

# SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Inside Out: Hidden Truths”

Rev. Mark Lampley

Matthew 23: 13-29a

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In our sermon series, “Inside Out,” we’re acknowledging our identity. We’re being honest about who we are with our shortcomings. We are coming clean with one another and with our sovereign God.

The Bible teaches us that we do belong to God as beloved ones. “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” We are who we are because of what God has done. We’re made in God’s image. God claims us in our baptism, so we are his.

Regularly we surrender to God, but that doesn’t mean that following God is always easy. We give into temptations, and we struggle with wanting power, prestige, and prosperity over what God designs for us. Often, we are one way on the surface and another way internally.

Today’s Scriptures acknowledge this fallen human condition. If you listen closely, you’ll note some word repetition as Jesus speaks to the crowds and his disciples in Jerusalem near the temple.

Matthew 23:13-29 <sup>13</sup> *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.”* <sup>[14]</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.”*

<sup>16</sup> *“Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.’* <sup>17</sup> *You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred?* <sup>18</sup> *You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.’* <sup>19</sup> *You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred?* <sup>20</sup> *Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.* <sup>21</sup> *And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it.* <sup>22</sup> *And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by the one who sits on it.*

<sup>23</sup> *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more*

*important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. <sup>24</sup> You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.*

*<sup>25</sup> “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. <sup>26</sup> Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.*

*<sup>27</sup> “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. <sup>28</sup> In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.*

*<sup>29</sup> “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous.*

The word of the Lord/ thanks be to God.

Heavy message of Jesus, huh? Passages like these force us to honestly look at how short we fall and how needy we are for a Savior. Scripture is known for comforting the afflicted, and afflicting the comfortable. To be transparent, I’m not trying to motivate you by guilt, [but if that’s a part of how you may feel today, maybe God can use it to draw you closer to him].

In this Matthew reading, you may have noticed “woe” occurred 7 times. You may have also noted other repetitious words like: “hypocrite” which occurs 6 times and “blind” 5 times.

Woe, back then, meant more than slow down or stop like it does these days, although nuances of today’s definition are found in that. During the first century, when Jesus declared “woe” it came from His heart of love that is broken by the stubborn blindness of God's people.

Jesus is telling us we can be blind/unseeing/unaware of what we are doing. It’s more than physical blindness. In its original language here, “blind” is used metaphorically, for people who do not see clearly. We can miss what’s in front of us, and our human condition can often lack self-awareness. Jesus points out, here, the blindness of the soul. It’s a lack of noticing one’s own mental, emotional, and spiritual self. It upsets God when we don’t have 20/20 vision of how we are cutting ourselves short and cutting others short. God designed us to have a much better and fuller life!

When I was growing up and got busted for doing something wrong, the most poignant/challenging thing my parents could say to me was, “You have broken my heart.” Those words stuck with me longer than the weeping willow switches that would fire up my rear end. Stuck with me longer than the hassle of doing extra chores or being grounded as consequences of my mistakes. YOU. BROKE. MY. HEART. I’m disappointed in your behavior. Ouch!

I wonder, when God looks at our inside authenticity, do we break God's heart? Do we appear more virtuous than we really are? Sadly, I do. Romans 3:23 reminds us, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Sin is a condition of the heart or an expression of that condition where we are estranged from God and fail to trust in God.

The "Brief Statement of Faith," another confession like the Apostle's Creed, says, "We rebel against God; we hide from our Creator. Ignoring God's commandments, we: violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature..."

We deserve God's condemnation. Fortunately, this is not the end of the story. This is the transition of the sermon, from a more of a dark message, to a message of growing light. God is doing a new thing. Can't you see it? God acts with justice, mercy, and love to redeem creation. "God is zealously passionate for our well-being."

Being loved by God is not a right or a privilege to be earned by attaining moral perfection or being "good enough." We'll never be good enough, yet we're not impossibly lost such that God can't reach us with his love.

While, not one of us is good enough on our own, we are all saved solely by the grace of God. We can't take this mercy for granted. Our response, so we don't take it for granted, is about seeing and paying attention, guarding the values of God in life and community. About being so grateful for grace, that we want to be used.

The scribes and Pharisees were not as accepting or merciful as God. They were making it hard for others to see the light. They refused to walk in the light, and they got in the way of others doing it. Their actions and their goals were off base. The problem was they were hiding the light and blocking others from seeing. Their blindness hurt themselves and those they were leading. The greedy and pretentious religious hypocrites brought grief and sorrow to those they ruled over, which, in turn, brought grief to God's heart.

Jesus' claim was the Jewish leaders majored in spiritually minor things and overlooked mercy and the weightier matters of the Torah. Their religious cleansing rituals, for example, included only washing the outside of the cup. Not the inside.

Our religious actions/rituals/practices may seem pious on the outside, but God sees and cares about the inside. Our inner transformation, our surrendering all, our openness to live for God not our own interests.

They were excessing over appearances of following the law, rather than truly caring about connecting with God's heart or helping others discover God's love. Their legalism overshadowed the love of God. They were made to be much more than that. We were made for much more than our shortcomings. God is continually drawing us into more of what we were made to experience ie. abundant life.

So, how do we clean ourselves from the inside out? We can't do it on our own, but we have a Truth-Teller within us, called the Holy Spirit. The Spirit can nudge us to self-understanding of faith matters. The Spirit can woo us and heighten our sin; work with our heart, our thoughts, our feelings to reveal the misguided life we've been leading- where we are maybe an imposter. With conviction, the Spirit can then help us realize we are in need of confession of sin to be made new, to enjoy God's good plan for us.

One of our new volunteer youth leaders, Anna Dale, shared a tender story illustrating this good life. She gave me permission to share it. It celebrates the work of the Holy Spirit convicting her grandfather, affectionately known as "Gramps. During a sermon last year, at the age of 97, he became transformed. In that sermon, he realized that he had a hard time verbalizing that he loved people. He often showed it, but realized he needed to say those simple, yet powerful words. So, in his final days on earth, he tenderly whispered them to his granddaughter, Anna, who was right by his bed. Tears streaming down her face, they bonded deeper in that moment, than decades of a lifetime together. They shared the goodness of God. They lived fully in those unique seconds. God's steadfast and comforting Spirit held them in faith, before Gramps took his last breath. Anna will always remember his message, "I. Love. You." Maybe you will remember Gramp's conversion by the Spirit. I certainly will.

Show you love, and say you love. Today, is the time to be open to the Spirit, to open your eyes/ to be made new/ to be changed at a Table of sacrificial redemption. Instead of breaking God's heart, share messages of love in all you do. That's your purpose in life. Live out your gratitude of God's mercy. Share it forward: with those close by, throughout our community, to our neighbors rebuilding in Hawaii and Florida, and to the ends of the earth. Amen.