

**Proposition: In His final woe upon the religious leaders, Jesus exposed the problem of self-deception. He confronted two distorted views that plague the self-deceived, as recorded in Matthew 23:29-36.**

- I. Jesus confronted people who had a distorted view of themselves (29-32).
  - A. They fed it by what they did (29).
    1. They built tombs for the prophets.
    2. They decorated graves.
  - B. They fed it by what they said (30-32).
    1. They claimed to be different from their fathers (30).
    2. In reality, they were just like them (31).
    3. Indeed, they were about to do something even worse (32).
- II. Jesus confronted people who had a distorted view of their future (33-36).
  - A. They didn't realize where they were heading--so He told them (33).
  - B. They didn't realize what they were about to do--so He told them (34).
    1. You're going to kill some messengers from God.
    2. You're going to commit brutal acts in a place of worship.
    3. You're going to hunt down people sent to help you.
  - C. They didn't realize what they would soon experience--so He told them (35-36).
    1. Righteous blood will come upon you (35).
    2. God's judgment will come upon your generation (36).

Implications: If you've been self-deceived, there is hope *if* you do two things...

The Pharisees refused to do so, and perished.

1. You must come to grips with your sinfulness.
2. You must come to the Savior.

When I was ten we moved from a house in the city to a farm house in the country. It was my first experience at country living. At the time we had a Pug dog named Napoleon. He was a city dog, if you know what I mean. He didn't have a lot of common sense. He wasn't afraid of anything, even things that should have produced fear. When he saw lightning flash in the distant sky, he ran after it and tried to catch it. And when he saw a herd of cattle, he thought the cattle should do what he wanted.

I can still picture Napoleon crawling under the fence into the cattle pasture. He fearlessly approached the herd of a dozen or so Hereford cows. He walked right up to the mammoth creatures like he was ten-feet tall, and barked at them as if informing them that he would be now be calling the shots on the farm. There he was, weighing in at thirty pounds, going nose to nose with a herd of thousand pound animals.

Quite frankly, the cows didn't appreciate this cocky little canine barking orders at them, so they would form a circle around him and box him in. Then they would head-butt him around for awhile until he quieted down and high-tailed-it out of *their* pasture. He'd stay out of their turf--for awhile. And then he'd head back to teach them a lesson about who was boss. The problem with Napoleon was that he never really learned who *was* the boss.

You're in trouble when you think you are something that you are *not*. It's called self-deception. It may be comical when it shows up in a dog, but self-deception is no laughing matter.

---

\*\*\* Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

How do you help someone who thinks they are something that they are not? It's not easy. Have you ever tried to tell somebody about the Lord, only to have them scoff at you and reply, "Don't waste your breath on me. Everything's just fine between God and me."?

It's a helpless feeling, isn't it? It would be like seeing fire coming out of your neighbor's roof, running over and pleading with him to exit the house, only to hear him respond, "My house is just fine! Leave me alone so I can finish watching my ball game."

In our study of God's Word today, we return to our current series' text, Matthew 23. We've been listening to Jesus warn us of the Danger of Being Religious. In Matthew 23 Jesus pronounced a series of seven woes upon the most religious people of His day. These were people who were sure they were okay with God. But they weren't. They were self-deceived.

We need to give careful attention to this sermon Jesus preached. Why? Because there's an ever-present danger that we may think we are something that we are *not*. And if that's true, we're missing out on what we *could* be through Jesus Christ.

In His final woe upon the religious leaders, Jesus exposed the problem of self-deception. He confronted two distorted views that plague the self-deceived, as recorded in Matthew 23:29-36.

#### I. Jesus confronted people who had a distorted view of themselves (29-32).

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers."

The setting was the temple court area. Jesus was nearing the end of His most pointed sermon, one in which He took to task the religious leaders of the day. This is the seventh time Jesus pronounced "woe" upon them. In a matter of days those of whom He was speaking would insist that Pilate nail Him to a tree.

I would remind you that these men were supposed to be spiritual leaders in Israel. They were the "teachers of the law" and the "Pharisees." But Jesus--for the sixth time in His sermon--called them "hypocrites." It's one thing to be wrong. It's worse to be wrong and think you are *right*. It's worse yet to be wrong and *insist* you are right--and that was the case of the Pharisees.

They had a distorted view of themselves, a view which they fed in two ways.

**A. They fed it by what they did (29).** Jesus mentions two practices.

1. *They built tombs for the prophets.* And...
2. *They decorated graves.* "Garnish the sepulchers of the righteous," is how the KJV depicts it.

In the first century there was a great emphasis on building splendid tombs, including some for long-dead dignitaries. For instance, according to Josephus, Herod built a new marble monument over David's tomb (France, 329).

Specifically, according to Jesus, the religious leaders built, improved, and embellished some tombs. Whose? Tombs of former prophets, righteous men who became martyrs in their service for God. But guess who had killed these martyrs? Jesus said the *fathers* of the tomb-builders did! Not their biological fathers, of course, but their spiritual fathers.

There have always been counterfeit believers in the world. It started with Cain in Genesis 4. It climaxed with the Pharisees in Jesus' day. The Pharisees had a severely distorted view of themselves which they fed by what they did. Secondly...

**B. They fed it by what they said (30-32).** What did they say?

1. *They claimed to be different from their fathers (30).* "And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.'"

Here was their claim, "We'd have done things differently! If we'd been around back then, we would not have participated in the blood bath. No way!"

To which Jesus in effect says, "Oh, really? You wouldn't have killed the prophets? Are you sure you wouldn't have done what your forefathers did?"

We might say, "I didn't bring slaves to America. I never would have done that." Or, "I didn't commit adultery and then lie under oath to cover it up. I never would have done that."

Beloved, beware of an inflated view of yourself. Beware of overestimating yourself. We are sinners, depraved sinners. If we know Christ, we are forgiven sinners, but sinners nonetheless.

We're in trouble when these six deadly words come from our lips, "It could never happen to me." Peter, you will deny me three times. "No, Lord, it could never happen to me." Paul put it this way in 1 Corinthians 10:12, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"

The Pharisees fed their delusion by what they said. They had convinced themselves they were different from their fathers. But...

2. *In reality, they were just like them (31).* Listen to Jesus (KJV), "Wherefore, ye are witnesses against yourselves, that ye are the sons of them who killed the prophets."

What does Jesus mean? In what way did the religious leaders incriminate themselves? Their problem wasn't the tomb-building nor the grave decorating. It was their claim. They acknowledged that the ones who martyred the prophets were their "fathers" (*pateron*). In Hebraic usage, to be the son of someone or of some group is to be intimately connected with that one or group (Bruner, 829). Though such a thought seems strange to our Western ears, it nonetheless was true in Middle Eastern culture.

"We are Abraham's descendants," the Jews cried in John 8:32, indicating their claim of connection with Abraham. In our text they acknowledge themselves to be "descendants" of the ones who killed the prophets. Jesus responds by saying, "You are sons alright, more than you realize." Like it or not, they were just like them. Indeed...

3. *Indeed, they were about to do something even worse (32).* "Fill up then the measure of your fathers." You'll notice this is a command. The religious leaders were about to fill up what their ancestors had been doing for centuries.

Time and time again God had sent His messengers to preach to His people, urging them to repent, and turn back to Him. And though they venerated the prophets' memories, they rejected the prophets' messages.

"We'd have done things differently!" the Pharisees claimed. "We wouldn't have shed the prophets' blood." How ironic! At that very time, they were plotting to kill, not a prophet of God, but the very Son of God! (see 21:38-39, 45-46)

To which Jesus said, "Go ahead. Fill up the measure of the sin of your fathers."

We'll never appreciate salvation as we ought until we realize how unworthy we are of it. "If I'd have been alive in A.D. 30, I wouldn't have crucified Jesus. I wouldn't have shed His blood. I would have received Him." Oh really?

Helen Keller, who was both blind and deaf, was once asked, "Isn't it terrible to be blind?" She replied, "Better to be blind and see with your heart, than to have two good eyes and see nothing." (Hughes, 76)

A self-deceived person has a distorted view of himself. He's naive. He's self-inflated. He's blind. And he foolishly fosters his self-deception by doing and saying things that prevent him from having to come to grips with his utter depravity.

Charles Colson tells the following story regarding an episode of *Sixty Minutes*.<sup>1</sup> In it host Mike Wallace interviewed Auschwitz survivor Yehiel Dinur, who was a key witness at the Nuremburg war-crime trials.

"During the interview, a film clip from Adolph Eichmann's 1961 trial was viewed that showed Dinur entering the courtroom and coming face to face with Eichmann for the first time since being sent to Auschwitz almost twenty years earlier. Stopped cold, Dinur began to sob uncontrollably and then fainted while the presiding judge pounded his gavel for order.

"Was Dinur overcome by hatred? Fear? Horrid memories?" asks Colson, who then answers:

No; it was none of these. Rather, as Dinur explained to Wallace, all at once he realized that Eichmann was not the godlike army officer who had sent so many to their deaths. This Eichmann was an ordinary man. 'I was afraid about myself,' said Dinur. 'I saw that I am capable to do this. I am . . . exactly like he.'

Wallace's subsequent summation of Dinur's terrible discovery--'Eichmann is in all of us'--is a horrifying statement; but it indeed captures the central truth about man's nature. For as a result of the Fall, sin is in each of us--not just the susceptibility to sin, but sin itself.

"Colson follows his penetrating observation with this question: why is it that today sin is so seldom written or preached about? The answer is in Dinur's dramatic collapse, for to truly confront the sin within us is a devastating experience. If sin was preached on, says Colson, many would flee their church pews never to return."

How about you? Have you come to grips with the sobering reality that overcame Dinur in the court room that day, the reality of your depravity? Don't misunderstand. Yes, there is hope for depraved sinners because of the Cross, but the Cross is robbed of its meaning if we foolishly cling to a distorted view of ourselves.

You see, the problem of self-deception is a serious problem. It keeps people from seeing their need for Christ. It's linked to two distorted views, the first being a distorted view of self. It results in a second distorted view which Jesus confronted in verses 33-36.

## II. Jesus confronted people who had a distorted view of their future (33-36).

The religious leaders thought they were something that they were *not*. Because of that they possessed a distorted view of their future. Jesus confronted their distortion by unveiling three future events in verses 33-36.

**A. They didn't realize where they were heading--so He told them (33).** "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

That's not a very nice thing to say to someone. Or is it? Please remember these words come from the heart of the Savior who loved these men. He's concerned for them--and for the people who are blindly following them.

---

<sup>1</sup>As retold by Kent Hughes, *Are Evangelicals Born Again?*, pp. 33-4.

Jesus uses two exclamations and a question to confront their self-deception: You snakes! You brood of vipers. How will you escape the damnation of hell?

John the Baptist had used such language with the Pharisees three years earlier, as recorded in Matthew 3:7. Jesus Himself had as well after the Pharisees accused Him of demonism (Matt. 12:34).

What a question! "How shall you escape the sentence of hell?" (in the NASB) How's that for being blunt with someone? Why was Jesus so pointed? It's because before Him were people who didn't realize where they were heading. In fact, they were sure they were heading to heaven. Why? Because they were religious--*very* religious.

But it was all external. Sure, they did a lot of good and looked impressive to people. But they were lost and unless they came to their senses they were heading for eternal condemnation in hell. And they didn't realize it--so Jesus told them. A second distortion...

**B. They didn't realize what they were about to do--so He told them (34).**

"Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town."

Jesus knows everything. He's the sovereign, omniscient Lord. Here He informs the religious leaders of what He was going to do, and what they in turn were going to do. He was going to send them "prophets and wise men and teachers."

In the Old Testament and in inter-testamental times, the prophets, wise men, and teachers were God's spokesmen. Jesus seems to use the terms to refer to His disciples, for after His departure He would send them to fill the same role. In just a few days He would be crucified and raised from the dead. Then in a matter of weeks He would return to heaven, and commission His followers--to do what? To preach the Word of God to people, including the very people listening to Jesus here.

What kind of reception would the religious leaders give them? Jesus told them. He predicted three horrendous sins they would soon commit. Three times He tells them, "You will...you will...you will."

1. *You're going to kill some messengers from God.* "Some of them you will kill and crucify." Some of them--not all. The Lord wouldn't allow that for He had said, "I will build My Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt 16:18)." But you will kill *some* of them. You're actually going to take the lives of some messengers from God.

2. *You're going to commit brutal acts in a place of worship.* "Other you will flog in your synagogues." You're going to scourge them. What intrigues me is *where* Jesus said they would do it--*in your synagogues*.

Wow! To reject God's messenger is one thing. But to reject God's messenger in the very place where you are supposed to be studying God's Word is inexcusable. And to inflict physical punishment on God's messenger in the place of God's worship is unthinkable. Yet that's what Jesus predicted the Pharisees would do. Thirdly...

3. *You're going to hunt down people sent to help you.* And some of them you will "pursue from town to town." The Greek term is *dioxete*. It means to persecute or hunt down.

Oh, the irony of verse 34. It's just the opposite of what the religious leaders claimed in verse 30. "If we had lived in those days, we wouldn't have shed the blood of the God's messengers." To which Jesus says, "It's not just that you *would have*, but you *will*." Which brings us to the third future event which Jesus revealed.

**C. They didn't realize what they would soon experience--so He told them (35-36).** "And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation."

The Pharisees didn't realize what they would soon experience--two inevitable events--so Jesus told them. First...

1. *Righteous blood will come upon you (35).* What kind of blood? Righteous blood. Whose righteous blood? All that had been shed on earth from Abel to Zechariah. Abel was the first Old Testament martyr, as recorded in Genesis 4:8, while Zechariah was the last (2 Chronicles 24:20-22).

In the Hebrew Bible, Genesis is the first book and 2 Chronicles the last. From cover to cover, it's the story of bloodshed. Those who come to God by faith are despised by those who try to come to God by merit. Abel was the first to die a bloody death in the Scriptures, and Zechariah the last.

But not the last. In just a few days more blood would be shed. When Jesus told the religious leaders, "Upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth," was He not anticipating the words we read in Matthew 27:24-25?

"When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!' All the people answered, 'Let his blood be on us and on our children.'" And so the words of Jesus were fulfilled.

There was something else the leaders didn't realize would soon happen--so Jesus told them...

2. *God's judgment will come upon your generation (36).* "I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation." *Amen*, Jesus says--I tell you the truth. Here's the punchline. All this will come on this generation.

All what? The literal reading is "all these things." But what things does Jesus mean? I believe He's referring to the seven prophetic woes of His sermon. God's judgment was coming, and Jesus said it would come on the present generation.

Not just on the religious leaders, but on the *generation* because the leaders represent the people. Sadly, the people refused to abandon their apostate leaders and receive their Messiah. So judgment was inevitable.

Yes, beloved, God is patient. And He is longsuffering--or we would not be here. But know this. God does not overlook sin. He may tolerate it for a time, but then when the measure is full, He will respond in wrath.

Twenty years later Paul wrote this explanation in 1 Thessalonians 2:14b-16, "You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out [just like Jesus predicted in Matthew 23]. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved [again, just like Jesus predicted]. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last."

You're in trouble when you think you are something that you are not. A person can be religious, indeed very religious, yet very lost.

Listen to a comment by Warren Wiersbe (85-6), "As we review these tragic *woes* from the lips of our Lord, we can see why the Pharisees were His enemies. He emphasized the inner man; they were concerned with externals. He taught a spiritual life

based on principles, while the Pharisees majored on rules and regulations. Jesus measured spirituality in terms of character, while the Pharisees measured it in terms of religious activities and conformity to external laws. Jesus taught humility and service; but the Pharisees were proud and used people to accomplish their own purposes. The holy life of Jesus exposed their artificial piety and shallow religion. Instead of coming out of the darkness, the Pharisees tried to put out the Light; and they failed."

We've pondered a sad story this morning, a story about some people who were self-deceived. They actually heard the Messiah, yet rejected Him. And all the while, they were convinced they were okay. They were sure they weren't like their forefathers who murdered the prophets.

But they were. And the truth is, so are we.

The nineteenth century Russian novelist, Ivan Turgenev, said it well when he wrote: "I do not know what the heart of a bad man is like. But I do know what the heart of a good man is like. And it is terrible."<sup>2</sup>

Beloved, we are sinners. Not *were*, but *are*. Praise God there is hope for sinners, even for self-deceived sinners, and here it is...

Implications: If you've been self-deceived, there is hope if you do two things...

The sad truth is that the Pharisees refused to do so, and they perished. Please don't follow suit. You can experience the hope and help of God today but you must do two things.

1. *You must come to grips with your sinfulness.* There is none righteous, no not one (Rom. 3:10). We are born in sin, and from the moment we enter the world we willfully sin. We go our own way rather than God's. To experience God's hope, you must come to grips with your sinfulness. But don't stop there. Secondly...

2. *You must come to the Savior.* The Pharisees didn't. They didn't come to Jesus because they didn't think they needed Him. They had religion. They were okay. So they thought.

What about you? Have you come to the Savior? Dear friend, I have nothing with which to merit God's forgiveness. Nor do you. What we deserve is eternal hell. What we're given is eternal life if we respond to the Spirit's calling and come to the Savior.

Have you refused to come to Jesus in the past? Come now.

*Just as thou art, without one trace of love, or joy, or inward grace,  
Or meetness for the heavenly place, O guilty sinner, come!*

*Come, hither bring thy boding fears, thy aching heart, thy bursting tears;  
'Tis mercy's voice salutes thine ears, O trembling sinner, come.*

*'The Spirit and the Bride say, Come,' rejoicing saints re-echo, come;  
Who faints, who thirsts, who will, may come; Thy Savior bids thee come.<sup>3</sup>*

---

<sup>2</sup>Hughes, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup>Spurgeon, *Grace*, p. 87.