

Good Intentions, Wrong Direction

The 7 Woes series

by Chris Famisaran

Well, good morning, everybody. How are you all doing? Awesome. Let's go ahead and get started.

Let's pray, gracious Lord, as we begin a new series on the seven woes found in Matthew 23. Lead and guide us. Help us, Lord, to open our minds. Help us as we go through these challenging passages in Jesus name. Amen.

All right, well, Do you hear something? Yeah. Oh, my. All right, well, we'll fight against the lawnmower. So one of the things that Bill and I talked about, you know, we plan our sermon series roughly around August. Hopefully we're done by September, maybe creep into October. We thought. I thought, what if we talked about some of the difficult sayings of Jesus? And there's a particular passage in Matthew 23 where you look at Matthew 23 and you see the caricature of Jesus that just doesn't seem like it would normally be Jesus, because Jesus is... He gets upset. I will say He's not upset. He has righteous indignation against the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. And I think, truly, I don't think all Pharisees and teachers of the law were horrible. There were definitely some instigators. I think there were some who were actually very sincere, like Nicodemus and the one who said, hey, you know what, if this guy really is a messiah and we're working against God, is that a good idea? So obviously it's not. And I think they had, I think some of them, for sure, they had good intentions. But the end state was not so good. Good intentions, wrong direction.

How many of you have maybe you have a device, or in my particular case, my computer. I saw that there was an update, and I thought, that is great. So I clicked update. And about the next day, it finally updated. And I thought, yes, what kind of new features do I get to use now? I sat down and wouldn't, you know, when you update, it was working worse and it was not acting properly. And accordingly, as was promised, the delivered product was vexing. And then I thought, what if I put all of my stuff into the cloud so I have less stuff. I

have more storage on my computer? I realized I didn't like that because it was even slower. And when I tried to reverse it, my computer literally has never been the same, and I just don't want to deal with it anymore. So it works, but it doesn't work as efficiently as it could. And that. That's vexing. That's struggling. Because what was supposed to be good, I had good intentions. Maybe the computer industry had good intentions, but what they sent me and I uploaded to my computer left me, as one particular actor said, unsatisfied.

Now, to understand where we're going to go in Matthew 23, we have to kind of understand a little bit of context. The prior chapter, right before Matthew 23, Jesus is talking to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, and he asks them a question of who, whose son is the Messiah? And he refers to David. But how could the Messiah be the son of David? But then the Messiah is also God, and ultimately he stumps them. Go back, read and see what you think. After that point, they stop questioning Jesus. But then Jesus follows up with some other questions. So let's go to Matthew 23, Matthew 23, starting at verse 1, Matthew 23, verse 1.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ²“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. ³So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

⁵“Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.

⁸“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah.

So what is Jesus basically pointing out here? Be mindful, but don't follow the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, because essentially, how does Jesus describe them? What's one word that you would describe them? Oh, come

on. You know. Starts with an H. Hypocrites. All right, he calls them hypocrites, essentially.

Then he says in verse 11. Okay, verse 11, the greatest among you will be what? Your servants. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. In his description of the Pharisees, did he describe them as being pious and humble and thinking of others? Quite the opposite. They're looking for the best seats. They love Being called rabbi because it makes their ego feel better.

And then he goes on, then he ramps everything up. So actually, wait, before that. So Lesson learned. Verses 11 and 12 highlight the fact that faith begins with humility. Okay? Faith begins with humility. And unfortunately, the Pharisees and the teachers of law lack some humility. And to be fair, for the teachers of law and the Pharisees, okay, this is one thing that I have learned, though.

You are what you are taught and modeled in many ways, right? You learn from what you were taught by your mentors, your teachers, your parents, whoever. And generally you mimic that. But then does that mean we just have to accept everything that they say? Or are you allowed to question? You should be able to ask questions. And it starts with what humility to recognize. You know what? I don't necessarily know everything. Maybe I should learn or maybe I should be humble. Maybe I should listen more than speak. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you know, they had a PhD level of their education, okay, In a sense, so they had dedicated their whole lives to being a Pharisee or a teacher of the law. That's all they did. And as you look through Scripture and everything, things started to get added. And ultimately they were a stumbling block to the people. As we're going to read, they became gatekeepers to people and could not recognize who the Messiah was.

So in verse 13, it says,

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

And essentially their gatekeeping. Why? Because in some ways, I think that they were. They were doing what they'd been taught, but they could not recognize who the Son of Man was, who the Messiah was. And if they'd taken time to think for themselves, just maybe, just maybe, they could have recognized Jesus for who he is. But that would go against the grain. But sometimes you don't outsource your faith. You don't just take everything with everything. Everything I teach you. Even Bill mentioned it. Like it's okay to ask us questions or even question us. I don't want you to just take everything and just apply. I want you to think about it, wrestle with it, look through the scriptures.

Somebody wrote. I don't know who it was, but it said, when we're willing to change our minds, it's not because we failed. It's because we've learned. And that's how God grows us. Many of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, they stuck to what they knew, what was comfortable. But in their thought process, they couldn't think beyond. They couldn't recognize that who was standing before them was the son of God.

Okay, *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.”*

They essentially had become gatekeepers. They prevented the people from being able to enter and get close to and know God. We think. Is there a classic example of gatekeeping in the Scriptures? How about when Jesus got upset and he went into the temple, what did he do? He flipped the tables and ran everybody out. Why? Because they've been overcharging. They've been extorting people who had traveled far. Oh, your sacrifice is not good enough, but we have this here, and you're going to pay a lot more.

Or maybe people who hadn't been able to even travel with their animals, who were there to sacrifice, they would simply just say, here it is. This is what you're charged. They were limiting people's ability to worship or to receive redemption from God. So the question that I sometimes ask myself, am I a gatekeeper? Do I place my expectations on others and am not living accordingly? Scary thought. And I'll be honest, I have. I have done that.

The other thing that we see here, verse 15. Okay. *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.”*

What's another way of saying that you know, in your own zeal, in your own desire to try, to try to help bring somebody to God, you actually send them on the path of they're so zealous that it's even worse beforehand. And that's what Jesus is actually upset about. He's upset that they're not only gatekeeping, but they're turning people who are. Who are overzealous and actually preventing people to be able to see and understand who God is. The Pharisees, they had no grounding in their faith.

For instance, fire without a foundation leaves only damage behind. Fire, can you control it? You can control it to a degree if you're all there. But as we've experienced recently, fires, were they out of control? Absolutely. There was no way to stop them. The only way was just to wait it out. Eventually, hopefully, the weather would change and shift. As hard as the fire crews worked, the fires decided where it would go. And without a strong foundation, only damage will occur.

One of the challenges that I think that I see is the Pharisees, in their minds were thinking, this is how you need to live. But what they were teaching was a burden to the people. It was heavy and oppressive. They were very legalistic. And I think even too, even, even as an Adventist church, unfortunately, now I'm not saying Downey is legalistic, but as a church, even before, like, even before in our early church heritage, up until 1888, I think people truly loved Jesus. But what was the focus? The focus was on the law. And in 1888, there was a conference, a general conference session at Jones. And I think E.J. Wagoner advocated that rather than focusing so much on the law, let's focus on what Jesus and this, believe it or not, okay, you would think, well, duh. But in that time, they were being called to be fired. They were slandered and all. They said, look, why are we focusing on this when it's impossible? We just went through the book of what Galatians. Much of their argument was the fact that, do we serve the law or do we help to understand that what was the purpose of the law? And ultimately we need to follow Jesus more than anything. Somebody stood up and said, this is the thing that I've been trying to teach you all for so many years.

Unfortunately, though, does culture change overnight? No. Through the church. Even still, okay, now I'm not saying that those who are very fervent in their faith in the ways that they're wrong. It's just that the most effective way of being able to bring people to God.

Now, my observation. Okay, this is my observation. I'm not saying it's truth. I think that there was a fundamental shift around maybe the 90s. And I've read things where it was very intentional that what do we need to do? We need to focus on Jesus. And I think that's. Well, that's indicative here, of course, here in this church. But the tenor of the church has changed over time. We haven't always been so Jesus loving. We've been very harsh. We've gatekept people out of the faith and we've land. I think we put unfair expectations, not only from the pastor, but even as fellow believers on, well, you're not doing this. You're not doing this right. You're Right? No, you're wrong. And we put unfair expectations. And ultimately, the people who are coming to church who are trying to learn more about Jesus, why would they want to stay around if they never measure up, or they don't believe, or they don't have enough faith when life hits them hard?

We've been known to be about the truth. And I believe that Adventism has a beautiful, beautiful message. But I won't say that we have the only message. I think that God still can teach us. I don't think everything has been discovered. Why are we trying to limit God?

So going back, we have to have humility how we lead, When as believers, we have to be able to ultimately lead Jesus and help open doors that are already closed. We have to help show them the way. And how do we do that? We have to have relationships.

I was talking to one of our family members here at the church, and I won't say this individual's name because I don't have permission. But in our conversation, a wonderful conversation that we had was it takes more than knowing you have to have relationships because you can teach somebody and tell somebody about Jesus. But if we don't have a healthy relationship and a home base, why would they want to stick around? Or how can they grow?

We're called to help lead people, show people the love of Jesus. Not to berate them, not to tell them that they're wrong or they're not good enough.

So as you move forward, what does that mean? We have to listen. We have to meet where people are, and we have to meet people. Maybe they're babies in the face, where they're going to eat mush and baby food level gospel. And then eventually they can learn how to eat carrots or filet mignon, whatever it is. You're not gonna feed the baby filet mignon, right? Hypothetically.

Hypothetically. You know what I mean? Because there are some things in the faith that we're gonna chew on, and one of these passages is gonna be a real difficult carrot you might have to chew on a little bit. Many of, you know, my dog and Leisa fed him carrots, and he took a while to eat those carrots, but once he was done eating those carrots, he was very happy. Sometimes you have to chew and you have to wrestle on things. But the other thing, too is, why go it alone? We're here to help each other, encourage one another. Not to keep people out, but to bring people in. Okay?

Jesus says, I am the gate. And he Opens the gate that others may come in. Am I a barrier to the Gospel? And if so, where can I grow and change? I want you to reflect on this. Am I a barrier to the Gospel? And if so, where can I grow and where can I change?

Now, earlier in Sabbath school, we read a passage that I want to actually reread here again, I want to go to Luke 18. Let's go to Luke 18, starting at verse nine. And I think that this is a posture that we can learn from Luke 18, verse 9. There's a parable I preached on, but I want to revisit it. Luke 18. You all there? Okay.

To some who are confident of their own righteousness and look down on everyone else, Jesus told them this parable. Okay, pause.

The way that Jesus described, were they confident in their own ways of righteousness? The Pharisees, yes. Okay, verse 10. *Two men went up to the temple to pray. A Pharisee.*

And the other. What? A tax collector. Okay. And for context, those of you maybe who've never heard this story, a tax collector was a Jewish, but had basically, generally. But had also been asked perhaps, maybe forced by the Roman Empire to go and collect taxes. They were not appreciated. In fact,

they were considered sinners. They may have been part of the faith, but now. Nah, you're on the out. Okay. They considered them sinners. *The Pharisee stood by himself and he prayed. God, I thank you that I'm not like what other people.* All right. This person is very important, apparently. Robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of all I get. It's a decent resume. He gives a tenth of everything that he gets. He fasts twice. It's very noble, right? But then I find it funny that he says, he stands over and lords over the fact that good thing I'm not like that other person. Is that genuine? Is that loving? Is that kind? Is that Jesus way? No. Verse 13. *But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God have mercy on me, a sinner.*

One sentence prayer. That to me, as I was reading it, it blew me away because he recognized who he was. He wasn't perfect, but he was humble. He was trying. He was seeking God. On the flip side, on the other side was a man who thought he was better than everybody else and was entitled and expected much. He had a fancy resume, but he had no love in his heart. And when I look at Pharisees, and the tax collectors, I see that there was not a lot of love. Not all of them, but some of them. In many ways they represented who they were. I pray that Downey Church will be a place that is full of love, understanding and that we open the gates, not keep them shut.

So reflect in the gospel. Am I a barrier to the good news? And if so, where can I grow and change? This week I want you to go. I want you to open doors and walk people to Jesus. Okay? I want you to go out, I want you to pray for people, maybe ask them, hey, what? Can I pray for you? Or don't ask, just be praying for them. Walk alongside people in faith. You don't even have to say anything but just be there for them. Or if you do check on them, send them a note of encouragement. Is there anything I can do for you? Is there anything I can pray for? Love on them and lead with kindness. Just maybe you might change somebody's life.

Father in heaven. Lord, I think many of us have good intentions. Unfortunately though, that were fallible and leads to unintended consequences.

Help us Lord, not to misdirect, but to lead people to you. Give us wisdom, give us courage and help us to see and know how to share the good news with others. This is our prayer. In Jesus name, amen.

Grace and peace.