

Bi123 The Gospels 2

Lesson Bi123-10 Warning Against Hypocrisy

When you were a child, did you ever play a game where you pretended to be someone else? Perhaps you wanted to be a king or a soldier or a nurse. You could make a paper mask, to appear angry or beautiful. Sometimes adults, too, pretend to be someone they are not. They don't wear paper masks, but they use their faces in a way to hide the truth about themselves from others. The word 'hypocrite' means someone who is pretending, hiding their real self. Most of the Pharisees hid behind what they did, so others would not see the kind of people they really were. Jesus saved his harshest words for such leaders.

In the last lesson, Jesus had silenced the Pharisees and their questions. This had taken place in the temple three days before the Passover. In this lesson we hear the final words Jesus spoke in the temple. He would never return there again. The crowds who listened to Jesus consisted of the curious, the believers, and the religious leaders. For this last group he had a parting message. He told the crowds the truth about the religious leaders and the Pharisees. They taught the Word of God as the successors of Moses, saying people should follow what the Law taught. "But," Jesus warned, "don't do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." They are hypocrites.

What exactly did Jesus accuse these men of doing? He gave several examples of what he meant when he said, "Don't follow their example." They loved to wear their fancy religious robes and have the seats of honor at banquets and in the synagogues. They especially enjoyed being called 'Rabbi' or 'my master' in the marketplace and being addressed as 'father' on religious issues. Summarizing the first part of his message he said about them, "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Matt 23:1-12).

Jesus challenged his listeners to follow the Pharisees around and see what he was talking about. He used several short illustrations to explain. His purpose was to show them the true nature of these religious leaders and how God viewed them.

In his first example, he talked about heaven's door. The Pharisees' spiritual knowledge was like the key to unlock the door for those who wanted to enter the kingdom of heaven. But instead of opening the door for seekers, they actually blocked the way. They refused to enter themselves, and by their teaching, refused to give the key to others.

Jesus gave another example of their evil ways. In that day, religious scribes often handled a man's estate after his death, and had to care for his widow. This paid position gave many of them the opportunity to rob both the dead man and his widow. Then to hide their guilt, they would do public religious displays, like long prayers on religious holidays. They wanted to appear to be kind, yet were greedy thieves. They were hypocrites.

Then he spoke against how they performed their religious duties. He focused on the making of converts, giving of tithes, and performing purification rites. They had changed all

these good practices into prideful behavior displeasing to God. When they made Gentile converts, they taught them only to keep Jewish rituals, which brought no salvation. This happened through the instruction and example they gave. Concerning tithes, they made sure they gave every tenth plant growing in their gardens to God. God didn't need their plants; he rather wanted them not to neglect the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. Finally, they were very concerned that everything seen by others was kept clean. What they forgot was that God first looked at the heart, to see if it had been cleansed of evil. Jesus said their hearts were full of greed and self-indulgence. They appeared to be holy, but their hypocrisy displeased God.

Then Jesus spoke of the temple, the thing that really produced income and honor for these leaders. They had become confused and blinded about what was most important in God's house. They thought the important things were what people brought to the temple to enrich them. Jesus reminded them the temple was God's house, not theirs. God in heaven was the true master of that house.

Then Jesus compared the teachers of the law and the Pharisees to whitewashed tombs. Before Passover each year grave stones received a fresh coat of whitewash, so no one would step on them and become unclean. The tombs looked beautiful on the outside, but inside were full of bones and everything unclean. In the same way, the leaders appeared outwardly righteous, but on the inside were full of hypocrisy and wickedness. God still saw the sin of unchanged hearts.

The final point Jesus made concerned the fact that they even decorated the tombs of the prophets their fathers had killed. Many hoped building those tombs might atone for their fathers' sins. He knew they would soon crucify him, the one all the martyred prophets had foretold.

For all these sins Jesus had the same response, "Woe to you!" These words spoke of judgment and agony ahead. "You snakes! How will you escape being condemned to hell? And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, recorded throughout scripture. Truly I tell you; all this will come on this generation."

In this lesson Jesus addressed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. At the end of his condemnation of their hypocrisy, Christ still reveals his love for a nation that has refused it. He said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you. How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matt 23:13-38).

This story is **important** because it reminds us that God will judge all people, including religious leaders, who misrepresent his love and justice by how they live their lives.

The **main truth** of this story is that leaders should guard their hearts and actions so they are not guilty of the sin of hypocrisy. They must practice what they preach.

Let's **review** this lesson—

1. Why did Jesus warn his disciples concerning the teachings and actions of the Pharisees?

- A. [Pause] If you answered that Jesus said, “Don’t do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach,” you are correct.
2. Who did Jesus address with these words, “You snakes! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”
- A. [Pause] If you answered he spoke these words about the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, you are right.
3. What did Jesus say was more important than giving of tithes to God?
- A. [Pause] If you answered that Jesus said, “You should not neglect the more important matters—justice, mercy and faithfulness,” you answered correctly.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to learn these stories so you can tell them from memory. After telling the stories to someone, ask this question, “Why do you think Jesus singled out the religious leaders for his greatest condemnation?”