



Question: "Why did Jesus rebuke the scribes and Pharisees so harshly in Matthew 23:13-36?"

Answer: In Matthew 23 Jesus pronounces “woes” on the scribes and Pharisees, the religious elite of the day. The word *woe* is an exclamation of grief, denunciation, or distress. This was not the first time Jesus had some harsh words for the religious leaders of His day. Why did Jesus rebuke them so harshly here? Looking at each woe gives some insight.

Before pronouncing the woes, Jesus told His listeners to respect the scribes and Pharisees due to their position of authority but not to emulate them, “for they do not practice what they preach. They 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. Everything they do is done for people to see” (Matthew 23:3–5). The scribes and Pharisees were supposed to know God and help others know Him and follow His ways. Instead, the religious leaders added to God’s Law, making it a cumbersome and onerous burden. And they did not follow God with a pure heart. Their religion was not true worship of God; rather, it was rooted in a prideful heart. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount emphasizes the true intent of the Law over the letter of the Law. The scribes and Pharisees emphasized the letter, completely missing its spirit.

The first woe is, “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” (Matthew 23:13). Jesus cares for people. He desires for them to know Him and to enter into His kingdom (John 3:16–17; 10:10, 17; 2 Peter 3:9). After rebuking the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus lamented over rebellious Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37–39). Clearly, His heart is for people to find life in Him. It stands to reason, then, that He would have harsh words for those who prevented people from finding salvation. The teachers of the Law and Pharisees were not truly seeking after God, though they acted as if they were. Their religion was empty, and it was preventing others from following the Messiah.

In the second woe, Jesus condemns the scribes and Pharisees for making strenuous efforts to win converts and then leading those converts to be “twice as much” children of hell as the scribes and Pharisees were (Matthew 23:15). In other words, they were more intent on spreading their religion than on maintaining the truth.

The third woe Jesus pronounces against the scribes and Pharisees calls the religious leaders “blind guides” and “blind fools” (Matthew 23:16–17). Specifically, Jesus points out, they nit-picked about which oaths were binding and which were not, ignoring the sacred nature of all oaths and significance of the temple and God’s holiness (verses 15–22).

The fourth woe calls out the scribes and Pharisees for their practice of diligently paying the tithe while neglecting to actually care for people. While they were counting their mint leaves to make sure they gave one tenth to the temple, they “neglected the more important matters of the law— justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23). Once again, they focused on the letter of the

Law and obeyed it with pride, but they missed the weightier things of God. Their religion was external; their hearts were not transformed.

Jesus elaborates on their hypocrisy in the fifth woe. He tells the religious leaders they appear clean on the outside, but they have neglected the inside. They perform religious acts but do not have God-honoring hearts. It does no good, Jesus says, to clean up the outside when the inside is “full of greed and self-indulgence” (Matthew 23:25). The Pharisees and scribes are blind and do not recognize that, when the inside is changed, the outside, too, will be transformed.

In the sixth woe, Jesus claims the scribes and Pharisees are “like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean” (Matthew 23:27). The deadness inside of tombs is likened to the “hypocrisy and wickedness” inside the religious leaders (verse 28). Once again, they appear to obey God, but their hearts are far from Him (see Matthew 15:7–9 and Isaiah 29:13).

Jesus concludes His seven-fold rebuke by telling the religious leaders that they are just like their fathers, who persecuted the prophets of old. In building monuments to the prophets, they testify against themselves, openly admitting that it was their ancestors who killed the prophets (Matthew 23:29–31). Although they arrogantly claim that they would not have done so, they are the ones who will soon plot the murder of the Son of God Himself (Matthew 26:4).

Jesus’ words are harsh because there was so much at stake. Those who followed the Pharisees and scribes were being kept from following God. So much of the teaching in Jesus’ day was in direct contradiction of God’s Word (see Matthew 15:6). The religious leaders made a mockery out of following God. They did not truly understand God’s ways, and they led others away from God. Jesus’ desire was that people would come to know God and be reconciled with Him. In Matthew 11:28–30 Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Unlike the burdens the scribes and Pharisees laid on the people in a human effort to gain reconciliation with God, Jesus gives true rest. The religious leaders spread lies covered in a veneer of godliness (John 8:44); Jesus spoke harshly against them because He came to bring life (John 10:10).

Also, the word *woe* carries with it a tinge of sorrow. There is an element of imprecation, to be sure, but with it an element of compassionate sadness. The seven woes that Jesus pronounces on the religious leaders are solemn declarations of future misery. The stubbornness of the sinners to whom He speaks is bringing a judgment to be feared. The scribes and Pharisees are calling down God’s wrath upon themselves, and they are to be pitied.

Immediately after Jesus’ rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees, we see Jesus’ compassion. He asks, “How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matthew 23:33). Jesus then expresses His desire to gather the people of Israel to Himself for safety, if only they were willing (verse 37). God longs for His people to come to Him and find forgiveness. Jesus was not harsh to be mean. He was not having a temper tantrum. Rather, love guided His actions. Jesus spoke firmly against the deception of Satan out of a desire for people to know truth and find life in Him.

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