

Matthew 23:33-36: You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?

³⁴ Therefore I send you prophets & wise men & scribes, some of whom you will kill & crucify, & some you will flog in your synagogues & persecute from town to town, ³⁵ so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary & the altar. ³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Intro: True, Biblical Love warns & points out sin. **Proverbs 27:5:** Better is open rebuke than hidden love.

This is the last week of Jesus' life. Matthew 23 is Jesus' last public teaching before He dies. Jesus warns the leaders of Israel about their utter failures to obey all that He has taught. Jesus taught the beatitudes, but here the scribes & Pharisees got the "woeatitudes"! Jesus pronounced these compassionate, sad, & angry condemnations upon them for their sin & hypocrisy. The scribes & Pharisees were doing everything they could to appear pure & holy & good & righteous on the outside, but on the inside, in their hearts, they were impure, unholy, bad, & unrighteous. They would even murder the LORD of glory Himself! They not only miss the main thing! They kill the main thing! The main thing in life is keeping the main thing the main thing: Jesus is the main thing. They look on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart: pursue true, heart religion in Christ.

False teaching & ungodly living is wicked, deadly, & damning. Flee from it, & pursue the pure doctrine of Christ & the pure life in Christ.

1. Jesus Calls False Teachers (They are false livers too!) Animal Names

Matthew 23:33: You serpents, you brood of vipers

a. The teaching & lives of false teachers are dangerous: Jesus calls the scribes & Pharisees a bunch of snakes & offspring of vipers. Brood=offspring. Their teaching is dangerous & poisonous. Their hypocritical, ungodly lives are dangerous & poisonous.

John Piper: What does that mean to Jews schooled in the Old Testament? In Genesis 3 Satan is pictured as a serpent or a viper, & God says to the serpent, "I will put enmity between . . . your seed and her seed" (Gen 3:15). So when anybody said you were the seed or the brood of a viper, it was the same as saying you were sons of the devil. That's exactly what Jesus said in John 8:43 to another crowd, "Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, & your will is to do your father's desires." . . . you are people in Satan's grip. You are his children with his nature. **1 John 3:8**

b. Godly, loving, faithful leaders sometimes use harsh language to warn: Jesus Christ, the Gospel Incarnate, love incarnate, called a political leader who wanted to kill the most innocent Person ever a wild animal name: fox - **Luke 13:31-32:** "Herod wants to kill you." He [Jesus] replied, "Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.'"

According to God's holy, perfect, inspired-by-God, inerrant, infallible, majestic, loving, everlasting Word, people who sin wickedly are called animals. Here are some more examples:

- **Jesus (Matt 7:15):** Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves
- **Jesus (Matt 7:6):** Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.
- **Jesus (Matt 16:23):** But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!"
- **John (Rev 22:15):** Outside are the dogs & sorcerers & the sexually immoral & murderers & idolaters
- **Paul (Titus 1:12-13):** One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith.
- **Paul (Phil 3:2):** Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.
- **Peter (2 Pet 2:12):** But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction.

- **Jude (Jude 1:10):** But these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, & they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively.

- **Acts 13:8-11:** But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him & said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit & villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? & now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, & you will be blind & unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist & darkness fell upon him, & he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.

Joe Rigney (Surprised by Scripture: Love and Spirit-Inspired Insults): This doesn't sound like what we would call kind or civil or gentle. These are biting words, pointed words, sharp words directed at a particular person. In this case, the fruit of the Spirit is name-calling, insults, & harsh words. In this case, Spirit-prompted boldness means not mincing words about the wickedness of this magician . . . Here we have a man, Sergius Paulus, who's open & receptive to the Gospel. God has paved the way – made a "straight path" – for Paul to give the Gospel to him. But then we have another man, Elymas, trying to make that straight path crooked. Or to change the metaphor, he's trying to build a wall between Sergius & the Gospel . . . So when someone tries to build a wall between people & the Gospel, pointed & exposing words are appropriate (& maybe even necessary) to tear it down . . . Like Elymas, the Pharisees & scribes are preventing people from entering the kingdom. They keep the hungry from being fed by the Word of God. And so Jesus doesn't play nice with them. He confronts them head on . . . Jesus & Paul distinguish between apostles of the world & refugees from the world. A refugee is someone who is at least interested in hearing the Gospel. They may not believe, but they're curious. They may recognize there's something missing in their life. They may feel guilty because of their sin & shame. Whatever the reason, they might be interested in entering the kingdom. But the next two verses in Matthew 23 describe apostles of the world: Woe to you, scribes & Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea & land to make a single proselyte, & when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. (Matt. 23:14–15) . . . Apostles of the world are on a mission. They prowl around looking for people to devour. They have a false gospel & they want to spread it – & they actively oppose the Gospel of Jesus. This is why he speaks one way to the woman at the well, to the prostitutes & sinners who come to Him for refuge, & another way to the leaders – whether religious like the Pharisees or pagan like Elymas – who seek to hinder His ministry . . . This is precisely what we see in Acts 13. Sergius Paulus is a worldly refugee. Elymas is a worldly apostle. He's a false prophet with a false gospel. And when an apostle from the world tries to build a wall between us & the refugees, the Spirit fills us & love demands we speak up. Note that – love demands. That's why Paul's words to the sorcerer aren't contrary to love & kindness & patience; they are driven by love & kindness & patience. Love for Christ & kindness for the governor & patience with his questions – these are what call forth such strong & biting words from Paul. And so we must labor & pray that God would help us distinguish between apostles & refugees, & that we would have the Spirit's wisdom to speak appropriately in all circumstances. And that burden falls particularly on Christian leaders. But this passage doesn't just challenge pastors & leaders. Even though lay Christians may never be called to speak like Paul does here, they are called to say "Amen" when their leaders do. This means all Christians must learn to recognize worldly apostles & false prophets. And when godly leaders speak the biting truth, we can't simply cluck our tongues & say, "Easy now. Isn't the Spirit a spirit of love & kindness? Don't speak so harshly." Instead, we must have a category in our mind for Spirit-filled, Spirit-prompted biting words so that we too can say "Amen."

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2. Jesus Warns False Teachers That They Will Go To Hell

Matthew 23:33: You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?

a. Jesus loves, & love warns people about hell: Jesus spoke of hell more than anyone else in the Bible combined. Jesus is saying here: "If you don't repent of your hypocrisy & love of money & self-indulgence & lawlessness & false teaching, then you will suffer God's everlasting wrath in hell forever. **GOSPEL!**"

Chad Bird: Whoever you are, your Father loves you differently than he loves other people. Not more, not less, just uniquely. You are more than a grain of sand in the vast desert of humanity. He calls you out of the shadows not by "Hey, you!" but by name. [Psalm 139]

- **Matthew 6:8, 23:** Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him . . . ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.

- **Galatians 2:20; 1 Corinthians 6:15-17:** Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two will become one flesh." ¹⁷ But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

b. We should love people like Jesus & warn them about hell: Lieutenant Colonel Art Athens (Go To Hell!):
Matthew 25:41: Then He will also say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels . . ."

- How do you react to the title of this column? Are you offended, shocked? Don't we strive to avoid saying these three words? From the mouth of a [mere] human being, they are profane, blasphemous speech. There is one person, however, who has both the authority & power to pronounce this judgment on a man or woman. Jesus Christ claimed this right when He spoke to the disciples about the fate of the unsaved on Judgment Day. He said they will be sent "into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil & his angels." Jesus, the King of kings, will one day justly & authoritatively proclaim, "Go to hell," to those who have rejected Him as Lord & Savior. We, on the other hand, may commit sin by expressing this condemnation indirectly – as when we fail to show interest in the eternal destiny of those whom God places in our paths. If we are unconcerned about their salvation, are we not saying by our silence, "Go to hell"? Why, when we know the way to heaven, don't we seek every possible opportunity to proclaim this "good news" to others? Nine years ago, while attending a week of refresher classes, I struck up a relationship with a Marine captain sitting next to me. Our friendship grew, & I sensed by the end of the week that I should share the Gospel with Steve. I hesitated, & failed to tell Steve about Christ's sacrifice for him. My silence really communicated, "Steve, go to hell." About two weeks later, Steve lost his life in a helicopter collision over the Arizona desert. I grieved over Steve's death & my own impotence as an ambassador for Christ. I reconsidered my view of hell, my compassion for the lost, my approach to praying for the lost, & my readiness to present the Gospel. Think about the "Steves" in your life, as you consider these four questions:

First – Do you appreciate the horrors of hell? Have you forgotten the dreadful description of it in Scripture – the weeping & gnashing of teeth, & the everlasting torment. This is the place where God is present (Psalm 139:7,8), not in love & mercy, but in wrath & judgment. Is this a place you are willing for your friends & neighbors to go without so much as a warning from us?

Second – Do you have a burden for the lost? While attending the 1995 Army/Navy football game, I noticed that during the fourth quarter my wife, Misti, had tears running down her cheeks. Knowing Misti couldn't be that distraught over the game, I asked her why she was crying. She responded that as she looked at the thousands of midshipmen & cadets, she was grieving over how many were destined for hell. She had "great sorrow & continual grief" for the lost.

Third – Are you praying for boldness? It is fascinating that one of the Apostle Paul's primary prayer requests was for his own boldness in presenting the Gospel. He often risked his life to speak of Christ, but still considered it essential to have others praying for him to act boldly. We need to pray & to have others praying that we would witness boldly to the world.

Finally – Are you ready and able to articulate the Gospel? In 1 Peter 3:15, we are commanded to be ready to share the reason for our hope. We must know the Gospel as it is presented, for example, in 1 Corinthians 15: (1) Christ died for our sins; (2) He was buried; (3) He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures; & (4) He was seen by many after His resurrection. This Gospel must be so ingrained in our hearts & minds that we are ready to proclaim it at any time. Our responsibility is not to make Christians – only the Holy Spirit can accomplish that. Our task is to be ready, available, loving & faithful. We are to be "ambassadors for Christ." The next time God places someone in your path who needs to hear the Gospel, may you say with great boldness, "Go to HEAVEN, and let me share with you how!"

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3. Jesus Tells These False Teachers The Evil Deeds They Will Do Even Though He Seeks To Be Merciful

Matthew 23:34-36: Therefore I send you prophets & wise men & scribes, some of whom you will kill & crucify, & some you will flog in your synagogues & persecute from town to town, ³⁵ so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary & the altar. ³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

a. The love, compassion, & mercy of Jesus: Therefore! Because you are going to hell! Because you are dead in your sins & hypocrisy! Because there is no hope for you – I'm going to send you prophets & wise men & scribes! I'm going to be crucified for sinners like you! I'm going to bear God's wrath & die & rise again for sinners like you! I'm going to send Stephen to preach the Gospel to you! I'm going to confront one like you, the Pharisee Paul, & radically change his life forever & send him to preach to you the everlasting Gospel!

2 Corinthians 2:15-16: For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved & among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.

b. But they would not listen but instead kill & persecute: V. 34: some of whom you will kill & crucify, & some you will flog in your synagogues & persecute from town to town

- **Stephen: Acts 7:51-8:1:** "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart & ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? & they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed & murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels & did not keep it." Now when they heard these things they were enraged, & they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven & saw the glory of God, & Jesus standing at the right hand of God. & he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, & the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice & stopped their ears & rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city & stoned him. & the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. & as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." & falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." & when he had said this, he fell asleep. & Saul approved of his execution. & there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, & they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

- **Paul: 2 Corinthians 11:23-26:** with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, & often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night & a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers

Romans 11:22: Note then the kindness & the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.

c. The wrath, justice, & judgment of Jesus will be done: Vs. 35-36: so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary & the altar. ³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

1) All the innocent, righteous blood on earth – of all the Old Testament saints murdered – is on the scribes & Pharisees: From the first martyr to the last – all their blood is on the scribes & Pharisees hands! (A to Z!)

[**Zechariah, son of Barachiah:** 1) Zechariah of the book of Zechariah the prophet (last martyr chronologically);
2) Zechariah, son of Jehoiada mentioned in 2 Chronicles 24:20 (stoned for preaching truth, last martyr in the

Hebrew canon, just as Zechariah is called “son of Barachiah” & “son of Iddo” (his grandfather) (Ezra 6:14), so Zechariah, son of Jehoiada may have also been Zechariah, son of Barachiah; 3) Zechariah’s father had two names]

B/C the scribes & Pharisees do what their fathers & ancestors did, they’re also responsible & also held accountable for all the murder & sin that their fathers & ancestors did as well. And judgment will be worse for them!

- **Nehemiah 9:2:** And the Israelites . . . confessed their sins & the iniquities of their fathers.

- **Daniel 9:16:** O Lord, according to all your righteous acts, let your anger & your wrath turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy hill, because for our sins, & for the iniquities of our fathers

Kevin DeYoung: Does this mean there is never any place for corporate culpability across time & space? No. In Matthew 23:35, Jesus charges the scribes & Pharisees with murdering Zechariah the son of Barachiah . . . most scholars agree he is a figure from the past who was not killed in their lifetimes. The fact that the scribes & Pharisees were treating Jesus with contempt put them in the same category as their ancestors who had also treated God’s prophets with contempt (cf. Acts 7:51–53). It could rightly be said that they murdered Zechariah between the sanctuary & the altar because they shared in the same spirit of hate as the murderers in Zechariah’s day. Similarly, there are several examples of corporate confession in the Old Testament. As God’s covenant people, the Israelites were commanded to confess their sins & turn from their wicked ways so as to come out from under the divinely sanctioned covenant curses (2 Chron. 6:12–42; 7:13–18). This is why we see the likes of Ezra (Ezra 9–10), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4–11), & Daniel (Dan. 9:3–19) leading in corporate confession. The Jews were not lumped together because of race, ethnicity, geography, education level, or socio-economic status. The Israelites had freely entered into a covenant relationship with each other and with their God. In all three examples above, the leader entered into corporate confession because (1) he was praying for the covenant people, (2) the people were as a whole marked by unfaithfulness, & (3) the leader himself bore some responsibility for the actions of the people, either by having been blind to the sin (Ezra 9:3) or by participating directly in the sin (Neh. 9:6; Dan. 9:20).

2) Jesus says all this will come upon this generation: V. 36: Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

These scribes & Pharisees will do all of this! They will crucify the Lord of Glory! They will kill men like Stephen & persecute Paul & ultimately have him killed! All this blood will come upon them! And God’s judgment will come upon them in fury! They & their temple will face God’s burning judgment & total destruction in 70 AD.

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Looking to Jesus: Matt 23:33: You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?

Jesus was counted as the serpent (all our Pharisee sins!) & did not escape being sentenced to hell on that cross!

John 3:14-15: And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

- **John Piper:** Jesus in the place of the snake is portrayed as evil and a curse. This is what is so shocking. The snake is evil. The snakes were killing people. The snake on the pole is a picture of God’s curse on the people. So it was with Jesus. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:2, “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” And in Galatians 3:13, he said, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” In becoming like the snake, he was the embodiment of our sin, and the embodiment of our curse. And in becoming sin and curse for us, he took ours away. **John 3:16**

Sadly, we often act like animals too. Every time we sin & reject the holy, good, & righteous commands of God, we act like animals – as evil beasts who deserve God’s wrath & judgment: **Psalms 73:22:** I was senseless and ignorant;

I was a brute beast before you.

But praise God for Jesus! Praise God that we can repent & be saved! Knowing that we were once animal-like sinners who were saved only by the free & abundant & amazing grace of our great God, we ought to love animal-like sinners, all of whom are human beings made in the image & likeness of God. Part of what it means to love them is to help them see the barbarity & animal-like nature of their sin. We love them & pray for them & seek to tell them the Gospel of Jesus Christ! There was one Man Who never acted like an animal! One Man Who always obeyed! Always loved! Always served! Always did what was right!

And He, the only worthy One, was treated like an animal and worse than an animal on that cross. He was beaten. He was bruised. He was spit on. He was mocked. He was beaten so badly that He became unrecognizable as a human being: **Isaiah 52:14**: Just as there were many who were appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness

Jesus Christ died on that cross; took upon Himself the wrath, curse, & judgment of God that we deserve; & then rose again from the dead, conquering sin, death, & hell, so that all of us animal-like sinners who turn from sin & trust in the Savior might be saved!

So we love animal-like people. We pray for them. We seek to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with them so that they might be saved! For He made Him who knew no animal-like sin to be animal-like sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him! Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Christ Jesus Came To Crush The Snake (He not only came to crush the snake, but He came to be made the snake!)
These Serpents Kill So Don't Partake
In Their Wickedness Outbreak
All They Do's For Show And Fake
They'll Be Cast In The Fiery Lake
But Come To Christ Who Loved And Spake
With Piercing Words, Offensive Shake
To The Core That Wicked Snake
Christ Is Perfect, He'll Retake
All That's Lost From Adam's Ache
He'd Die, His Father Would Forsake
All God's Wrath On Him He'd Take
But On The Third He'd Rise Awake
All For Us And God's Name's Sake
So Trust In Him, Make No Mistake
He'll Be Your All With Joy Quake!

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