

“Woe to you Lawyers”

AN ADMONITION FROM JESUS AGAINST SELF-APPOINTED EXPERTS OF HIS WORD

In Luke 11:45-52, Jesus rebuked the lawyers of his day for poor leadership and for harming the people of God. These lawyers were the scribes, thought to be experts in the law. This rebuke came in the form of three woes that he pronounced on them in the passage (11:46; 11:47; 11:52). In the Scriptures, such woes by the prophets of God demonstrated God’s judgment on certain individuals or groups of people.

Now the Old Testament had some good lawyers, scribes of the Law. We are reminded of Ezra to whom it is written, “Ezra...was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6). What was truly remarkable about this lawyer of God’s word is found just four verses later. Here it is said that “Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel” (7:10). A true scribe of the word of God teaches God’s people what God has taught him in his studies. He also models what God has taught him in his daily life. This is much different than what Jesus found in his day and what we often find in churches today.

Jesus rebuked these lawyers for being self-appointed experts in law, having no divine commission to promote themselves as the caretakers of truth that they supposed themselves to be. In Luke 11:46 Jesus pronounced the first woe and charged them with interpreting the law with their own bent for the purpose of having people bow to their whims. Jesus says, “Woe to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.” These men persuade others as to what is truth, yet they were not prophets called by God. They were self-appointed.

Things are no different today in the church age. The church constantly has to deal with men who appoint themselves as guardians of the truth, and yet like those of Jesus’ day, are whitewashed sepulchers (11:44). They are not called by God to pastor or shepherd. They do not teach others. Yet they promote their ideas about the church and proclaim to others what they should believe to be doctrine. They badger, bully, calculate, and intimidate. They are the ones who protest the most about doctrine, who interpret theology for everyone else, who critique teachers of the word of God, and yet do the least. They are not teachers themselves. They do not lead prayer meeting or even attend. They lead no discipling ministries. They have no regular ministries, yet they promote themselves and bully other people into giving to them the role of protector of the truth. Woe to you!

Jesus goes on to rebuke them even more. In Luke 11:47 he pronounces a second woe and in verses 48-51 lays out the charges and evidence against these men. They were like their fathers who killed the prophets, those men of God who came from God and proclaimed truth. The irony here is that they would later accuse even Jesus of error and have him silenced. Later we see in verses 53 and 54 that these lawyers ultimately became hostile to Jesus! They hoped to capture him teaching error so they could silence him. You see, these kinds of men are in every generation. Their fathers schemed to get rid of the prophets, and so too would they. How tragic. These men would reject the Prophet and

appoint themselves as guardians of the truth. Their fathers bullied and intimidated others to reject the prophet. Again, how tragic. They charged the prophets with error, schemed to get the ignorant to believe them, and in turn they persecuted the prophets. Why? They knew more. “Woe to you lawyers!” Why? Because Jesus is saying, “You are just like them!!” And they exist today, hence the warning from Jesus and the rest of the New Testament.

The goal of teaching is unity and love, yet when these lawyers were finished, there was neither. Jesus pronounces the last of the three woes in verse 52: “Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge.” You see, as Paul said, “the goal of our instruction is love” (1 Tim 1:5). How does one test a man like this? When his actions have run their course, what is the result? If it is not edification but division, he has exposed himself. Woe to you!

All this from Jesus. Why? He is preparing his disciples to take on leadership roles in the new church. These apostles would go out, plant churches, and appoint elders in these churches. Jesus wanted them to know, and us as well, that factious men should never have a forum to cause this kind of division. When they begin to badger, when they begin to critique the teaching, when they begin to round people up, when they begin to whisper, when they begin to plot, the elders have the responsibility to immediately step in and stop them, regardless of personal relationships. Elders have responsibilities to Christ. They are to have courage to stop such enemies of God regardless of personal relationships. If not, there will be ruination, disunity, and worst of all, the church will have a poor reputation in the community, and this does not glorify God.