

- Pray and ask the Lord to help you identify anything in your own life that smacks of Pharisaism. It is a hard thing to do, but the effort is important. Religiosity needs to be rooted out of our midst if the Lord God is to be our only guide.
- If you can gain the opportunity, try and speak to someone you know who is outside of the church, and ask them whether they think that the church is hypocritical. Ask them to explain to you what is wrong with what they see. Do not respond, but listen carefully in order to learn about the public image of the church.

## Final Prayer

The majesty and the power of Your glory O Lord is beyond our comprehension. Yet You continually make Yourself available to us in surprising and helpful ways, showing us Your love and compassion. May we always be alert to Your presence and responsive to Your touch O Lord; AMEN.

## Prayer

Glorious and faithful God, You carry Your people through all manner of trouble and distress, returning over and over again to rescue them from the world's troubles. Save Your people today; save them from becoming so absorbed in the trials of the moment that they do not see the glories of Your future, of Your Kingdom and of Your Victory! Glorious and faithful God, lift Your people higher, we pray! AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Weapons of War

*The whole human race lives under the cloud of nuclear weapons, though it is easy to forget them. Pray for those who have control of these terrifying weapons of mass destruction.*

### On-going prayers

- Give thanks for your home and all that God has given you
- Pray for casual workers in your country who have no fixed home
- Pray for India and the terrorist outrages in Mumbai (Bombay)

## Meditation

Take love, and give it to those around you,  
You do not know how the world might change  
Through one single act of love.

Take faith, and show it in your living,  
You do not know how the Kingdom will grow  
Through the faith of just one disciple.

Take hope, and believe in all God's promises;  
You do not know the effect of your dreams  
Through aspiring to truth and justice.

Take joy, and show it in all you do;  
You do not know what delight others find  
Through the inspiration of your happiness.

## Bible Study - Matthew 23:13-22

<sup>13</sup> 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees. You hypocrites, you shut people out of the kingdom of heaven! You neither go in yourselves, nor allow others to try and enter. <sup>14/</sup>

<sup>15</sup> 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees. You hypocrites, you travel over sea and land to make a single convert, and you then make the new convert twice a child of hell as yourselves.

<sup>16</sup> 'Woe to you, blind guides; you who say, "It means nothing to swear by the Temple, but you are bound to your oath if you swear by the gold of the Temple." <sup>17</sup> You blind fools! Which is greater, the gold or the Temple that makes the gold sacred? <sup>18</sup> And you also say, "it means nothing to swear by the altar, but you are bound to your oath if you swear by the gift on the altar!" <sup>19</sup> How blind you are! Which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift

sacred? <sup>20</sup> Therefore whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; <sup>21</sup> and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the One who dwells in it; <sup>22</sup> and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the One who is seated upon it!

## Review

Jesus continued to denounce the terrible consequences of the religion of the scribes and Pharisees in these words, which are the first three of seven sayings each beginning with the word 'woe' (vv13,15 and 16), the opposite to 'blessing'! The word acts like a curse offering not just discouragement but condemnation. Sometimes, it is used in English as if it means something like 'how awful', but this comes nowhere near the sense of powerful censure which Jesus directs at the Pharisees here. Clearly, the seven 'woes' of verses 13-33 systematically denounce, if not curse, the rise of Pharisaism; and they do so in sayings which reflect a broad range of Jesus' teaching ministry, notably from the Sermon of the Mount (chs. 5-7), as we shall now see.

**Woe No.1: Preventing people enter the Kingdom** The first woe, in verse 13 condemns the Pharisees for the barriers they placed to God's Kingdom. Entry into the Kingdom was Jesus' way of describing salvation itself and was the subject of many of His parables (see chs 13 and 18), whereas the Pharisees were not interested in inviting people into the things of God at all. Their version of religion interpreted the Laws of Moses by means of a myriad regulations and laws which Jesus not only sought to sweep aside in His teaching (5:17ff) but now regarded as a barrier to God's intentions for all people. The imposition of these laws and traditions not only prevented the Pharisees themselves from entering the Kingdom, but prevented others from so doing.

Jesus had already taught that entry into the Kingdom and into God's salvation required childlikeness, not complication (18:3), and also that entry was to do with receptiveness towards the Word of God (the parable of the sower; 13:1ff). He had also given the 'keys of the kingdom' to Peter (16:19) and all authority 'to bind and to loose' to the church (18:18). This was all poles apart from the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, and although both Jesus and the Pharisees based their teachings on the Old Testament and the Laws of Moses, it was Jesus who taught the truth about access to the Father, and the Pharisees way had become a form of religion without God's Messiah.

**Woe No.2: Conversion of Judaism without a Messiah.** You will find that your Bible probably misses out verse 14, moving directly from verse 13 to 15. This is because the verse marked 14 (in the 'Authorised Version') is simply not there in most of the ancient copies of Matthew's Gospel we possess. If you wish to include this verse, then it is the same as Mark 12:40; 'They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation'. This verse adds an example to what has just been said but nothing more.

The second woe, in verse 15, talks of the scribes and Pharisees going about the process of gaining converts. This may seem surprising to us, as we do not read about it anywhere else in the Bible or in other ancient texts. The Pharisees did indeed bring Gentile 'proselytes' into the fold of Judaism following the ancient practices established in the Old Testament for 'resident aliens' (see Ex 12:48f.), but no substantial mission such as advocated by Jesus for the church (see Matt. 10). It is possible that at the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were busy persuading other Jews to join their own 'sect' within Judaism, therefore gaining power at the expense of more moderate parties. It was also important for them to travel around the different Jewish communities in the wider Roman Empire to establish their cause, hence the reference to 'travel over sea and land' (23:15). Jesus was set against the creeping influence of Pharisaism and its quest for power and total authority

in Judaism, and it was no wonder that He described those who converted to Pharisaism as 'twice a child of hell' as the Pharisees themselves. This sounds harsh, but Jesus could see that Pharisaism cut people off from God, and it was completely subversive to His ministry.

**Woe No.3: Swearing – all oaths are binding.** Jesus had already dealt with the issue of swearing in the Sermon on the Mount (5:33-37). He concluded that swearing was not relevant in the Kingdom of God, and therefore regulations concerning it were irrelevant. He concluded 'Let your word be 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one' and the teaching here in verses 16 to 22 is the same.

Jesus declared the Pharisees to be 'blind guides', echoing His earlier criticism ('they are blind guides of the blind', 15:14) made to the disciples in private and now declared openly to the crowds. It is likely that the practice of swearing on objects of devotions such as the gold of the Temple (23:16) or the gifts on the altar (23:18) had something to do with the concept of 'korban' (dedication to God) which Jesus had already spoken out against (see 15:3ff and also Mark 7:11). Jesus tore into the ridiculous nature of these laws which seem ridiculous to us today, but no-doubt made sense to people of Jesus' day. He said that all swearing on 'holy objects' went back ultimately to God, who should not be the object of our designs or our wishful thinking (23:21,22) and the end result of Jesus' words here are to condemn both the practice of swearing and the rules whereby swearing was permitted. As has been observed by so many over the years; those who need to swear are to be mistrusted, and those who swear nothing but do what is required are to be trusted.

These first three of the 'woes' in Matthew 23 confirm the complete split that was occurring between the teaching of Jesus about God and His Kingdom, and that of the Pharisees. Despite all this, we should not allow ourselves to forget that what Jesus said and did was for the salvation of all. His condemnation of Pharisaism was also, by inference and through His extensive teaching, an invitation to all who heard Him to follow the real path of faith leading to the Kingdom of God.

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. When you think of the word 'Pharisee', what comes into your mind? What can we say if anything, that is positive about Pharisees?
2. Do you see power groups within the church today trying to gain power? What are they, and to what extent do they show features of Pharisaism?
3. How do people swear today? How does God come into swearing and why? Can swearing ever be eliminated from society?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*Although Jesus speaks strongly against Pharisaism in our text today, it is hard not to read it and feel uncomfortable about the way that power and influence is exercised between different 'parties' within the church today. Rights and wrongs are certainly involved, but the acquisition of power in order to 'influence things' is a dangerous matter, always open to the abuses of Pharisaism. Over the years I have had to watch myself carefully because it is too easy to become sucked into being Pharisaic about rules and regulations within the church, and the end result is nearly always trouble for the church, and difficulty for its mission. By understanding Pharisaism, we can perhaps make good judgements about how NOT to manage the church today!*

### Ideas for discipleship programme