The Meaning of Matthew 23:15

“You make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”

Primary Text

> *Matthew 23:15 (ESV):*
> *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”*

Theological Explanation

Jesus begins this warning by acknowledging the *extraordinary religious zeal* of the scribes and Pharisees. They were willing to cross seas and travel long distances in order to make converts. In Jewish history, such converts (proselytes) were often Gentiles who adopted Jewish law and traditions.

However, Jesus does not condemn their missionary effort itself. Scripture elsewhere affirms zeal when it is rooted in truth (cf. Romans 10:2, ESV: “They have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge”). What Jesus condemns here is the content and direction of their teaching.

False Religion Produces Deeper Condemnation

The Pharisees taught a distorted form of righteousness—one that emphasized external obedience, legalism, and religious performance while neglecting the weightier matters of the Law.

> *Matthew 23:23 (ESV):*
> *“You tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.”*

Their teaching reduced salvation to rule-keeping, traditions, and outward acts, rather than repentance, faith, humility, and love for God. This kind of religion fostered pride and self-righteousness rather than true transformation of the heart.

Why “Twice as Much a Child of Hell”?

The phrase “child of hell” uses the Greek term *Gehenna*, a word associated with final judgment and eternal separation from God. Jesus is saying that these converts became even more entrenched in spiritual deception than their teachers.

Theologically, this happens because:

1. Converts often become more zealous than their teachers, seeking to prove their loyalty.

2. Their zeal, lacking truth, produces greater hardness of heart.

3. They inherit not only false doctrine, but also its most extreme expressions.

This principle appears elsewhere in Scripture:

> *2 Timothy 3:13 (NIV):*
> *“Evil people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.”*

Paul as a Historical Example

The apostle Paul (formerly Saul of Tarsus) perfectly illustrates this truth. Before his conversion, he was trained as a Pharisee under Gamaliel, one of the most respected teachers of the Law.

> *Acts 22:3 (ESV):*
> *“I was educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers.”*

Yet Paul’s misguided zeal led him to exceed even his teachers. He persecuted the church violently, imprisoning believers and approving their deaths.

> *Acts 8:3 (ESV):*
> *“But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.”*

This demonstrates how false religious instruction can produce followers who are more extreme, more harmful, and more destructive than those who taught them.

Ongoing Relevance Today

The warning of Matthew 23:15 is not limited to first-century Judaism. The same pattern appears today in false religions, cults, and distorted Christian teachings. Often, followers become more rigid, judgmental, and hostile than their leaders—because they cling to doctrine without truth, grace, or the gospel.

> *John 8:32 (ESV):*
> *“And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*

Greater Responsibility, Greater Judgment

Because the scribes and Pharisees were religious leaders, their accountability was greater.

> *James 3:1 (NASB):*
> *“Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.”*

This explains Jesus’ warning that their judgment would be more severe than that of others (cf. Matthew 23:14).

Conclusion

Matthew 23:15 teaches that:

Zeal without truth is dangerous,False religion multiplies condemnation, Leaders who misrepresent God produce followers who deepen deception,True righteousness flows from faith, mercy, humility, and obedience to God’s truth

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