

# Matthew 23:14

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-23/matthew-2314/>

*Jesus speaks the second of eight woes to the scribes and Pharisees. It is issued because they pretend to take care of widows, but actually seek to take great advantage of them.*

The parallel accounts of this remark are found in Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47.

The second *woe* of Matthew 23 regarded the abuse of *widows* while practicing false righteousness. It was addressed to *you, the scribes and Pharisees*.

*The scribes* were religious lawyers. They meticulously searched the Law and the Tradition to create loopholes for themselves and to manufacture an abundance of rules to control the people. *The Pharisees* were the teachers of these religious customs. They led the local synagogues and strictly followed their and *the scribes'* interpretations of the Law and the Tradition. *The Pharisees* crushed anyone who failed to follow their rules or dared defy them.

*The scribes*, with the legislative and judicial authority; and *the Pharisees* as the religious police allied together as a dominant and corrupt force of religious malpractice.

Jesus called them *hypocrites*. Hypocrite comes from the Greek term for “actor.” It is someone who pretends to be one thing but is really another. It describes someone who is fake. Jesus uses this term to brand *the scribes and Pharisees* as religious frauds.

The reason He called them *hypocrites* in this *woe* was because they made a false show of concern for *widows* (and others who were defenseless and in need) even as they abused and took advantage of the people they pretended to help.

Taking advantage of *widows* was a direct violation of God’s law.

“You shall not afflict any widow or orphan.”  
(Exodus 22:22)

One of the ways *the scribes and Pharisees* deceived people was through the *pretense* of *long prayers*. Apparently, *the Pharisees* would pray to God with and on behalf of widows. Their *prayers* were *long*. They used many words. There were probably displays of emotion and concern as well. The prayed-for widow likely felt safe and looked after by *the Pharisees*. But the entire production was a ploy to take advantage of her vulnerable situation. The *pretense* of the Pharisees enabled them to *devour widows' houses*.

The phrase *devour widows houses* may be hyperbole, or Jesus may actually have been charging *the scribes and Pharisees* with evicting *widows* from their *houses* for their own gain. In either case, they were abusing their power.

Women had no property rights in the ancient world. They were dependent upon a husband, a father, a brother, a grown son, or another male relative to protect and provide for them. Obviously, a widow's husband was deceased. Her primary source of protection and provision was no more. Depending on the circumstance, some *widows* may not have had another male relative to assume responsibility for her needs. And some of these righteous *widows* turned to the religious leaders for help in their time of need. They turned to men they perceived to be righteous, the keepers of God's law—they turned to *the scribes and Pharisees*.

But instead of helping them, as they ought to have done and claimed to do, these *hypocrites* took advantage of these *widows'* desperation to take what they wanted.

For their treachery, Jesus told them, *therefore you will receive greater condemnation*.

The Bible says God will bring every act to judgement—both good and evil (Ecclesiastes 12:14). The Bible says He will vindicate and avenge the righteous (Deuteronomy 32:36; Joel 3:21). God is on the side of the oppressed (Psalm 56). God promises that He will heal the brokenhearted and bind up their wounds (Psalm 147:3) For those who have suffered abuse, there is great comfort in this truth—that your pain will not last forever if you trust in Him. And the Bible says God will punish and condemn the wicked (Isaiah 3:11). These things are certain.

But Jesus says there *will* be additional and worse *condemnation* for these *scribes and Pharisees*.

It is always a terrible thing for anyone to harm the poor and the weak (Proverbs 17:5). But it is even worse to do so when *you* claim to represent God and His love, and *you* abuse this position of trust as *a pretense* to facilitate your wickedness. Those who do this compound the sins of oppression and abuse with the sin of false prophecy, false teaching, and corrupt leadership. God does not deal kindly with false prophets who prey upon His people. Consider the fate of Korah (Numbers 16:1-3, 25-33). Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when He said these religious leaders would *receive greater condemnation*.

This woe is terrifyingly similar to the stern *woe* of warning the Lord gave to the “shepherds of Israel” during Ezekiel's day:

“Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them.”  
(Ezekiel 34:2-4)

The Lord then warns the shepherds,

“Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them.”  
(Ezekiel 34:10)

The Lord's statement to the wicked shepherds of Israel, with a promise to come Himself and search for His flock (Ezekiel 34:11); to lead them to streams and green pasture (Ezekiel 34:13-14); and to set "over them one shepherd, My servant David... And I the LORD will be their God and My servant David will be prince among them" (Ezekiel 34:23-24).

Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of David, and the Divine Shepherd. And His chastisement of the scribes and Pharisees here may have been the start of the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy. Or it may have been a final warning before God poured out His wrath upon them.

These *scribes and Pharisees* were wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). Jesus warned His followers to look out for these false teachers, warning that they would know them by their fruit (Matthew 7:16-20). He issued similar caution when He warned His disciples "watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:6, 12). Jesus stated that we should not judge one another, but rather tend to ourselves (Matthew 7:1-2). However, when deciding whom to follow, listen to, or give spiritual authority, Jesus made clear that we should examine their lives, and only follow those who practice what they preach.

Finally, this second *woe* regarding abuse of widows from Matthew 23 is similar to a *woe* of warning from the prophet Isaiah. Notice the similarities. Notice the consequences. But also notice God's offer of mercy for the oppressors/abusers who heed the warning and repent. Perhaps this prophecy and merciful offer came to mind as Jesus warned *the scribes and Pharisees*:

"Woe to those who enact evil statutes  
And to those who constantly record unjust decisions,  
So as to deprive the needy of justice  
And rob the poor of My people of their rights,  
So that widows may be their spoil  
And that they may plunder the orphans.  
Now what will you do in the day of punishment,  
And in the devastation which will come from afar?  
To whom will you flee for help?  
And where will you leave your wealth?  
Nothing remains but to crouch among the captives  
Or fall among the slain.  
In spite of all this, His anger does not turn away  
And His hand is still stretched out."  
(Isaiah 10:1-4)

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>14</sup> 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.**