



GROUP GUIDE: WEEK 10

CONVERSATION STARTER

If you could institute one rule that would have to be followed at every wedding from here on out, what would it be and why?

SEVEN WOES FOR THE PHARISEES

The powerful have long had a tenuous relationship with God, and the religious elites of Jesus' day are no exception. Jesus is a threat to the status quo. If he is the Way, they are not. If Jesus is the King, they are not. As John Mark Comer says, "Elites have the most to lose from the Gospel's claim that Jesus, and Jesus only, is Lord."

In this week's reading, Jesus issues seven woes against the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. He begins, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so **do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do**. For they preach, but do not practice."

The Moses seat was a chair in the synagogue from which the rabbi would teach. It was so named because, like Moses, their job was to interpret Scripture and help God's people follow His commands. Jesus makes it clear that their teaching is not the problem; the problem is their lives. Jesus offers a long list of examples of the ways they fail to practice what they preach.

First, they tie up loads on others that they cannot carry. Jesus is probably referring to the *halakhah* that we have discussed before in Matthew. This was a complex code of hundreds of extra rules, not found in Scripture, that these religious leaders enforced. Unlike his yoke, which is "easy and light," no one could live up to those 1,300 rules—not even the Pharisees.

Jesus knows that life itself often feels heavy enough, and these religious leaders are doing others an *unkindness* by heaping on the extra weight of legalism.

What's more, they do everything for show. "They make their phylacteries wide and tassels long," Jesus says. Phylacteries are small leather boxes with the Shema prayer inside that are banded around the arm and head. These are still worn today by some Orthodox Jews. They

would be easily seen by others as a sign of the Pharisees' piety. Jesus calls them out for flaunting their religiosity for show.

Not to mention, their outward piety is not matched by inner integrity. They use oaths to add weight to their words, and they take great pains to tithe spices to God, but they neglect what truly matters to God—seeking justice and mercy. They prioritize appearance over the substance of their character. They also desire honor and status. In Jesus' day, seating was a very elaborate cultural custom.

But Jesus throws all of that to the wind. What matters is his humbling principle that “the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” They want to climb the social ladder, but as Jesus has impressed upon his followers time and again, the way to greatness is the way of the cross.

Most of all, Jesus calls them hypocrites because they like to tell themselves that “if the prophets were alive in our day, we wouldn't be like our ancestors!” Yet, just like their ancestors, they will kill this prophet, Jesus. The greatest prophet of all.

All of us have something to learn from Jesus' woes. Who among us hasn't held others to a higher standard than what we ourselves can live up to? Don't we all sometimes care more about how we look than the substance of our character? Don't we all want status—whether it's through a degree, a corner office, a follower count, or a house in the right neighborhood?

Rather than seeing this as a “Pharisee problem,” we need to meditate on Jesus, who is the ultimate example of practicing what he preaches. He is the one who perfectly embodies this truth: “The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What stuck out to you about the reading from this week? Was there a verse or idea that was particularly meaningful or challenging for you?
2. How has this week's reading added color to what you think about Jesus?
3. Which of Jesus' woes to the Pharisees stood out most to you? Why?
4. What “woes” do you think Jesus would offer up to us today?
5. Read Matthew 25:13-40 together. What are the gifts, talents, and resources you've been given by God? How can you use what you've been given to be a blessing to those around you?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

Throughout Lent, we will be pulling these practices from our [Lenten Practice Guide](#). These practices invite you to either give something up or take something on, with the hope of simplifying your life, standing in solidarity with those who are suffering, and becoming people

who love God and others well. Our prayer is that God would meet you in the midst of these new rhythms so that you would experience in real, tangible ways the transforming love of Jesus Christ and the hope of the Resurrection.

Week Four | Pray on Your Knees

As followers of Jesus, we're called not just to learn *about* God but to be *with* God. Our faith is first and foremost a relationship with our Creator, and just like any relationship, it requires time and intentionality. One of the ways we spend intentional time with God is through the practice of prayer. This week, begin and end each day by physically getting on your knees to pray if you are able. This is a great practice to do with your family or on your own. At the end of the week, reflect on your experience: *Did changing your posture during prayer change the way you prayed?*