

frequently pointed out. Tradition does have an important part to play in our faith, as all of us who try to expound 'classical' Christianity would say; however, godly traditions are tested and proved by scripture, not the other way round as the Pharisees would have it. This is why the traditional Christianity I write about is intended to be an exposition of scripture, not an extension of it.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Does Pharisaism exist within the life of your church? This is a hard question, but one we need to ask from time to time, firstly of ourselves, and then of others, or we stand accused of getting our priorities wrong! Reflect on this carefully.*
- *Pray for those who find it hard to express faith without a rigorous framework with which to assess all things. Liking rigidity, they end up imposing it. Pray for all God's people to be open in understanding each other and willing to give ground to each other.*

Final Prayer

Almighty God, teach us the wisdom of life. Make us wise enough to learn the truths we need to learn from You, so that when we meet You face to face we may have the wisdom to confess our sins before our Saviour Jesus Christ and receive His forgiveness. All praise to You, Almighty God, for Your salvation! AMEN

Prayer

May we give our best to You Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour;
The best of our attention, so that we might truly know Your will,
The best of our love, so that others know we have been changed,
The best of our efforts, so that our witness may be strong,
The best of our time, so that we are not found wanting,
May we give our best to You, for You gave your life for us. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Weapons of War

Pray about the illegal arms trades supplying terrorist groups and subversive organisations. Pray that government will regulate the arms trade adequately and sufficiently.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for the strained relationships between India and Pakistan*
- *Give thanks for your home and all that God has given you*
- *Pray for casual workers in your country who have no fixed home*

Meditation

Meet the anger that arises within your soul

With an intent to live by the ways of the Lord,
And a will to let love be the victor in everything.

Meet the fear that arises within your soul

With a resolute heart that holds on to reality,
And knowledge of your victory over Satan, in Christ.

Meet the sorrow that arises within your soul

With assent to those truths you cannot escape
And an unquenchable hope in the promises of God.

Meet the frustrations that arise within your soul

With the peace of the Lord that dispels all gloom,
And self control by which you stand firm in the Lord.

Meet all the trials of life, whenever they come

With the gifts and graces of your faith in Christ,
And then you will find why the Spirit has given them!

Bible Study - Matthew 23:23-33

²³ *'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You tithe mint, as well as dill and cumin, and have neglected the basics of the law: justice and mercy and faith. You should have practiced these whilst not forgetting to tithe. ²⁴ You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!*

²⁵ *'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶*

You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside may also be cleansed.

²⁷ 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look well presented on the outside, but they are full of the bones of the dead on the inside together with all manner of filth. ²⁸ In the same way, you look righteous to others on the outside, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

²⁹ 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, ³⁰ and then say, "If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have joined them in shedding the blood of the prophets." ³¹ You therefore publicly accept that you are indeed the descendants of those who murdered the prophets, ³² and you finish off their work! ³³ You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being condemned to hell?'

Review

These words of Jesus are the 4th to 7th 'woes' which he spoke to the crowds and the disciples in Jerusalem about the Pharisees. It was not a condemnation of Judaism as a whole, but of the emerging Pharisaism which was dominating the life of God's people, and would march on unchallenged after Jesus' death, creating division, yet creating the Judaism we know today. Yesterday we looked at the first, second and third woes, so with the same understanding of the context provided by yesterday's study, we will proceed through these four remain pronouncements.

The 4th Woe 'you strain out a gnat but swallow a camel'! Jesus' basic condemnation of the Pharisees here is that they had skewed God's Word by placing emphasis upon details of the Law at the expense of what was important. It was generally accepted that everything eaten should be 'tithed' (Lev 27:30-33, Num 18:21-32, etc.) and offered unconditionally to God. However, the Old Testament itself did not mention the tithing of herbs and spices for cooking, but unbelievably, the intricate Pharisaic foods laws did! Perhaps Jesus expressed a sense of humour by including this trivial example of Pharisaism! Nevertheless, the Pharisees were well aware that minor issues were of secondary importance to basic principles. What Jesus pointed out in verse 23 was that the prophets provided the clues to real meaning of the Law; the Law did not interpret the Law, but the prophets did. He illustrated this by saying that 'justice, mercy and faith' were more important to tithing herbs (similar to Micah 6:8: 'do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God', but similar passages can be found within all the Prophets). Yet again, Jesus pointed out to the Pharisees their ignorance of scripture.

Jesus' final illustration is based on Lev. 11:41 which forbade the consuming of 'swarming things'. For this reason, Pharisees strained their drinks to remove small flies! A camel, however was unclean, although a useful beast of burden, and the idea of swallowing one would have been highly offensive to the Pharisees. I wonder how much of a laugh was raised by this obviously humorous aside!

The 5th Woe The fifth woe is about the difference between the inner reality of faith and its outward practice, and it echoes much of Jesus' previous teaching. In this 'woe', Jesus illustrated a similar principle by talking about the washing of cups. No-one, according to everyday logic, would wash the outside of a cup alone. The point is that if a cup is to be really clean, all of it must be washed; therefore, if we are to be completely clean before God, we need to be righteous before Him inwardly, and also practice our faith outwardly in a way which expresses what God has done within us. The Pharisees may have 'washed

the outside' by their show of religiosity and piety, but they did not demonstrate the inner righteousness God required, so Jesus called them 'blind'!

The 6th Woe This woe is very similar to the 5th. This time Jesus used the example of the decorated tombs highly visible in the countryside outside Jerusalem, even to this day. Common hillside tombs were regarded as unclean because of their contents and were consequently 'whitewashed' to warn people to keep away, but the words of v27 suggest Jesus was speaking about the more elaborate tombs of respected righteous people, including those regarded as prophets, the edifices of which were often polished and decorated as memorial shrines. Nevertheless, said Jesus, the contents of such tombs were all the same, just like the contents of an unrighteous heart!

Verse 28 continues by accusing the Pharisees of 'hypocrisy and lawlessness'. We are used to Jesus making the accusation of hypocrisy, but here, the addition of lawlessness is cutting, but consistent with what Jesus was saying. The Pharisees were lawless because they had lost sight of the basics of Mosaic Law of which they claimed to be the guardian.

The 7th Woe Following on from the previous 'woe', Jesus painted a picture of the Pharisees going about the decoration of the tombs of famous prophets outside Jerusalem. We do not know the burial location of most of the Old Testament prophets, but there is speculation that some of the later post-exilic prophets, possibly including Zechariah, were buried outside Jerusalem with tombs still evident in Jesus' day but not today. Jesus baited the prophets by commenting on the kinds of things people said as they cleaned and polished these ancient tombs. He said it was hypocritical for the Pharisees to say that they would not have killed the people they now claimed to honour (5:21, 19:18); why should they be any different now! He knew they were planning His own death, so with irony, He went on to tell them to 'finish off their work' (23:32)!

The whole series of woes was then concluded by Jesus by using a phrase directly from the teaching of John the Baptist, 'you brood of vipers' (23:33, 3:7). John's message was the same as Jesus, so Jesus therefore pronounced the same consequence as John the Baptist had before, saying that they would not escape the consequences of their neglect of the things of God. Jesus said similarly 'how can you escape being condemned to hell' (23:33)!

Interestingly, in Jesus' day it was commonly believed that the End Times would come when the guilt of the Gentiles was too much for God to bear. Jesus turned this idea on its head; He predicted the End Times as a result of the unbearable sins of Israel, as led by the Pharisees.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Do you believe the Church today has created regulations which do not reflect the heart of God's Law? What are they, and how do you know?
2. In what ways do we honour people of the past without learning from them? Think of examples from the history of your own church.
3. Does any part of this passage of scripture make you wonder whether you are a bit like a Pharisee? Ought it to make you feel like this?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

There are many points within today's passage of scripture from which we can learn. One is about the relationship between tradition and scripture. The Pharisees misunderstood the role of tradition in matters of faith by allowing it dominance over scripture, as Jesus