

# "HEAR YE HIM"

## A Devotional Series For Radio

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The Sermon: WOE UNTO YOU SCRIBES, PHARISEES, HYPOCRITES

Scripture: Matthew 23:10-30, condensed. The "Woes" against the Pharisees.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in ..... Ye devour widow's houses, and for a pretence make long prayers ..... Ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he is made, you make him two-fold more the child of hell than he was before, like unto yourselves ..... Ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin; and have omitted the weightier things of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith; these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. You blind guides, who strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel; who make yourselves appear unto men that ye would not commit the least sin, and yet you yourselves transgress the whole law. .... Ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of exhortation and excess ..... Ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but are within full of the bones of the dead, and of all uncleanness ..... You build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous ..... (and) you yourselves kill the prophets like unto your fathers. You serpents, and generation of vipers! How can you escape the damnation of hell?

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Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength, and ..... thy neighbor as thyself.

It is very comforting and highly self-satisfying for us to read Jesus' denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees. When we read it today we thank God that we are not as the Pharisees, and feel a sort of glow of self-satisfaction that Jesus would never have spoken to us like that. We are good church members, good Christians. But we should remember that the scribes and Pharisees were the most devout and active and devoted church people of their day. They were the religious leaders of the nation, the pillars of the church. It was they who supported the temple and the synagogues, taught the law, and regulated the moral and spiritual affairs of the people.

Nowhere in the recorded gospels is Jesus depicted as delivering any scathing, blistering, withering denunciation against the sort of people that most religious men are prone to label as sinners -- people such as liars, thieves, murderers, adulterers, drunkards, gluttons, sluggards, or embezzlers. He once called Herod a "fox," and that is about the extent of his denunciation of individual sinners. To say that he never denounced

a sinner is not to say that he ever condoned a sin. He hated and deplored sin, but he loved the sinner. His greatest outburst of condemnation was reserved for those hypocrites who despised and shunned the sinner guilty of the obvious sins of the flesh, but who cherished within themselves deeper and more damnable sins of heart and mind and spirit. This kind of hypocrisy is by no means confined to the Pharisees of Jesus' day.

The sin of the scribes and Pharisees was the sin of trying to be one thing while professing to be another -- the sin of divided allegiance -- the sin of trying to give the external and obvious allegiance to God while serving their own selves, having their own way, and following their own wills. The sin of the Pharisees is still the besetting sin of many good people today. We know what we ought to be; we profess to be the kind of people we ought to be; but we are not; and deep inside we know that we are not. A man who is trying to be two kinds of man at the same time never knows which kind of man he is. He is divided within himself; he is engaged in a perpetual

inner conflict. He feels subconsciously guilty. He hates himself and the sin that makes him what he is. But he must keep up appearances; therefore he covers up, justifies himself, and distracts attention from himself by hating lesser sinners and condemning and calling attention to their sins.

This is not only the sin of individuals; it is the sin of nations which call themselves Christian, and give a nominal allegiance to Christ and to his teachings. In the past and even in the present, some of them have preached and professed to believe in the universal Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, but have dominated, exploited, oppressed, and denied worth and dignity to other peoples and races. With a passionate vehemence born of a guilty conscience and of that inner conflict between profession and action, they have justified and defended their prejudices. They have preached the power of love, but raced with each other to build more deadly implements of war and destruction. They have preached humility, but continued to bask contentedly in their pride of culture, race, and material achievement. They have preached the gospel of sacrificial service, yet demanded that others serve them. No wonder that our western civilization is a bewildered, confused, and befuddled civilization today. No wonder that the conflict between this sense of superiority and this sense of inner guilt is making us a nation of people subject to all kinds of fears, all kinds of physical and nervous and mental ills, with our doctors' offices and psychiatrists' couches always crowded, and our hospitals and mental institutions always filled.

The sin of the Pharisees was that they made a great show of professing religion, but paid little or no heed to the great commandments: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all .... and thy neighbor as thyself." Their lives were divided. They insisted on the form and the letter of the law, but denied the spirit. They multiplied and added to the law so many petty rules and restrictions that no ordinary man could remember or keep them; but they themselves failed to keep the greatest commandments of all, to love the Lord with all, and to love neighbor as self. By their insistence on meticulous observance of petty laws they kept others out of the kingdom, but they would not obey the greater commandments and enter in themselves.

The Pharisees took an unseemly pride in not doing some relatively unimportant things they counted as sins. Some of the people who today regard themselves as the world's best Christians still measure their righteousness in terms of the things they don't do. The Pharisees prayed long prayers, but devoured widow's houses. Today's Pharisees also pray long prayers and preach love, but in actual practice assume that a predatory economic system, colonial exploitation, racial discrimination, and aggressive war are still the necessary and inevitable instruments of our modern economic, political, and social life.

The Pharisees were more concerned about the form of the oaths they took than they were with the spirit of honesty which requires no oaths at all to make a covenant or agreement binding. They were more concerned about the meticulous details of tithing the smallest of seeds than they were about mercy, judgment, and faith. They carefully strained a gnat out of their wine, but in terms of Jesus' hyperbolic humor, easily swallowed a camel. They were clothed in outward piety and white purity, but within were death and corruption and filthiness. They gave lip service to the ancient prophets, but meanwhile killed the modern prophets who called them to observe the ancient teachings with undivided loyalty.

Our Christian civilization is sick today because as a whole, in spite of many good and sincere and worthy individuals, it is guilty of this ancient crime of the Pharisees -- professing and pretending to believe and to be one thing, but failing to live up to its beliefs and pretensions. No other civilization has lived under quite such a tension or such a contradiction -- a profession of Christian principles on one hand, and the actual guilt of ignoring those principles on the other. The pagan has no such division of loyalty, no such qualms of conscience. He worships gods of hate, of narrow racialism, of cruel strength -- gods who are expected to help their followers to annihilate all enemies -- gods in whom mercy or love or pity or humility or self-sacrifice would be counted as weakness. Perhaps in some respects the pagan who does not profess love and brotherhood and service and humility is better than the Christian who professes, but like the Pharisees and scribes and hypocrites, does not.