

When Zeal Goes Off The Rails

The 7 Woes series

by Bill Aumack

How many of you here are English as a second language? Man, like two thirds of us, maybe three fourths. I'm proud of you guys. English is a hard language to learn. I've been speaking in my whole life, haven't mastered it yet. Right? I mean.... I don't know why, but when the first people were inventing English, they put letters into words that you don't say, and they didn't put any marks on them to tell you that they were there. You're just not supposed to say them. Like the H in Hour. Nobody says Hour. It's half past the hour. And half has got an L in it. Nobody says half. It's half past the hour. Right? And B. Why is there a B in subtle? Nobody says subtle. And K's. There's Ks all over the place, right? We know. Something. We have a knot in our shoestrings. I've got a knife I'm going to cut the knot off with. Right? Some people like to knit and they make things. Who did this? Those people were just plain old evil, right? That's just mean.

And then some words have sounds with no letters to go with them. I came across the word soiree this week. You guys know soiree? It's a fancy word for a fancy party, right? We're gonna have a soiree. Big fancy party. So how do you spell that? What'd your teacher tell you? Sound it out. Right? Soiree. Okay. S, W. Wrong. There are no W in soiree. You know how you spell soiree? S, O, I, R, E, E. You know what that spells? Sorry! That's what that spells. Right? And you've seen people that wear a coat that's made of fake fur, right? What do we call that? It's faux. How do you spell foe? F, O, E. No, that's an enemy. You spell this kind of faux F. A, U, X. It's a faux fur coat. And then there's that Asian dish that's spelled pho. It's P, H, O, fo. But you say fu, right? It's impossible to learn this language.

And then they give you all these rules, like I before E, except after C. And this list of 20 words where it doesn't apply there. How are you supposed to get this?

Now imagine you knew somebody that was coming to America, didn't know much English. Would you put all of these rules into a big book and hand it to them and say, hey, here's the rules? Good Luck, buddy. Wouldn't work very well, would it? So we learned some conversational English, right? How to talk a little bit, how to say hello and goodbye and talk about the weather and order food at the restaurant and all these kinds of things, right? And we start learning the other things.

But there's rules in English that we don't even talk about. And nobody teaches you adjectives for the nouns, right? In English, we put the adjective before the noun. It's the red truck. Spanish, we'd say the truck red, right? But I don't know if Spanish does this. But in English, you've got to put those adjectives in a certain order. There's an order that comes with. And nobody ever teaches you that order. You just have to know and get it right. I took English every year I was in school. Nobody ever taught me that order, right? But I can't say the red Chevy little my truck. That's wrong, isn't it? And we all knew it was. Even the ESL people knew that that was wrong, right? If you don't say my little red Chevy truck, every other order is wrong. Does Spanish do that? You have to have them in order in Spanish, too. Is there a certain order? Not as strict, maybe.

Okay, so, you know, we have all these rules, and it's so hard. And this is exactly what's happening in Matthew 23. Open your Bibles with me to Matthew 23. Jesus is talking to some of the religious leaders of the time, and he's talking about some of the rules that they have and some of the things that they do. And there were so many rules. Nobody could keep all the rules. So they were always looking for loopholes and ways around them. Right? We don't ever do that. Right. Nobody ever looks for loopholes in the tax law or anything like that, right? So, But that's what they were doing. It was because it was so impossible to keep the rules. So let's start out. Matthew 23:16. It says,

Woe to you, blind guides. You say if anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing. But anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath, you blind fools. Which is greater, the gold or. Or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, if anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing, but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath. You blind men, which is greater, the gift or the altar? That makes the gift sacred.

Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. Anyone who swears by the temple, swears by it, and the one who dwells in it. And anyone who swears by heaven swears on God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

All right, let's take a little break there. There's a lot going on. Swearing was apparently a big part of their culture, but it's not cussing, right? Their swearing is like making an oath. It's like making a promise. It's a contract.

How do we make a contract? You sign along the dotted line, Right? And the bigger the contract, the more you have to sign. Right? If you go down and you want to apply for credit and buy a new couch, you've only got to sign one or two pieces of paper. You want to buy a car, there's 20 or 30 pieces of paper. You want to buy a house, they bring out a book, and you got to sign it like 55,000 times, right?

And so the swearing was how they made their contracts. And what the Pharisees had done was made this whole hierarchy of things that you could swear on, and some were more binding than others. So you could say if you swore on this, you could get out of it, but if you swore on this, you couldn't. Okay? And they would use that to try and trick people and take advantage of them, because they would try and use language that made it sound like they were swearing on this, but they were swearing on this, and then they would swindle people out of their money. Okay? And Jesus is not very thrilled with this behavior, Right?

Because **integrity matters to God**. Right? Integrity matters to God. All right, let's continue. Verse 24.

It says, Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites, you give a tenth of your spice, mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law, justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former. You blind guides, you strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel.

Now imagine if somebody brought me their car to work on their car. And I don't know why anybody would do that, but this person brings me their car to work on their car. Gonna leave it with me a couple days, and pretty quickly I

figure out I can't fix the car. I need one of those computer fancy do dabby things that the dealer has to diagnose it and see what's going on. And I don't have one. I can't fix it. So I'm sitting there looking at the car. I've got the car for a couple days. You know, the car's been around the block a few times. So I start cleaning it and I detail the inside. We shampoo the carpets and the seats and clean and vacuum. And it looks spiffy inside. You get out and close the door. Well, now the outside doesn't look so good. Right. So we wash that and clean it all up. Well, it still doesn't look great. So we get out the buffing compound and we buff the paint. We put wax on it. Tire black on the tires. We spend a lot of time on it. The car looks sharp. What's the person going to think when they come back? This is great. I'm always bringing my car to this place, right? Until you try and turn it on and it still doesn't work. Right? Because the car won't do car things. You can't get in it and drive around.

And that's kind of what the Pharisees were doing. They couldn't keep the whole law, and they knew they couldn't keep the whole law. They couldn't keep the most fundamental part of the law, so they just ignored it and kept the easy part of the law. Sounds like a plan. Instead of fixing it and dealing with the difficult thing, they just worked on the easy stuff.

They were zealous with the easy part. They were strict with the easy part. And here's Jesus coming with resurrection power, and he's doing all kinds of things for them, and he wants to give them life, spiritual life, where there's death. And they don't want it. Right? Because let's be honest, sometimes it's easier to stand against things than it is to actually do it. The Christian church does this sometimes.

We stand against something. We're against that. We're against that. Don't do that. We're boycotting those people. Don't know. Oh, can't. Don't know. That's a no. And we're against a lot of things. Does anybody know what we're for? We're just for being against stuff, right? Because that's easy. And it's easier to do that than it is to actually try and make a difference in all those things that we're saying. Don't get me wrong, there's a lot of things in society we should be against. There is, but what are we doing about it or are we just against it? Oh, I made a Facebook post saying, I don't like that. That make any difference? Okay.

And we think, well, I'm not like the Pharisees. You know the Pharisees, they were messing up. We don't do that. Okay, let's get personal. Seventh-day Adventist Church. We're all Seventh-day Adventists. We're thinking about becoming Seventh-day Adventists. That's why we're here today. What's in our name? Seventh Day. Right. What's important to us? Sabbath. Did you notice that didn't make Jesus list? Oh, I know, I know. What about the health message? That's important. We ought to tell the world about the health message. Yeah, that didn't make the list either. Oh, I know, I know. I got it, I got it. Evangelism. We're for evangelism, telling people, go and preach and make disciples. Daniel and Revelation, everybody should know about 2300 days and weird animals. Didn't make Jesus list either. Oh, no, that kind of hurts, doesn't it? The things that we consider most important, the things that we think you gotta do. These things don't make Jesus list. Maybe we're more like the Pharisees than we think we are.

Now, don't get me wrong. The Sabbath, the health message and evangelism are important, but they're not as important as the fundamentals of justice, mercy and faithfulness. If you were the best Sabbath keeper on the planet, absolute best Sabbath keeper on the planet, and you were not a just person, you were not a merciful person, you were not a faithful person, what good would it be? You'd be some crazy legalist. That's all you'd be.

So we got to get these things right. So we're going to take a minute and walk through these things. And before we do that, let's look at this. Let's go to Micah 6:6-8. Micah is Old Testament, about five or six books from. So this was not a new thing. Jesus is telling them. Man, I got to hurry up. All right, so this is not a new thing that Jesus is telling them. They've heard this before.

Micah 6:6-8. It says, with what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams? And with 10,000 rivers of oil shall I offer my firstborn for my transgressions, the fruit of my body, for the sin of my soul?

Verse 8. He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

The Pharisees knew this message, but they ignored it because it's hard. These things are hard. These things are hard. And they ignored it, right? The sacrificial system pleases God. God invented it. He's the one that told us to do it. It pleases God, but it doesn't please God. If you're not just merciful and faithful. If you don't have those things, it's just empty ritual, and it doesn't mean anything. Okay, you guys tracking with me?

We're gonna be looking at a lot of text today. We're not gonna turn to them all, but I've put them all in your notes. So you can go home today after your nap and check my work, okay? You always check my work. All right.

We're gonna talk about justice first. Justice. Sometimes we think about justice as a legal thing. You know, you go to court and you get justice, and justice was done. That's not the kind of justice we're talking about here. I think there's an aspect of that, but that's really not the kind we want to talk about here.

Psalms 11:17 says, *for the Lord is righteous, he loves justice. The upright will seek his face.* When the Bible says God is love, what does that mean for us? How should we respond to that? We should be loving, right? God wants us to be like he is. We're made in his image. So if God is loving, we're supposed to be what? Loving. If God is just. We're supposed to be just. If God is faithful, we're supposed to be. Okay, you're tracking at least a few of you over here. You know, this side I'm not so sure about. Okay, so this is a major theme in the Old Testament. We're aware of the Old Testament saying that God is faithful, God is holy, right? That's all in the Old Testament, but it's also all in there that God is just. **God loves justice, which means his justice requires justice from his people.** God requires justice from us.

Leviticus 19:15. *Do not pervert justice. Do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.*

This text is so difficult to follow. It seems easy. Be fair to everybody. But what do we like to do in our society? If somebody's downtrodden, what do we like to do? Lift them up, give them an advantage. But sometimes when we lift them up and give them an advantage, what do we have to do? We have to push somebody else down. Bible says, don't do that. Don't show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great. Be fair to everybody. Super hard to do.

Super hard to do. Okay? We like to lift people up, and we should. We should help the disadvantaged, but not at the expense of pushing somebody else down. We got to figure out how to help them up while we're fair to everybody else. Right? Tracking? This is not my idea. It's in the Bible, okay?

Isaiah talks about the injustice that the Israelites do, how they perverted justice, and a lot of things that happened to them because of their injustice. Proverbs 29:7 says, *the righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.*

Deuteronomy 27:19. *Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless, or the widow.*

Isaiah 1:17. *Learn to do right. Seek justice, defend the oppressed, take up the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.*

And we could go on and on and on. There's a whole bunch of text like this, okay? But again, we have to figure out how to help and defend the downtrodden, the oppressed, without oppressing somebody else. One big example we see right now in our society is everybody wants to tax the billionaires, right? Tax the billionaires, make them pay for everything. Is that fair? They should pay their fair share. They should pay their fair share. Everybody should pay their fair share, including the disadvantaged, right? We don't do that so well. We say, I'm going to charge you more, so I don't have to charge you anything. That's not what the Bible tells us to do. That's not what the Bible tells us. We've got to be fair to everybody. And that, I think, is a very, very fine line. It's hard to find and walk. Okay? But we are told to take care of everybody. All right? And we could do a whole sermon on that. But that's all we've got time for today.

The Pharisees, they kept the letter of the law, but they didn't keep the intent of the law. They didn't keep the purpose of the law. And that was the problem.

All right, next is mercy. And Jesus says mercy is important. And that's also what we call compassion, right? We need to be compassionate towards each other. If you are compassionate towards somebody, will you treat them unjustly? No. Those two kind of go together. If you're doing one, you're doing the other. It'll be fine.

I need some water. Does it feel like the air conditioner's off in here? Dying. Evan, do me a favor. Can you check the air conditioner?

But this comes with what Jesus says in Matthew 22. He says, Love your neighbor as yourself. If you're going to love your neighbor as yourself, you're going to treat them justly. You're going to be compassionate towards them, okay? Because **standing against sin is easy compared to loving people**. It's easy to say, I'm against this. Don't do that. Want to be against this. But how do we love people?

Now, there's one area where society has kind of done this, and that's people that have addictions. They get addicted to drugs or alcohol or something, right? And we say, we hate that they're addicted, but we still love that person. We still want good things to happen for them. We don't do that for anything else. If somebody's a murderer, you don't say, well, I'm sorry they murdered somebody, but I love that guy. I'm having to back up so he doesn't hurt me. Right? We got to figure out how to be against sin but still love the people. Again, this is difficult. Jesus said these were the hard things. These were the fundamental things of Christianity.

Okay, turn with me to First Corinthians 13, verses 1 to 3. We recognize First Corinthians 13 is a chapter that talks about what? Love. Right. 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but I do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. See, I'm against this, I'm against that, I'm against that. I'm boycotting them. We've heard people like that. They're just making noise.

Verse 2. If I have the gift of prophecy and I can fathom all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but I do not have love, I am what? Nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship, that I may boast, but I do not have love, I gain nothing.

How important is this? Very, very important. Right? If we stand against sin, but we have no love for the sinner, it's useless. And let's be honest. Sometimes the people that need our love and compassion are difficult to love. They need stuff, and it's going to cost you something. You see, it's easy to love your neighbor that has it all together. And he's never going to ask for a ride into

town because his car broke down. He's never going to ask to borrow some money because he can't make ends meet this month. He's never... right. That guy's easy to love, but some of those other folks. Boy, you got to put some skin on that one. That hurts a little bit, right? Are we willing to do that?

James 2:15 and 16. I love James. *Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, go in peace, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about their physical needs, what does he say?*

What good is it? See, people say, I'll pray for you, brother.

Sorry you're having a hard time. Sister put you on my prayer list right there.

What if he's cold? Why don't you just give him a coat? That'd be a lot more helpful than a prayer. Now, James is not speaking against spirituality. He's

saying spirituality without any works behind it is nothing. Okay? It's good to

pray for people. It's better to do something about it. God put us here to do

something, not just pray about it. There's times in our lives when we get so

stuck, so lost, so so out of everything, that there's nothing you can do but

pray. But I'll be honest with you, most of the time, that's not where we are.

Most of the time, there's something we could do about it. The person says, I

need a job. So they sit on their couch and doom scroll on Instagram. Why

don't you go look for a job? So there's things we can do. There's things we can

do to help our neighbors. We should be doing those things.

Too often the world perceives that we're really not interested in them. We

want to make converts, bring them into a system. Say, yay, Good little

Adventists. We don't really care about them that much.

James 1:27 says, *Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is to look after orphans and widows in their distress, to keep oneself from being polluted in the world.* There's something you got to do.

Hosea 6:6 says, *For I desire mercy, not what, not sacrifice.*

But wait. God wants our sacrifices. Yes, he does. He wants our mercy first.

Your sacrifice doesn't mean anything if you don't have mercy. It's just an empty tradition.

Last one, faithfulness. Now we have to be faithful. And Jesus was condemning them for being faithful because they were putting on a show of righteousness, but they weren't being faithful about it.

See, because faithful is faithful. Is this.... maybe? No, it's not. Alex, can you send me forward?

Faithfulness is consistency. Faithfulness is integrity. Notice we've gone full circle. We're back to that integrity word, right? Faithfulness is consistency. Faithful is what I hear here on Sabbath, I go and do during the week. Faithfulness is consistency. What I do in public is how I behave in private. How I drive with pastor in the car is how I drive when pastor's not in the car. That's faithfulness.

God says to Israel, *what can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist and the early dew that disappears. It was not faithful.*

It didn't last forever. And God had Hosea marry a prostitute and she was unfaithful to him and he had to run around following her and it was a big mess. And God says, that's exactly how I feel about you because you're not faithful to me.

Are we being faithful to God? Are we doing these kinds of things? Jesus isn't looking for half-hearted commitment. He condemned the Pharisees for being hypocrites. And that word hypocrite means you're an actor, you're faking, right? You ever watched a movie and just hate the bad guy? The bad guy... Is the actor necessarily a bad person? No, he's playing the role of the bad guy. Might be the sweetest dude ever, but he plays the role of the bad guy. Right? And the Pharisees were just playing a role. They weren't serious about it. And God says, I'm not interested. He wants people who are consistently and faithfully committed both to moral righteousness, to justice and compassion.

So, reflection. **Are we content with putting on a show that we're Christians, or are we tackling the hard fundamental issues of being a Christian?** Are we working on justice, mercy and faithfulness? Because those are hard. Those are hard.

And our challenge this week is **do an evaluation on your life and pick one of those things**. Because you can't pick all of them. You just get discouraged, least if you're like me. **So pick one and say, what am I doing this week to be more just? What am I doing to be more merciful? What am I doing to be more faithful? Am I following God's leading?**

These are the foundations of our faith. And if we don't have them, it's a house built on sand. It won't stand and God's not that interested in it. The seven woes were not just for the Pharisees because if they were, they wouldn't have been recorded for us. They were for us too. I think sometimes we're a little bit more like the Pharisees than we care to admit. We like to say I'm not like them. No, not me. But, yeah, sometimes we are.

So this week, justice, mercy and faithfulness. Maybe you want to make a little card and put that on your dashboards when you're driving to work, because I bet you there's somebody at work that challenges you in one of those areas. I know when I went to work, there was. Now I'm at home. It's the dog that challenges me in these areas. Our dog's a really good dog, but he has emotional problems. We've told him that he needs to go to get professional help, but he's not going. All right, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you so much for this message. Lord, help us to be the kind of people that are just. We care about the downtrodden. We are doing what we can do to lift them up, not at the expense of somebody else, but just to lift them up. Help us to be merciful, to have compassion. Help us to be faithful, to have consistency, to have integrity, to always be following you, Lord. That's our prayer this morning. Be with us now. In Jesus name, amen.