

(Matt. 23:13) – “*WOE*” means great trouble, sorrow, anguish, and despair. The Lord pronounced several woes upon the “*SCRIBES AND PHARISEES*” because of the hypocrisy of their self-righteous religion of legalism. Their hatred of Jesus and His message of salvation by grace was seen in their refusal to believe His message – “*FOR YE NEITHER GO IN YOURSELVES*” – and the fact that they did all that they could to prevent others to follow Christ – “*FOR YE SHUT UP THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AGAINST MEN*” and “*NEITHER SUFFER YE THEM THAT ARE ENTERING TO GO IN.*” The fact is that all whom the Father chose and gave to Christ to save will come to and follow Him, and no man can prevent it (John 6:37-45). All for whom Christ died are redeemed and cannot be charged with their sins and condemned (Rom. 8:33-34). They must be given the gifts of spiritual life, faith, repentance, and be preserved unto glory (Rom. 8:28-32).

(Matt. 23:14) – They took the possessions of poor widows under the pretense of religion and using their money for God’s glory. They made long, drawn-out prayers seeking to impress those who saw and heard them pray. Such hypocrisy deserves “*THE GREATER DAMNATION*” (cf. Matt. 11:20-24).

(Matt. 23:15) – They were missionary-minded to spread their false gospel of salvation by works and gain converts to their religion, especially among the immoral Gentiles. But Christ is clear that when they gained converts to their false way, they only made them doubly the children of hell than they themselves were. To be a “*CHILD OF HELL*” is to be non-elect and one who goes through life and dies in unbelief deserving of hell. To live and die without Christ is to live and die in condemnation. All who die in unbelief are without Christ, i.e. without His blood to wash away their sins and without His righteousness to justify them. They will be judged and condemned (Acts 17:31). When a pagan, idolatrous, and immoral Gentile converted to Judaism, he became twice the hypocrite that he was before and twice as confirmed in a false profession of religion (cf. Luke 11:24-26).

(Matt. 23:16-22) – The Lord calls them “*BLIND GUIDES*” and “*FOOLS,*” because they were spiritually dead and ignorant with no spiritual sight to see and know and understand the glory of God in Christ and His righteousness for salvation. The only way we who are fallen in Adam and born dead in sin can see, hear, know, and understand the glory of God in Christ is to be blessed by God with spiritual life and truth in the new birth (cf. Matt. 13:10-16; John 3:3-7). This woe involves the fact that the scribes and Pharisees were masters in the art of evasion in the matter of swearing oaths. They reasoned that an oath was binding upon them if the name of God was involved, but not

binding if the name of God was not involved. Their reasoning may sound far-fetched, but they would say something like if a person made an oath by virtue of the gold that was in the temple, that was considered to be a binding oath, but if he swore by the temple itself, it was not considered to be a binding oath. If he swore by something upon the altar of sacrifice, it was a binding oath, but if he swore by the altar, it was not a binding oath. Christ exposed the fallacy of their reasoning by showing how everything belongs to God, and if you swear by anything, you swear by that which belongs to God. Therefore, every oath is binding, and we cannot break our word and rightly claim to keep the law. All believers should take great comfort and find much assurance in the fact that our Lord and Savior never breaks His oath and promise to save us by His grace and power – *“Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for He is faithful that promised;)”* (Heb. 10:23; cf. 2 Cor. 1:19-20; Heb. 6:13-20; Lam. 3:21-23).

(Matt. 23:23-24) – These false religionists were so careful and meticulous in trying to keep the letter of the law, but they were negligent in *“THE WEIGHTIER MATTERS OF THE LAW, JUDGMENT, MERCY, AND FAITH.”* The Lord told them that it was right for them to pay their tithes under the law but not to the neglect of matters of the heart. False religion can make a person outwardly appear righteous and obedient, but it cannot make a person righteous, and it cannot change the heart. Matters of judgment, mercy, and faith can apply to our relationship with people in seeking to make right judgments, show mercy, and be faithful to our promises, but it mainly applies to the spirit of the law in showing by judgment their need of righteousness that they could not produce by their works (Rom. 3:19-20). It showed their need of God’s mercy and grace in the Person and work of the Messiah (Rom. 9:31 – 10:17). It showed that even though the law itself is not of faith (Gal. 3:10-12), in light of the law’s purpose to show them their sinfulness and depravity, the only way of salvation is by God-given faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:13-14).

(Matt. 23:25-26) – These next two woes set forth the impossibility of the false religion of legalism (salvation by the works and the wills of sinners) to produce righteousness before God Who looks on the heart or to produce and give to sinners new hearts of faith in and love to God in Christ. Their religion was hypocrisy in cleaning *“THE OUTSIDE OF THE CUP AND OF THE PLATTER,”* but it left people spiritually dead within. The Lord told them, *“CLEANSE FIRST THAT WHICH IS WITHIN THE CUP AND PLATTER, THAT THE OUTSIDE OF THEM MAY BE CLEAN ALSO.”* This is not to say that sinners CAN cleanse themselves within. We cannot do this. Only God can do this. But the Lord showed here the need of spiritual cleansing that comes from the righteousness that He alone can produce in and by Christ. Only Christ can produce the righteousness by which we are justified before God, and only Christ can produce spiritual life and a new heart within His people by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:10; John 16:7-11).