

## **The Seven Woes of Pharisees The Chiasm of Matthew 23:13-32**

When Jesus pronounces woes to the Pharisees, He is expressing a condemnation of these teachers of the “law,” whose law was the Law of Moses plus their oral traditions. With literary beauty, Jesus presents His woes in a structured chiasm with its apex emphasizing the main reason for the Pharisees’ failure as teachers.

However, complicating this observation of the biblical text is the woe of Matthew 23:14, which is missing in a number of translations. Because the best and earliest manuscripts do not have Matthew 23:14, many Bible translations omit it and indicate that Jesus speaks of seven woes. Translations using later manuscripts containing Matthew 23:14 will present eight woes.

Jesus’ chiasm, a Hebrew literary device, presents ideas or clauses that mirror each other in a pattern that places a focus on the apex of the literary structure. The chiasm of Matthew 23:13-32 can be observed in the following manner:

**A:** 13) “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. [verse 14 is not found in early manuscripts: Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.]

**B:** 15) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

**C:** 16) “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’ 17) You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? 18) And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.’ 19) You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? 20) Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. 21) And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. 22) And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.

**X:** 23) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. 24) You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

**C’:** 25) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. 26) You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.

**B’:** 27) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. 28) So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

**A’:** 29) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 30) and say, ‘If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ 31) So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32) Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers.

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To help with the observation of the chiasm's designed structure, pairing the first half of the chiasm with its corresponding inverted parallel of the second half, one can gain a better understanding of each idea of the chiasm that Jesus was presenting to the Jews.

<b>Matthew 23:13-23</b>	<b>Observations</b>
<p><b>A:</b> 13) "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because <b>you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people</b>; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.</p> <p><b>A':</b> 29) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 30) and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31) So you testify against yourselves, that <b>you are sons of those who murdered the prophets</b>. 32) Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers.</p>	<p>By failing to recognize and point people to the Messiah, "you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people."</p> <p>By persecuting and murdering OT prophets, Jewish religious authorities of the past disregarded those who prophesied and pointed to the Messiah, "you are sons of those who murdered the prophets."</p>
<p><b>B:</b> 15) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, <b>you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves</b>.</p> <p><b>B':</b> 27) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 28) So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly <b>you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness</b>.</p>	<p>As a false teacher, Pharisees led others astray and could not show another how to be a child of Abraham (Believer).</p> <p>The Pharisee was also a deceitful teacher who acted as though he was holy but was not a genuine child of Abraham (Believer).</p>
<p><b>C:</b> 16) "Woe to you, <b>blind guides</b>, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' 17) You fools and <b>blind men!</b> Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? 18) And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.' 19) You <b>blind men</b>, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? 20) Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. 21) And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. 22) And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.</p> <p><b>C':</b> 25) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. 26) <b>You blind Pharisee</b>, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.</p>	<p>The Pharisees were "blind guides," who cannot lead others, because they believed the temple's wealth and how much you gave sanctified a person. They did not recognize God's holy temple or His holy altar sanctified a person. The Pharisee did not know how to be holy.</p> <p>The Pharisees were blind, because they did not know that holiness came from within.</p>
<p><b>X:</b> 23) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. 24) You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!</p>	<p>The inflection point of the chiasm: the scribes and Pharisees do not know and fail to properly care for God's word.</p>

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The inflection point of the chiasm is well worth evaluating for all teachers of the faith. Neglecting and not knowing God's word renders one blind to a hypocritical life and as a deceitful guide in leading another to faith. Worse is the misrepresentation of Jesus Christ to the world with an utter lack of agape love.

References:

1. Gaeblein FE ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House (1992).