

One way to be a hypocrite is to pretend to care about others when you really care about yourself. ***Hypocritical compassion is caring for people when you can get attention for it while exploiting people when you can get away with it.*** It's an evil that Jesus denounces. In those ways in which we are guilty of it, we can repent, apologize, and change. In those ways in which we are victims of it, we can overcome, forgive, and be restored.

If you are skeptical of the term "hypocritical compassion", here is a little fact that might increase your skepticism. The verse we are studying today is not in my Bible. I had to open 4 translations before I found one that included Matthew 23:14. Many Bibles jump from verse 13 to verse 15. I feel that a short detour is appropriate to say a word about Bible translations. Occasionally someone will come to me with a stack of literature or a list of web links to support their conviction that all modern Bible translations have a hidden evil agenda. They change words, delete some, or add others. ***Spiritual vigilance is necessary. Spiritual paranoia is toxic.*** Spiritual vigilance should be a pursuit of the heart of God not an obsession with the schemes of Satan. It is a victory for the enemy when the paranoia of spiritual deception overshadows the passion for spiritual growth. There are good and scholarly reasons for the decisions made by Bible translators. In this case, there are multiple early manuscripts of Matthew. Some include verse 14, some don't. The original manuscripts cause most scholars to omit verse 14. But since the words of verse 14 ***are*** in the original manuscripts in both Luke (2:47) and Mark (12:40) in the same discourse, we can have confidence that Jesus said these words in this teaching. I suggest not getting worked up about Bible translations. Instead, study them. The important thing is to read the Bible! Use whatever translation keeps you reading.

The New King James Version is one of those translations that include Matthew 23:14. It is translated like this, "But woe to you, scribes and pharisees, you hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore, you will receive greater condemnation." This woe can be summarized as hypocritical compassion. In these words, we will see the teaching behind the definition, "hypocritical compassion is caring for people when you can get attention for it, while exploiting them when you can get away with it." The verse begins with the same repeated phrase that opens each of the 7 woes. We will take time in this study to zoom in on this phrase, but these words have application to each woe and each message in the series.

First, we will highlight the word "woe". In Greek it is pronounced "oo-eye". It carries a stern pirate vibe, but only to modern ears. Still, 1st century hearers would have known Jesus was serious when he started pronouncing woes. "Woe" is a strong word. It is not the word choice to begin a sentence of mere warning or preference or advice. A Biblical woe is a judgment from God. The seriousness is expressed in the final phrase of the text. "Therefore, you will receive greater condemnation."

I will risk getting into some nerd level attention to this word "woe", with the hope that we can sense the severity of the term. Jesus speaks a woe over the cities which rejected him (Matthew 11:21). You can hear the deep emotional pain when he says, "Woe to you Bethsaida..." Feel the emotional anguish as Jesus pronounces a woe on his friend and betrayer Judas. Adding the

words, “it would be better for you if you had not been born (Mark 14:21) Here is how serious a woe is. You know when Jesus says that it would be better to cut your hand off and gouge your eye out than for your whole body to be thrown into hell? That drastic measure followed a woe to those who tempt others to sin. (Matthew 18:7-9). Woes are serious pronouncements of judgment that grieve the heart of God.

Woes are featured devastatingly in the book of Revelation. Angels bring woes as messages of divine judgment (8:13). Heaven unleashes 3 woes in chapters 9-11. These judgments are devastating to the point that people seek death and cannot find it (9:6), they send out a lion headed, fire breathing horse (9:17), and they are accompanied by deadly earthquakes (11:13). Woes are what are pronounced in the condemnation of Babylon the Great (18:10, 16, 18).

When we apply the teaching of the seven woes, we ought to apply it with a weight of spiritual sobriety. Hypocrisy is serious stuff. Jesus could not have spoken more harshly against hypocritical forms of religion.

Biblical woes are at a level of judgment reserved for God. The word woe is used 33 times in the New Testament. 31 of these times it comes out of the mouth of Jesus in the gospel account or in the Revelation of Jesus. This leaves only two verses where the word “woe” is spoken by a human. Paul pronounces a woe on himself if he does not preach the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:16). And Jude speaks a woe to those who walk in the ways of Cain (Jude 11). Ironically, this comes two verses after Jude says, “not even the archangel Michael presumed to pronounce a blasphemous judgment but said, ‘the Lord rebuke you’”. Does this seem off to you too? He tells us that judgment belongs to the lord then he pronounces a woe. In both cases, I would argue that these woes are stated as journalistic reporting on the judgment of God, not as judgments coming from man. Woes are such serious judgments that they can only come from God.

My nerdy word study is over. What I want you to know is that when you see the word “woe”, like we did last week and this week and for the next three weeks, it is a cue to take the message very seriously. Hypocritical compassion is one of those heavy woes.

The next word I want to settle on in this repeated phrase “hypocrites”. This woe shares a restriction with the word “woe” in that it is only used by Jesus (in all 18 uses). Jesus didn’t make up the word, but he is responsible for introducing it into the vocabulary of religion. The word “hypocrite” was used at the time of Christ to refer to an actor. Roman performers put on masks, stilts, and various disguises to appear as something other than what they were. The word didn’t carry a negative connotation until Jesus applied it to fake spirituality. The word hypocrite appears in English dictionaries today because Jesus disapproved of religion that was publicly spiritual and privately shameful.

There is not a better definition for spiritual hypocrisy than the 3-part description that Jesus gives in Matthew 23:3-5. He tells the crowd and his disciples not to do what the religious leaders do because ...

1. They preach and do not do. Hypocrisy!

2. They burden people and will not share the burden. Hypocrisy!
3. Everything they do is to be seen by people. Hypocrisy!

Each characteristic applies to verse 14. They preach compassion through their prayers and don't give it. They require burdensome contributions from widows, and rather than helping them they take their property. In all of it they wish to be seen by people as spiritually compassionate.

The next striking word in the text is "devour". Devour is an intense word. For the church, a lack of compassion is not an attitude of neutral apathy, but of active destruction. Lack of compassion devours people.

Here are 5 words I will remember, "Pastor, the church kills people!" I heard these words from a friend and church member with an IV in her arm, an oxygen tube in her nose and tears in her eyes. The doctors diagnosed her with a list of illnesses. She identified the church as the root cause of her failing health. More precisely, she reported that the brokenness started with the church, continued through a lifetime of anger, and resulted in destroyed health. As a child she had been abused by a leader in the church. This was someone who devoured the innocence of children and for a pretense made long prayers. This person cared when he could get attention for it and abused when he could get away with it. Eventually his abuse was seen, and he still got away with it. The church supported him by choosing to not expose him further and by not removing him from leadership. Everything they did was to be seen by men. And it would have looked bad to their community to admit this sin in their leadership. This support gave a crushing message to all those he had abused. It invalidated their pain and confusion. It denied them justice. It demonstrated that the church valued how they are seen by people more than they value people. Appearance was more important than compassion. The dismissal of the sin didn't make the brokenness go away. For this one victim it was the foundation of an angry life and was evidence for the sobering conclusion that the church kills people.

In my aversion to a victim mentality, I have an urge to add that you don't have to let it kill you. You can overcome abuse in the hands of God. This is true but it is not the point here. That is the truth for the victim to receive. The truth for the church to receive is that hypocritical compassion kills people. They can overcome it, but we can make that healing awfully hard for them. We devour widows' houses. We devour with abuse. We devour by spreading gossip. We devour by breaking confidence. We devour with a judgmental spirit. Galatians 5:15 tells us to watch out, because if we keep on biting and devouring, we will destroy each other.

The specific victim in the devouring is widows. Widows are heavily featured in the Bible. The word most often appears in the repeated Biblical sequence, "aliens, fatherless, and widows." These represent all who are disadvantaged and vulnerable. Hypocritical compassion is caring for people when you can get attention for it while exploiting people when you can get away with it. Widows are a demographic that is easy to take advantage of and get away with it.

God is the defender of widows (Psalm 68:5; 146:9; Jeremiah 49:1) and he calls his people to defend them (Deuteronomy 10:18; Jeremiah 7:6). Defending and devouring are on opposite

spectrums of compassion. In active support of the widow, the Israelites were to give a portion of their tithe to the widow and to leave a harvest for them to glean (Deuteronomy 14:19,29). The responsibility of defending the widow was so strong in the consciousness of the ancient Hebrew that when a man named Elphaz visited Job, he suggested that the reason for Job's suffering was that he had sent the widow away empty handed (Job 22:9, 31:18). Do you remember how severe Job's suffering was? He had lost his great possessions, his children, and his health. He was miserable. Elphaz presents a wild theory. This is how important compassion to the widows was in their culture. The law of Moses pronounced a curse on those who withheld justice from widows (Deuteronomy 27:19) and ordered the death penalty for all who took advantage of widows (Exodus 22:22-24). No wonder Jesus pronounced a woe on the pharisees when he saw them destroying widows' homes. The judgment of God is strong toward those who take advantage of the disadvantaged. Jesus says it would be better to have a millstone hung on your neck and to be thrown into the sea than to cause a little one to stumble. For the spiritually proud, who devour widows' houses, God flipped the judgment on them. Proverbs 15:25 says, "The lord tears down the houses of the proud but preserves the widows' boundaries". Consider the irony in this. For the proud who devour widows' houses, God flips the judgment onto them by tearing down their house. The easiest targets for abuse are the ones that God calls us to protect and extend compassion to. ***Hypocritical compassion is caring for people when you can get attention for it while exploiting people when you can get away with it.***

James 1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

The devouring of widows' houses illustrates how they exploited people when they could get away with it. The long, pretentious prayer illustrates how they would care for people when they could get attention for it. We don't know all that was said in their long prayers, but we do have an example of a pharisaical prayer in a parable that Jesus told. The pharisee prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, even this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all I get (Luke 18:11-12). The prayer is a virtue signal. It is a prayer about self. To be seen by people When he thanks God that he is not like other men, the first example given is that he is not an "extortioner". It is a word also translated as "robber, "swindler", or "ravenous". It exposes greed. It is the word Jesus used when he warned to watch out for false prophets, saying, "They come in sheep's clothing. But inwardly they are ferocious wolves." Their prayer claimed they were not extortioners. Their devouring of widow's houses proved they were.

The sermon on the mount describes hypocrites praying on the street corners to be seen by men (Matthew 6:5) and sounding a trumpet when they give to the needy (Matthew 6:7) The wish to be seen as compassionate. Their prayers interceded for the poor and powerless and the widow. They projected compassion as prayer warriors for the afflicted, but it was a show. Their prayers were not compassion but hypocritical compassion. Publicly, they were interceding for the vulnerable. Privately they were taking advantage of the vulnerable. ***Hypocritical compassion is caring for people when you can get attention for it while exploiting people when you can get away with it.***

Hypocritical compassion is fueled by pride but is sometimes expressed in politeness. It might sound like this, “On, I am so sorry”, “I am praying for you”, or “is there anything we can do for you.” These are good and compassionate words, unless they are a bluff for our pride. We want to be seen as compassionate, but we have no intention of being compassionate. It was polite to say, and it made us look good but if we aren’t really sorry, if we aren’t really praying, if we don’t actually intend to help, then they are only said to make us look good.

Love is the cure for hypocritical compassion. Hypocritical compassion is not a lack of love, it is a misplacement of love. True compassion emerges when our self-seeking love decreases and our love for others increases. When God injects our hearts with his love for people, hypocritical compassion dies. Pride, self-love, is the great enemy of compassion. Their long prayers were not compassion because a prerequisite for authentic intercessory prayer is to have a love for the person you are praying for. ***Our ability to see people is in conflict with our desire to be seen by people.*** What do you long for more, to be seen by others as spiritual or to see others through the Spirit of God?

There was a group of people in Bethsaida who had true compassion on a blind man (Mark 8:22-24). They could have taken advantage of him. Instead, they brought him to Jesus and begged Jesus to touch him. Jesus took him by the hand and led him out of the village. Can you imagine? The man is still blind. He can’t see Jesus but he feels his hand and follows. Then Jesus does the strangest things, he spits on his eyes. He didn’t spit into the dirt and make mud and rub it on his eyes. That was a different healing. This time he spits directly into his eyes. Then he asked, “Do you see anything?” Previously his answer would have been “no”. But something had happened. He responded, “I see people, but they look like trees walking.” Fascinating. He knew what people should look like and he knew that he wasn’t seeing them clearly. It was a dramatic vision improvement. The man was excited just to see anything. But Jesus is not satisfied to leave him with a distorted view of people. This man needed to be touched again. The second touch restored his sight fully.

Jesus is at work to help you see people clearly, through the lens of his love for them. When we care more about being seen by people than seeing people, we are in need of a second touch. Hear the gospel in this. Jesus has a second touch for the hypocrite. ***Hypocritical compassion is caring for people when you can get attention for it while exploiting people when you can get away with it.*** Hypocritical compassion needs a second touch. With a second touch we will not pray to be seen by men we will cry out, “it’s me, it’s me, it’s me oh lord, standing in the need of prayer.”

The bad news is that we are guilty of hypocritical compassion, and it kills people. The good news is that God gives hypocrites a second touch.