

[R5389 : page 26]

"WOE UNTO YOU, PHARISEES!"

– FEBRUARY 15. – LUKE 11:37-54. –

"Be not deceived; God is not mocked." – GALATIANS 6:7.

AMONGST the various sects of the Jews of our Lord's day we have every reason to believe that the Pharisees constituted the best – the one most loyal to God and His Law. The Sadducees professed no faith in a future life. They were infidels and politicians. The Essenes were a small sect not mentioned in the Bible, a kind of Higher Critics, of little faith and confused by mixing paganism with Judaism. The Pharisees were what might be termed the orthodox body of Jews. Their name signifies "holy people." In today's Study, Jesus, not deigning to mention the other sects, which had entirely departed from God, addresses Himself especially to the Pharisees, pointing out wherein, with all their boasted holiness, they came far short of what would be acceptable to God.

A Pharisee invited Jesus to dine with him at his house. The invitation was promptly accepted, and Jesus passed in and sat down at the table with the others, without going through the formalism of washings, customary to the Pharisees. We are not from this to suppose that Jesus was careless. Rather, we are to recognize that the washing of hands by the Pharisees was a ceremony which Jesus especially wished to ignore, in order that He might have the opportunity of criticising that spirit which the ceremony well illustrated.

The host thought of Jesus as a holy man, not a publican or a sinner, and remarked that it was strange that He had not performed the usual ceremony of washing. [R5389 : page 27] This remark gave opportunity for a discourse on the subject. Jesus pointed out that a great deal of the religion which even the holiest of the Jews practised was merely ceremony, formalism, and not true religion.

Outwardly they were clean, but inwardly their hearts were unclean – given to extortion – spiritual wickedness. The Lord sought to show that in God's sight the heart is the important matter and that the outward cleansing is quite secondary. The inside of the cup should first be attended to, and afterward the outside.

As a matter of fact, those who do come into heart harmony with the Lord, and who are cleansed by obedience to His Message and its spirit, are thereby made clean every whit – outwardly, as well as inwardly. It is safe to say that every one who is pure in heart will, according to his circumstances and opportunities, seek to be clean in person, in speech, in every way. The principle working in his heart will exercise an influence upon all his words and thoughts and doings – all his days and all his hours.

From the expressions of our Lord here and elsewhere it would appear that one of the great failings of the Pharisees was covetousness. According to the Greek, Jesus called them "money-lovers." On one occasion He told them that this covetousness, greed, love of money, led them to disregard dishonestly the rights of others. He said: Ye devour widows' houses, meaning that they would take advantage of widows to accumulate property for themselves. As a matter of fact, it would appear that many of the Pharisees were quite rich.

Jesus pointed out that with such wrong conditions of heart God could not be well pleased with them, even though they ever so carefully observed the outward regulations of the Jewish Law. He called attention to the fact that in their outward observance of the tithing (giving one-tenth of their income every year) they were particular even to those small seeds of which they grew but a trifling quantity. In everything they were careful to give one-tenth, but they neglected the weightier matters of the Law – to do justice in their dealings and to have mercy toward others. The Master did not object to their giving one-tenth of everything, but declared that

these things they should do and not to leave the more important things undone.

Another time He reproved them, saying, Ye strain a gnat and swallow a camel – a strong hyperbole, a figure of speech, showing how inconsistent were their reasonings and doings. The straining out of a gnat represented their carefulness to avoid things strangled. The swallowing of a camel meant that, on the contrary, while careful about the little things, they would be thoroughly disregarding of God's Law on the weightier matters. Jesus declared that they should be benevolent rather than covetous and self-seeking, and that if this were their disposition of heart the outward cleanliness would be less important.

He declared that they chose the chief seats in the synagogue and salutations in the market-places. Their covetousness took the form of pride, as well as dishonesty. They wanted to be very prominent in things religious, to be very popular and to be hailed as "Rabbi" – master, learned one. Jesus declared that they were like sepulchres, outwardly clean and whitewashed, but inwardly full of death, corruption, uncleanness, unholiness. They were holiness people merely in the outward form or ceremonial.

It is not for us to judge all or any of the sects of Christendom and to apply the Master's words to them. Unlike Jesus, we have not the power to read men's hearts, nor the authority to pronounce them hypocrites. The Lord's message to us is, "Judge [condemn] nothing before the time." At His Second Coming, He declares, everything will be revealed. The true status of each will be shown. He declares that at that time many will be saying, Lord, have we not done many mighty works in Thy name? but that He will, nevertheless, declare to them: I do not recognize you. Ye have been workers of iniquity – workers of unrighteousness – in My name.

Without judging personally, we may all fear that much of the Christianity of our time is well described by the Apostle Paul.

Speaking of our day he says, "Having a form of godliness, but denying its power" – outwardly Christians, but inwardly skeptics – covetous, extortionate, unjust. Men are not able to judge rightly of such matters today. Some who are loyal and zealous for the Lord are branded as hypocrites and deceivers; while others, disloyal, merely whited sepulchres, may be lauded to the skies as denominational idols or generous benefactors of earthly systems.

Some of the Pharisees, especially educated, talented and well-versed in the teachings of the Law and the Prophets, were styled lawyers – Doctors of the Law, the equivalent of what today are termed Doctors of Divinity. Turning to these, Jesus upbraided them, saying that they placed upon the common people grievous burdens which they themselves would not bear. He meant that they gave such hard interpretations of God's Law as were discouraging to the common people – setting before the publicans and sinners standards of excellence and perfection which they themselves would not think of even trying to live up to. Apparently the thought was [R5390 : page 27] thereby to impress the common people with the sanctity of the clergy, that they might be the more reverential toward them. They builded sepulchres for the Prophets of old, forgetful that their fathers, whose same spirit they had, were the very ones who had killed those Prophets – had persecuted them to death.

WOE! WOE! WOE! WOE! WOE!

While Jesus prophesied woes against the Pharisees, we are not to think of Him as condemning them to eternal torment, nor as intimating that this would be the nature of the woe that would come upon them. The woe to the Pharisees was that they were about to miss the great blessing which God had promised to the Jewish nation; namely, that of chief association in Messiah's Kingdom. (Genesis 12:3.) The Promise belonged to Israel primarily. Because of their unpreparedness for it, this was taken from them to be given to another Israel. Had enough of them been "Israelites indeed" to

complete God's foreordained Elect, the Bride of Christ, the Kingdom offer would not have gone to the Gentiles.

The Pharisees, of all the Jews, were in the most favored place for attaining to joint-heirship with Messiah; but they recognized not what they were losing, as Jesus recognized it. His expression, "Woe unto you," is therefore to be regarded sympathetically, pityingly. This thought is borne out in the context, which proceeds to declare the great time of trouble which came upon their nation at the time of Jesus' crucifixion, and reached its completion in A.D. 70 in the total destruction of their city and polity.

As the Lord here declares, that awful trouble was a settlement of Jehovah's account with the Jewish nation for all the righteous blood which had been shed and for which no expiation had been made. Little did those Pharisees know that their hypocrisy was not only hindering **[R5390 : page 28]** themselves from preparation to be joint-heirs with Messiah in His Kingdom, but was also hindering the masses of the people, who relied upon them for information. Jesus refers to this in the succeeding verse (52), saying, Ye have taken away the key of knowledge. Ye neither enter into the Kingdom yourselves, nor do you permit others to enter who would be glad to do so, but who are misled by relying upon your judgment.

Bible students very generally believe that the great time of trouble which closed the Jewish Age was an advanced picture, or prophecy, of the still wider spread of the Time of Trouble which will close this Gospel Age and bring woe to many of the Pharisees of our day, as well as tribulation upon all evil-doers in connection with the overthrow of present institutions, as a prelude to the establishment of Justice – the Messianic Reign of Glory.

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