

31. Woe to You, Scribes and Pharisees!

Jesus was always known for his gentleness, his tenderness, his forgiving nature, and his patience with the human weaknesses of those who came to him. With some people, however, Jesus was usually very severe—hypocrites. The word “hypocrite” comes from a Greek word which means “actor.” The hypocrite pretends to be something he is not. He tries to make others think that he loves God, though in reality he doesn’t.

In Matthew 23, Jesus addressed these hard words to two groups of people in Jewish society who were, for the most part, hypocrites—the scribes and the Pharisees. Being experts in the law, the scribes were respected as teachers. The Pharisees were an influential sect whose members tried hard to keep the law and Jewish traditions in the smallest details. They despised others, but all the same, they were respected for their exceptional purity. A good number of scribes were also Pharisees.

Scribes and Pharisees may not exist anymore, but there have been religious people in all times who resemble them. Christian or Muslim leaders, just like the rank and file believers, are sometimes guilty of the same faults that Jesus condemned so strongly. So, let us see two traits which are foreign to the spirit of Christianity and which we must carefully avoid.

THE LOVE OF HONORS, TITLES AND THE GLORY OF MEN

A serious fault that Jesus condemned in the scribes and Pharisees was the love of the glory of men. Listen to his description of these men in Matthew 23:

“But all their works they do to be seen by men. Look at the straps with scripture verses on them which they wear on their foreheads and arms, and notice how large they are! Notice also how long are the tassels on their cloaks! 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.” (Matthew 23:5-12)

The religious leaders of the Jews distinguished themselves by their clothing. Some religious leaders of our day often wear robes or reversed white collars to distinguish them from other believers. Those in Jesus’ time loved the best places. Those of our time also like to be seated on expensive cloth or armchairs where everyone can see them.

The scribes and Pharisees loved titles of respect such as “rabbi” or “master.” Religious leaders of our day have many different titles of honor. They teach the believers to call them “Father,” despite the fact that Jesus said clearly, “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.” They call themselves president or reverend or monsignor. Jesus taught that there are honors and titles which are not rightfully ours and that we must not use them to refer to others or allow others to use them to refer to us. “But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’... Do not call anyone on earth your father... do not be called teachers.”

In the book of Acts, we see a positive example and a negative example concerning honors. The negative example is that of the king, Herod Agrippa I, in chapter 12, verses 20-23. God struck him down and he died. Why? Because when the people applauded his speech by saying, “It is the voice of a god and not of a man,” he did not stop them. He did not correct the people, but by his silence accepted the honor they gave him, an honor which he did not deserve. The positive example is found in chapter 10, verses 24-26, where the apostle Peter went to the home of a Gentile named Cornelius to preach the gospel. The text says, “As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up, saying, ‘Stand up; I myself am also a man.’”

A word that the Bible uses to speak of elders or bishops, who are responsible for a local congregation of Christians, is the word “pastor.” This word, which translates as “shepherd,” highlights similarities between elders of the church and shepherds who protect, nourish, look after and manage a flock of sheep. Even this biblical word has, in our day, been transformed into a title of honor. Believers and non-believers alike are taught to use the title to greet their leaders, “Good Morning, Pastor”, or, “Let me present to you Pastor So-and-So...” People in one

group may speak of their “senior pastor,” while those in another group may even use the term “supreme pastor.”

We should not let ourselves be seduced by the honors of men. We would quickly resemble the proud scribes that the Lord reproached. It is time for teachers and religious leaders to take to heart the warning of Jesus. “And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:12).

ATTENTION TO THE EXTERIOR; NEGLIGENCE OF THE INTERIOR

A second trait of the scribes and Pharisees which is contrary to the spirit of Christianity is the act of giving excessive attention to exterior aspects of religion and neglecting morality, compassion and the condition of our hearts.

Jesus told them:

“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 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.” (Matthew 23:14,25-28)

The scribes and Pharisees were very religious. One could see them praying and giving alms. In Luke 18, Jesus spoke of a Pharisee who said that he fasted twice a week and gave God a tithe—that is the tenth part—of all his assets, as commanded in the Law of Moses. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus recognized that they were so scrupulous in giving the tithe that they measured and gave the tenth part even of plants like mint and cumin which grew next to the kitchen and were used to season food. Unfortunately, Jesus has to add that they had “neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.” We must not neglect careful observance of our duty to

give to God as we should. But tithes, fasts and prayers are not the most fundamental part of what God asks of us. They can never replace righteousness, goodness and faith. God said the same thing to the Israelites by the prophet Isaiah:

“‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?’ Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.” (Isaiah 58:3,4)

In our days, many people still think that the essential part of religion is reciting prayers, giving money, observing a month of fasting or an annual feast, prostrating oneself or bowing the head at certain moments, covering the head or removing the shoes, etc. They take great care with such things, but their neighbors often see them as impolite, dishonest, nasty, arrogant or quarrelsome. They don’t pay their employees or they practice corruption of every kind. What Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees also applies to them: “Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (Matthew 23:24).

In verses 16 to 22, he spoke of their way of making legal distinctions between this formula and that when they swore. If, for example, they swore by the temple and not on the gold of the temple, they did not consider themselves bound to keep their word. They were very religious but in fact were not honest people or faithful to their promises. They occupied themselves with the formalities of religion but not real morality. By this kind of maneuvering, they persuaded themselves that they were righteous. We can see blind they were when we consider the fact that they would later bring in false witnesses to condemn Jesus at his trial, but at the same time they were concerned for their ceremonial purity, which they believed would have been compromised if they entered the home of a non-Jew. John 18:28 tells us, “Then they led Jesus from Caiaphas to the Praetorium, and it was early morning. But they themselves did not go into the Praetorium, lest they should be defiled, but that they might eat the Passover.”

CONCLUSION

As we have said, Jesus—so well-known for his kindness—spoke with severity to these hypocrites. In

verses 33-36 in Matthew 23, he declared the chastisement of God which would come on these men:

“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.”

But let's not think that Jesus took pleasure in the idea that the people would be punished. In verses 37 and 38, he laments over the city, “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.”

Hypocrisy is always a danger. It gets into the life of a pious man or woman and pulls him or her farther and farther away from God. Let us then be wary of all the signs of this evil, including a love for the honors and glory of men, and excessive attention to the external aspects of religion. Listen to Jesus' warning: don't neglect the most important teachings, such as righteousness, kindness and faith—this is what must be practiced without neglecting the rest.