey the minutia of the Law that they overlooked the importance of the Law. The spirit of the Law was to make sure people were treated justly, were shown mercy and became faithful followers of God. The tablets of stone were originally placed in the Ark of the Covenant. This Ark was covered by the mercy seat so-called because it represented God's mercy. If God's mercy didn't stand between the Law and the people they all would have been condemned because they all broke the Law. The Pharisees did not interpret the Law in a merciful way. God does allow for the Law to be broken if necessary. When David and his small band of soldiers ate the shewbread they were not condemned for doing so even though it was unlawful for anyone but the priests to eat (Leviticus 24:5—9). In this case David was allowed to eat this bread for survival. The Law had some flexibility allowing for man to be above the Law instead of under it. This is something the Pharisees needed to learn.

**Woe 6 (verses 25—26)**

The hypocritical nature of the religious leaders was evident to Jesus because He was able to compare what they were doing externally with the condition of their heart. The inside and outside did not match up. This sixth woe is directed to these leaders because they look good on the outside with all their pompous acts, fooling the people into thinking they were godly, men but inside were unclean and therefore unusable. A dish that is clean on the outside but filthy on the inside is completely non-serviceable.

**Woe 7 (verses 27—28)**

Similar to woe six, this seventh woe is stated more severely than the last one. Woe six compares the scribes and Pharisees to dirty cups while this one equates them to tombs—clean on the outside but inwardly they were dead, corrupt and putrid devoid of any righteousness. Spiritually they were completely dead with no chance for revival other than through Jesus Christ. This was brought out when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. This was a picture of Israel unable to do anything on her own and therefore in need of a Savior. If only the religious leaders could have understood this.

**Woe 8 (verses 29—33)**

This is the greatest condemnation against the religious leaders. They proudly proclaimed that they would not have killed the prophets as their fathers had done while honoring the dead prophets with ornate tombs. They deceived even themselves when they bragged how they would not have killed the prophets while they already stood by and watched as John the Baptist was killed and they were already plotting to kill Jesus. They would soon (in about 18 months) stone Stephen to death along with James and probably others. They were even guiltier of murdering the prophets than their fathers because they didn't even recognize their own Messiah when He came personally to them.

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There seems to be an interesting correlation when the blessings promised to the righteous in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) and the woes pronounced on the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23) are contrasted. We can see how out of touch these leaders were with what God wanted.

<b>Beatitudes to the righteous</b>	<b>Woes to the scribes and Pharisees</b>
The poor in spirit will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.	They hinder people from going into the Kingdom of Heaven.
Those who mourn will be comforted.	They are the cause of mourning causing misery instead of relief.
The meek will inherit the earth.	They turn people away from the earthly inheritance promised to those who believe.
Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will be satisfied.	They hunger and thirst after earthly possessions and power. They are never satisfied.
Those who are merciful will be shown mercy.	They are so caught up in the minutia of the Law that they fail to faithfully show justice, mercy.
Those who are pure in heart will see God.	Their hearts are unclean and unusable.
The peacemakers will be called sons of God.	They are inwardly lawless, using their power and authority against the people to their own advantage.
Those who are persecuted for righteousness will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven	They were the ones responsible for the persecution of the prophets.