

Wolves in Wool:

Pharisees, Faithfulness and Fraud

Matthew 23

Sermon Two: From Bad to Worse!

Opening ILL: Ravi Zacharias. Normally I don't name names, especially from the pulpit. My heart is broken because another well-known Christian preacher has been revealed to be duplicitous. He was not only susceptible to a very human, even common propensity (sexual sin), but he covered it up and attacked his victims when they tried to bring his sin to light. He led two lives, leaving those who trusted him to mourn while those who didn't to mock.

I would like to start tonight by acknowledging 4 assumptions that I bring to the interpretation of this text:

- Everyone who goes into ministry wants to help people and make their lives better.
- It is very possible to be/become self-deceived.
- Poison that looks like good food is the most dangerous poison. Because of this, the lie that looks most like the truth is the most insidious lie.
- Danger and damage in a spiritual sense is not always easy to detect and expose.

I would also like to share 4 reasons why these wolves in wool get this way:

- They may become disenchanted with the true nature of working with people/ministry.
- They may become external in their focus. It is easier to do than to be! It is also easier to impact people's behavior than their hearts.
- They lose faith, but still need to pay their bills. Some give up and leave; others give up and stay.
- They may become drunk with esteem, or the lack thereof. They believe they are so important to the cause, that God will overlook their sin.

I. Introduction/Review

A. Who were these Wolves in Wool?

B. What was the problem and what is the solution?

1. Hypocrisy
2. Legalism

II. Woe #1—You close people off from the Kingdom! (v. 13)

A. How does Jesus say this?

1. You close the door in front of people.
2. You don't enter the kingdom.
3. You don't allow people who want to enter the Kingdom to go in.

B. How do they do this?

1. By making the Gospel harder than it needs to be!
 - i. Belief itself is difficult and requires a miraculous work of God.
 - ii. Focusing on secondary things turns people off who would be otherwise interested.
 - 1) **ILL:** Spiritual seeker in college. She met with the Mormons and then me.
2. By scandalizing people by their example so that the Gospel becomes an object of scorn!
 - i. The world loves to see hypocrisy in us because, in their mind, it validates their rebellion!

III. Woe #2—You devour widows' houses! (v. 14)

A. Should this verse even be here? The textual problem.

1. This verse is not in the oldest, most valued manuscripts of most modern scholars.
2. This verse is, however, in the overwhelming majority of the manuscripts (albeit in different places).
3. The content of this verse is clearly biblical, in that it appears in Mark 12:40 (and Luke 20:47)
4. Our approach to things like this will be to assume that this verse is genuine and explain the verse.

B. They devour widows' houses!

1. What does this mean? This means that they took advantage of the most desperate.
2. Widows were supposed to be protected, not exploited.
 - i. **Isaiah 10:1-2** Woe to those who enact evil statutes And to those who constantly record unjust decisions, So as to deprive the needy of justice And rob the poor of My people of *their* rights, So that widows may be their spoil And that they may plunder the orphans.
 - ii. **James 1:27** Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

C. They offer elaborate prayers!

1. Notice that these two things are happening concurrently. That's what hypocrisy is!
2. In fact, they may justify their oppression by focusing on their performance.

D. They are increasing their judgement!

1. Many duplicitous people think that if their good outweighs their bad, that they will be accepted by God.
2. These wolves in wool were only taking their judgment from bad to worse!

IV. Woe #3—You make them twice as much a child of Hell! (v. 15)

A. They expend a lot of effort into making proselytes.

1. They travel land and sea—they are missionaries!
2. They do all of this to simply make one convert!

B. Once they make a convert, they take this person from bad to worse.

1. From an accidental ignorance (bad) to a willful hypocrisy (worse).
2. From doing evil and not expecting judgement (bad) to doing evil and expecting reward (worse).
3. From believing false doctrine (bad) to exaggerating false doctrine (worse).
 - i. Have you ever notice that people who worship at the altar of celebrity pastors almost always become more extreme than the ones they are following?
 - 1) Example: My friend calling his favorite celebrity pastor “The Good Shepherd” of the sheep! [And lightning strikes!]

V. Some practical exhortations

A. Make sure you are truly relying on the Gospel!

1. Are you relying on your good works, reputation or even vocation to stand before the Lord?
2. Let the gospel crush you and then heal you!
3. **Hebrews 4:1-2** Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. ²For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard.

B. Make sure you are protecting those of us who are susceptible to becoming wolves in wool!

1. Let me encourage you to be more intentional about encouraging your pastors and your elders.
2. Let me encourage you to be more faithful in praying for your pastors and elders.
3. Let me encourage you to test everything we teach by the word of God.

C. Make sure you are battling the sin which so easily entangles you, for your sake and for the sake of the Gospel!

1. None of us are perfect. All of us, then, have a battle to fight over the sins to which we are prone.
2. **Romans 8:12-13** So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh--¹³for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.