

NT LESSON #20

“WOE UNTO YOU, . . . HYPOCRITES”

(MATTHEW 21-23; JOHN 12:1-8)

by Ted L. Gibbons

INTRODUCTION: I held up two glasses of water and asked my seminary class to tell me how they were different. It was a difficult assignment. The containers were identical, the amounts contained were equal, the water of the same apparent purity. They could see no difference, but were willing to concede that there might indeed be invisible, even deadly differences that they could not identify just by looking.

I invited a student to come and take a taste of each. I did it myself to reassure her that no danger was involved. The taste test convinced her at once that there was a difference. In fact, one receptacle held liquid from the fountain in the hallway, the other distilled water.

Once I had told them this, class members were able to discuss the differences with some expertise. Both vessels contained water that was *medically* pure—you could drink either one and not suffer ill effects—but only one of them had water that was *chemically* pure. The distilled water was H₂O and nothing else. The tap water, if examined under a microscope would reveal such things as a revolting collection of dead organisms and traces of the chemicals that had killed them.

The lesson was that it is one thing to *seem* pure, good, and wholesome, but it is quite another thing to *be* pure. Elder Wirthlin said:

Do we, indeed, actually live the gospel, or do we just manifest the appearance of righteousness so that those around us assume we are faithful when, in reality, our hearts and unseen actions are not true to the Lord’s teachings?

Do we take on only the “form of godliness” while denying the “power thereof”? 11

Are we righteous in fact, or do we feign obedience only when we think others are watching?

The Lord has made it clear that He will not be fooled by appearances,

and He has warned us not to be false to Him or to others. He has cautioned us to be wary of those who project a false front, who put on a bright pretense that hides a darker reality. We know that the Lord “looketh on the heart” and not on the “outward appearance.” 12

The Savior taught us to “judge not according to the appearance” 13 and warned us against wolves who “come to [us] in sheep’s clothing” and whose deception can only be discovered “by [examining] their fruits” (Joseph B. Wirthlin, “True to the Truth,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 15).

Today we will talk about people who looked lovely, but who were, under the divine scrutiny of the Savior, revealed to be filled with filth, iniquity, and hypocrisy.

25 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.

26 Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.

27 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.

28 Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. (Matthew 23:25-28)

I. MARY ANOINTS JESUS' FEET (John 12:1-8)

1 ¶ THEN Jesus six days before the Passover came to Bethany, where Lazarus was which had been dead, whom he raised from the dead.

2 There they made him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with him.

3 Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment.

4 Then saith one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, which should betray him,

5 Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?

6 This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein.

7 Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this.

8 For the poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always. (John 12:1-8)

Less than a week before the Passover and his crucifixion, the Savior spent time with his friends in Bethany. He had always been welcome here, but now, with Lazarus risen from the tomb and the family reunited by the Savior's incomparable power, he must have been accepted with a devotion that defies description. They made him a supper.

Mary, in what Elder James E. Talmage calls "an expression of adoration . . . the fragrant outwelling of a heart overflowing with worship and affection" (*Jesus The Christ*, p. 512) anointed the feet of the Savior with spikenard. This ointment "was among the most highly prized of oriental unguents. That with which Mary anointed Jesus is described by Matthew and Mark as 'very precious,' and by John as 'very costly.'" (Elder James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, p.523)

Just how valuable a gift it was is made clear by the text. In Matthew 20:2 we learn that a penny was a day's wages for a common laborer. This pound of ointment was worth three hundred pence (pennies), or three hundred days wages! In an average year, I work about 240 days.

Judas complained at the wasted resources: "Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?" (John 12:5). Of course Judas cared nothing for the poor. He was a thief (John 12:6), and he supervised for the funds of the Savior and the 12. (John 12:5,6). A bag with 300 pence would be much easier to lighten surreptitiously than the nearly empty one he was carrying. In what way was Judas a hypocrite? In what way is a pretended interest in the welfare of the

poor by one concerned only with his own welfare, hypocrisy? Are there examples of this kind of hypocrisy in our own families? Our wards? Our stakes?

The anointing of the Savior's feet by Mary with this expensive ointment was for her the highest possible expression of her love. There could not have been a more extraordinary way for her to communicate her feelings of reverence and gratitude for what he had done for her and her family. How do you show your love? What sacrifices are you willing to make to communicate to the Lord your love for him and what he has done for you?

II JESUS MAKES A TRIUMPHAL ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM (Matthew 21:1-11)

1 And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples,

2 Saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me.

3 And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them.

4 All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying,

5 Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.

6 And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them,

7 And brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon.

8 And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way.

9 And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest.

10 And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying,
Who is this?

11 And the multitude said, This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee.

After a time of preparation and a diminishing of his confrontational appearances in Jerusalem, Jesus returned to the city. He spoke with great power at the Feast of Tabernacles, declaring himself the light of the world and the source of living water. He raised from the tomb a man four days dead. The Saturday night before the beginning of what is often called “the greatest week in history” he spent in the town of Bethany with dear friends, half a mile from the temple mount of Jerusalem. Then, on Sunday morning, he departed for Jerusalem. *The time was at hand and his hour had come.*

The response of the people was stunning. The Pharisees were beside themselves. “Behold, the world is gone after him,” they said to one another (John 12:19). Matthew tells us that “a very great multitude” greeted him and spread their clothing and the branches of palms in his pathway” (See Matthew 21:8). The shouting, thronging multitude lining the streets of the Holy City this day certainly contained some of the same multitude who would scream. “Crucify him,” the following Friday (Mark 15:13,14), but on this day, they welcomed him as the Messiah. The compounding witness of his teachings, his miracles, and especially the raising of Lazarus from the dead, had brought all but the most skeptical to believe, at least for a time, that he was whom he had claimed to be. Their cry was, “Hosanna to the Son of David” (Matthew 21:9). *Hosanna* means “save now” or “save us now.” *Son of David* was a popular Jewish title for the coming Messiah (See Matthew 1:1; 9:27; 2:23; 20:30; 22:41-45). Thus the people greeted Christ by saying, “Save us now, Messiah.”

And when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, Hosanna to the Son of David; they were sore displeased, And said unto him, Hearest thou what these say? And Jesus saith unto them, Yea; have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise? (Matthew 21:15,16).

Nicodemus is the only leader of the Jews of whom the scriptures make mention, who seemed to evaluate the claims of the Savior on their own merits (John 3:1-13; John 7:50-53; John 19:38). Others reacted to him with fear and hatred. “*If he is*

*right, we are out of work . . .”*they seemed to feel, “*and our lives would be so much more convenient if he were not around.*” So while many in Jerusalem welcomed him as their Savior, the scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees turned their efforts and power to the task of killing him.

Today it remains possible to misunderstand the Savior and to keep him out of our hearts and lives, but those lining the streets of Jerusalem teach us that we ought to welcome him and cry out with joy when he is near.

III. JESUS GIVES THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS AND THE PARABLE OF THE HOUSEHOLDER. (Matthew 21:23-46)

23 And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?

24 And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things.

25 The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him?

26 But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet.

27 And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.

28 ¶ But what think ye? A [certain] man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard.

29 He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went.

30 And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I [go], sir: and went not.

31 Whether of them twain did the will of [his] father? They say unto him,

The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.

32 For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen [it], repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.

33 ¶ Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country:

34 And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it.

35 And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another.

36 Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise.

37 But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son.

38 But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance.

39 And they caught him, and cast [him] out of the vineyard, and slew [him].

40 When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?

41 They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out [his] vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons.

42 Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?

43 Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.

44 And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.

45 And when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them.

46 But when they sought to lay hands on him, they feared the multitude, because they took him for a prophet.

The question posed the following day by the “chief priests and elders” was., “by what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?” The Savior required them to answer a question before he would answer theirs, a question they were unwilling to answer.

The parable of the two sons is a description of the Jewish leaders and those among the Jews so thoroughly condemned by them. The first son refused to serve but repented and did so; the second agreed to serve, but would not (See Matthew 21:28-30). As he explained the meaning of this parable, he said

Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him (Matthew 21:31,32).

The JST changes the conclusion of this parable:

For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and bore record of me, and ye believed him not; but the publicans and the harlots believed him; and ye, afterward, when ye had seen me, repented not, that ye might believe him. For he that believed not John concerning me, cannot believe me, except he first repent. And except ye repent, the preaching of John shall condemn you at the day of judgment (Matthew 21:32-34, JST).

But in the second of these two parables at the end of Matthew 21, Jesus in fact teaches the source of his authority. Read the parable (vss. 33-46), recognizing that those to whom it is directed (the chief priests and elders), “perceived that he spoke of them.” (Matthew 21:45) And what did he speak of them?

1. (21:35,36) They beat, killed, and stoned the servants of the husbandman who had planted the vineyard and left it to their care.
2. (21:38,39) They threw the son out of the vineyard and killed him.

These Jewish leaders condemned themselves in their correct interpretation of the response of the householder to the wickedness of his husbandmen.

He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out [his] vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons (Matthew 21:41).

The listeners, once they knew that the Savior spoke of them, must have known that the son of the householder was Christ. That knowledge would have been the answer to their question about authority.

Any of us may feel some shame, a trace of pride, even indignation when we are called to repentance, but the solution is to change our attitudes. What did these “wicked husbandmen” want to do to the Lord ? (Matthew 21:46)

IV. THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES TRY TO TRAP JESUS (Matthew 22:15-46)

These men now tried to “entangle him in his talk” (Matthew 22:15). They should have known better. They had tried on several occasions to force the Redeemer into a position on doctrine or politics that they could then use to turn people against him. The question about authority in Matthew 21:23 was such an attempt. These verses contain three such attempts. The first is from the Herodians in Matthew 22:16, 17:

And they sent out unto him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, Master, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men. Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?

Note the response of the Savior to this question in verses 18-21. James E. Talmage said of the response of the Lord to this question, "Every human Soul is stamped with the image and superscription of God" (*Jesus The Christ*, 546, 547). The Herodians retreated from the battle in defeat. "They marvelled and went their way" (Matthew 22:22).

Later that same day came the Sadducees. Note that they do not believe in the resurrection (Matthew 22: 23). They ask a question about a woman who married seven brothers, all of whom died without offspring. Aside from some legitimate concerns about the cooking of this sister, we ought to look for the real message of the question, and then for the real question, which is not "whose wife shall she be of the seven?" (Matthew 22:28).

The context of this confrontation makes it abundantly clear that even the Sadducees who do not believe in life after death, knew that most Jews and Jesus did, and that most of them also believed in the eternity of the marriage covenant. Elder McConkie wrote:

It is difficult to understand why they would ask such a foolish question, even in ridicule, for every informed person already knew the answer. The matter had been fully analyzed and debated in the Rabbinical schools. `The Pharisees," for instance, as Farrar points out, "had already settled the question in a very obvious way, and quite to their own satisfaction, by saying that she should in the resurrection be the wife of the first husband" (Farrar, p. 561.) (*The Mortal Messiah*, Vol.3, p.375 - p.376).

The real question here, however is not about eternal marriage, but about the resurrection. It is to this matter that most of the Savior's attention is given: "But as touching the resurrection of the dead . . ." (Matthew 22:31) he began, and then gave an answer in verses 31 and 32 that "astonished" the multitude (22:33) and "put the Sadducees to silence" (22:34).

Next, after the routing of the Herodians and the Sadducees, the Pharisees "were gathered together." One of them "asked him a question, tempting him . . ." (Matthew 22:35). The question was, "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?" (Matthew 22:36). Regardless of the commandment he picked, they would have challenged his answer. "*Is 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me' more important than 'thou shalt not kill'?*" But the Savior answered with such precision

and power that no one else challenged him, and after a question or two of his own, this tactic was retired. “And no man was able to answer him a word, neither durst any man from that day forth ask him any more questions.” (Matthew 22:46)

We must not miss the lesson inherent in the answer to this question about the greatest of all the commandments. We must love God and we must love one another. Sometimes we can show our love to God by our love to those about us (see Mosiah 2:17). C.S. Lewis wrote:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship . . . It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal . . . everlasting splendors . . . Your neighbor is the holiest thing presented to your senses (*The Weight of Glory*, p. 210).

V. JESUS CONDEMNS THE SIN OF HYPOCRISY (Matthew 23)

Matthew 23 is a scathing rebuke, perhaps the most dramatic verbal chastisement given anywhere in holy writ. The Savior seems to be saying what Joseph Smith said when he finally published all of the sins of his enemies in the *Nauvoo Neighbor*. He declared “forbearance is no longer a virtue.” These Jewish rulers were hypocrites at the highest level and the time for parables and hidden messages was past! “Ye 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 ye yourselves, transgress the whole law” (Matthew 23:21 JST). The list in Matthew 23 of their transgressions of the “whole law” is a staggering indictment. We have noticed a number of times through the lessons of this year that these Jewish leaders are devoid of the Spirit. But the scope of their wickedness is more vividly presented in these verses than in any other passage in scripture. J. Reuben Clark said of this chapter,

I can never forget that the most scathing denunciation that I know of in

our literature, scriptural or otherwise, is that denunciation which the Savior made, and which is recorded in the latter chapters of Matthew, against hypocrisy. He leaves one almost with the persuasion that nothing is so bad as that. (J. Reuben Clark, Jr., *Behold the Lamb of God*, p.292)

And while we may not have descended to the level at which these apostates found themselves, the Saviors indictment of hypocrisy should be a solemn warning for all of us.

CONCLUSION

If we draw near unto the Lord with our lips and our hearts are far from Him, then we are hypocrites. If we profess to be Latter-day Saints and have an outward semblance of religion, while in reality our lives do not correspond with our professions, then we are hypocrites--we are guilty of hypocrisy before the Lord, and His anger will be kindled against us. There is only one way for us where we are so situated. We have the greatest promises held out to us of any people that ever lived; we shall receive their fulfilment if we are faithful. But woe unto us Latter-day Saints if after these promises and blessings have been sealed upon us we do not so live as to be worthy of them. Woe unto us if we fall by the wayside through carelessness, through indifference, through neglect, through the commission of sin, until the Spirit of God is grieved and departs from us, and we are left to ourselves to wander and to grope in the dark, knowing not the true path. Woe unto us if we get into that condition; then we shall be far worse off than if we had never heard the Gospel of the Son of God; far worse off than those who have died in ignorance and never heard the name of Jesus, never heard the Gospel of salvation (*Collected Discourses*, Vol.1, George Q. Cannon, May 26, 1889).

In the most recent General Conference, Elder Eyring described his father in language that has stayed in my heart.

My father was like that. He was a scientist. He lectured to audiences in countries around the world. Once I read a talk he had given to a large scientific convention. In it, he referred to creation and a Creator as he talked about his science. I knew that few, if any, in that audience

would have shared his faith. So I said to him with wonder and admiration, "Dad, you bore your testimony." He looked at me with surprise on his face and said, "Did I?"

He had not even known that he was being brave. He simply said what he knew was true. When he bore testimony, even those who rejected it knew it came not by design but because it was part of him. *He was what he was, wherever he was* (General Conference, Saturday afternoon, April 2003, emphasis added).

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