

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: **Jesus Unloads on Religious Hypocrites**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 23:1-39

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DATE: November 23, 2008

Before we turn our attention to Matthew 23 this morning, I want to go back to last week's sermon for a moment. Our topic was the greatest commandment—to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. I learned on Wednesday that one of our elders skipped worship last Sunday. I don't know how we can be spiritually healthy as a church when one of our key spiritual leaders misses such an important sermon!

I learned about this from one of our elderly residents at Sedgwick Plaza, Mildred Rice, who told me that she ran into this elder between his Adult Bible Fellowship and the worship service last Sunday. He asked her how she was doing, and she told him things were OK but that she had discovered a flat tire on her car that morning. She had gotten a ride to church but she didn't know what to do about the tire.

The elder, instead of coming to worship and hearing how important it is to love his neighbor, went home, changed clothes, drove to Sedgwick Plaza, put on the spare, took the car to Beard's, left it for a Monday repair, and paid for it. And as far as I can tell he didn't even know what I was preaching on! Do you remember the skit last Sunday—about the couple that was too busy with church stuff to give a neighbor a ride to work? Thankfully Christian people don't always respond that way.

**Introduction:** The popular image of Jesus is that He was something of a wimp, calling people to practice the golden rule, loving everybody, tolerant of everything, anti-war, anti-death penalty, letting people strike Him on both cheeks and taking it all with a smile. If that's your notion of Jesus, our text today should change your perspective considerably.

This is not a pleasant Scripture passage. Oh, we might find some satisfaction in the ridicule Jesus heaps on the religious leaders of His day, because we all know hypocrites who deserve everything Jesus dishes out here, but if we're honest, we know all too well that the same religious hypocrisy that Jesus condemns the Pharisees for is too often attributable to us as well. In fact, it is important for us to remember that the religious leaders Jesus attacks in this passage are not the liberals but the conservatives, the Bible-thumpers, the legalists of first century Judaism. I ask that each one of us take this passage to heart and consider to what extent it speaks to our own phoniness.

This is a long passage, but I don't know how we can avoid reading it, because part of the impact is its cumulative effect, so I invite you to take your Bible or pick up one of the Bibles in the pew and follow along as I read the entire 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the book of Matthew.

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them."*

*"Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'*

*"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*

*"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.*

*"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.*

*"Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.*

*"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices, justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.*

*"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.*

*"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.*

*"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!*

*"You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will*

*kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.*

*"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"*

### **Jesus attacks religious phonies for their blatant hypocrisy. (1-32)**

By the way, the chapter we just read is not as unique as you might think. There have always been phony religious leaders, and the Scriptures frequently warn us against them. Ezekiel denounces them at length, as do Isaiah and Jeremiah. Paul calls them preachers of a perverted gospel, Peter says they secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, John calls them antichrists, and Jude spends almost his entire epistle berating them in the strongest language. Furthermore, the Scripture makes clear that as the second coming of Christ nears, counterfeiters of the Gospel will proliferate and attract to themselves great followings and immense influence. This is not a chapter we should take lightly.

Please note that Jesus starts out by addressing the crowds and His disciples about the religious phonies. Then in verse 13 he speaks directly to the religious phonies. His purpose seems to be two-fold—to denounce and condemn the hypocrites themselves and to warn His followers about their tragic influence.

**Religious phonies don't practice what they preach. (1-4)** Jesus acknowledges that the scribes and Pharisees have a certain authority as spokesmen for Moses, and that such a position demands respect. In fact, to the extent that they teach the Scriptures accurately, they are to be obeyed. But what a terrible indictment follows: "Do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." This indicates to me that a preacher can have his exegesis correct, have his homiletics down pat, and be an extremely skilled communicator, but if he doesn't live out the truth he shares, he leads people astray and suffers the condemnation of Jesus Christ.

I knew a man who was probably the most effective Bible teacher from a pedagogical standpoint I have ever heard. He could make almost any passage of Scripture come to life and always had his students eating out of his hand. But his personal lifestyle was pathetic—drinking, swearing, promiscuity, you name it. I think that's the exact kind of thing Jesus is warning against here. But I also have to ask myself from time to time (and I urge you to ask yourself as a parent or an AWANA leader), "Would Christ ever speak these words of me—'Do what he says but do not do what he does, for he does not practice what he preaches'?"

By the way, it's not always gross behavior that a religious phony gets involved in. It can be the opposite—legalism. In fact, that's what Jesus focuses on in verse 4: "they tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." The picture is that of a man loading a donkey or a camel to the point it can hardly move, and walking alongside beating the animal for not going faster. The Pharisees piled religious rules, regulations, and rituals on their followers, and then added the burden of guilt when they failed to meet expectations. Jesus, in contrast, says to us, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."

Friends, I think it is safe to say that it has often been the temptation of religious conservatives to put the greatest emphasis on their teaching and doctrine and to pay the least attention to living out the precepts they profess. May God help us to avoid that tragic error.

**Everything they do is for appearance sake. (5-12)** The next eight verses describe the degree to which religious phonies are driven by P.R. considerations. They do what they do for its effect on those who observe them, not because deep down they think it is right. The first example:

**They wear religious items and religious clothes for show. (5)** I mentioned the phylacteries last Sunday that the religious leaders wore on their foreheads and arms. The wider the better, because it was more noticeable. Jesus also mentions the tassels they wore on their garments. The problem wasn't the tassels themselves. Jesus Himself wore them on His cloak, for in Matthew 9:20 the woman with the hemorrhage touches the fringe or tassels of His garment. The purpose of tassels was to remind people of the commandments of God. But the Pharisees made theirs extra long as a means of calling attention to their claim to pay greater attention to the commandments, and in the process the tassels became marks of carnality rather than spirituality.

When I was doing hospital visitation in St. Louis one day I ran across a monsignor in a cream colored robe with a crimson fringe and a huge religious medallion around his neck. As I followed him a short distance through the halls, I couldn't help but notice the special deference that medical personnel, employees, and patients paid to him. A few even bowed to him. I couldn't help but think of this passage and wonder about the legitimacy of religious habits or clergy collars or robes—whether worn by Protestants or Catholics. What is the point, if not to draw attention to the one who wears them, with the expectation of being treated with special deference?

That raises the interesting question of what is appropriate dress for clergy today. I have never forgotten Ronald Reagan saying that he never went into the oval office without a coat and tie, not because he thought he was so important but out of respect for the office of President. (Unfortunately, his successor had trouble even keeping his pants on in the oval office!). I have always felt that if Reagan had that much respect for the mere office of President, I should have at least as much respect for the even more important office of pastor/teacher, and so I have always worn a coat and tie when I preach.

But I would concede that we may be at the point in our culture where even a coat and tie are so distinctive that they become attention-drawing. I have no criticism of pastors who wear casual clothes if their parishioners are all wearing casual clothes. I don't think pastors should draw attention by dressing up or by dressing down. They are fellow-travelers in a congregation of brothers and sisters.

**They seek places of honor. (6)** The most important seats in the synagogue were up front facing the congregation. These religious leaders wouldn't be caught dead sitting with the *hoi poloi*, the common people. And if they attended a wedding reception or a temple potluck and didn't get to sit at the head table, they would likely walk out in disgust.

For ten years as pastor here back in the 70's and early 80's I sat on the platform in our old sanctuary until it was time to preach. That was the custom in most churches, and I never questioned it. But I noticed something—it was very hard for me to worship because I was always watching people, taking mental notes of who was there and who wasn't, who came in late every Sunday, who sang and who didn't, who chewed gum, etc. And I made up my mind that if I ever had a chance to start over I would never sit on the platform again. That was a fortuitous decision, because when I went to St. Louis there was no platform in the cafeteria of the Sanford Brown Business College where our church plant met. And once we built our own facility we made sure there were no thrones on the platform.

Now I'm not suggesting that every pastor who sits on the platform is doing it to take roll or be noticed—that would be ridiculous. But the point of Jesus' critique is that it is easy for a religious leader to come to expect, as a matter of course, certain privileges, perks, and honors—to the point that he feels slighted if he doesn't receive them. In verse 7 Jesus mentions a third thing religious phonies do for appearance sake:

**They revel in respectful greetings. (7)** Their favorite terms of endearment, according to ancient Jewish sources, were “Rabbi,” “Father,” and “Master.” It is on record that two scribes came in after walking on the street, grieved and bewildered because someone had greeted them without adding, “My Masters.” It reminds me of a well-known Christian minister whose name you would know, whom I heard berate a colleague for not referring to him as “*Dr.* So-and-So.”

Does Jesus really mean that we should not call any human being, even our own dads, “father”? No, I don't think so. Paul himself said to the Corinthians, “In Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel” (1 Cor. 4:15). Elisha used the term “father” of his mentor Elijah (2 Kings 2:12). I think Jesus means that we shouldn't use the term “father” as a spiritual title, for God alone is our spiritual father. Nor should we use it to imply spiritual superiority, because there is a priesthood to which all believers belong. Because of this I have always refrained from calling any Catholic priest “Father.” I will refer to him as Reverend or Pastor, but not “Father.” I knew the Bishop of Kansas City, Joseph Nauman, when we both lived in St. Louis, because we were on the same pro-life committee together. I have deep respect for him, but I always called him Joe or Reverend Nauman, and he never seemed to mind.

Jesus' forbidding of the use of the term "teacher" is a little more difficult to understand, but I think the point is similar. Titles should never become barriers between those in leadership positions and others in the church. The greatest person in God's sight is not the one with the most degrees or titles or awards but the one who serves in genuine humility as a selfless servant.

Having spoken about the hypocrites who were the religious leaders of Israel, Jesus now turns to them where they are huddled up scornfully listening to Him.

**Jesus delivers seven devastating "woes" on them for a variety of sinful behaviors. (13-32)**

If you are using a KJV you can count eight woes, but verse 14 is missing from the NIV and most modern versions. In the KJV that verse reads, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation." This is biblical; it just doesn't belong *here*. It's not found in the oldest manuscripts of Matthew and was apparently imported by some early scribe from Mark 12 or Luke 20, both of which contain this part of Jesus' speech.

Now the term "woe" in the NT carries the dual concepts of punishment and pity, cursing and compassion. Jesus is not wishing for the damnation of these false leaders but rather certifying it. And if you thought He was tough on the scribes and Pharisees up to this point, the section from verse 13-33 raises the ante exponentially. He calls them sons of hell, blind guides, fools, robbers, self-indulgent, whitewashed tombs, serpents, vipers, persecutors and murderers. He utters every syllable with absolute self-control but with devastating intensity.

This kind of language is almost never used today by spiritual leaders of one another, not because religious phonies are no longer a problem, nor because we are more gracious and kind than Jesus was. Rather it's because we don't have the courage to speak the truth as we should. We tolerate the intolerable, we shun the reputation of a fighting fundamentalist. I listened to a sermon yesterday that was preached by Mark Driscoll at the Desiring God Conference in September of 2008. Mark is an edgy but powerful preacher. His sermon was entitled, *How Sharp the Edge? Christ, Controversy, and Cutting Words* (it can be heard on the Desiring God website) and much of it was focused on Matthew 23. He observed that evangelicals are fairly good at feeding sheep (and caring for them), and that is good, but we fall far short when it comes to killing wolves. When we ignore the wolves we allow the weak and gullible to have the door to the kingdom shut in their faces. That is the accusation in verses 13-15.

**Woe #1: They slam heaven's door in people's faces. (13-15)** The picture is of one of the religious leaders of Israel standing at the gates of heaven, not to usher people in but to keep them out. I like what John MacArthur writes:

*"Regardless of the appealing, benign, and promising front that a false system of religion or philosophy may have, its ultimate accomplishment is to shut off the kingdom of heaven from men. It may feed their bodies, stimulate their minds, and calm their emotions, but it will inevitably damn their souls. It may raise their moral standards, increase their worldly success, overcome practical problems, and improve their outward*

*relationships with other people, but it will not remove their sin or improve their relationship to God. It may promise heaven, but it can only deliver hell.”*

I can't help but think of cults like Mormonism when I read that. Mormons have a reputation for clean living, intact families, and financial responsibility, but their theology is from the pit of hell. And the fact is, their reputation is largely ill-deserved. As a matter of fact, Utah has one of the highest rates of divorce, child abuse, alcoholism, and drug addiction in the United States. It's all a facade.

**Woe #2: They are evangelistic but their converts are destined for hell. (15)** The Pharisees would go to great extremes to recruit proselytes, as do most cults today, but since a new convert to anything is usually more zealous than those who have been inoculated for some time, Jesus says he becomes twice as much a son of hell as the one who converted him.

**Woe #3: They make a mockery of oath-taking. (16-22)** You will perhaps remember that Jesus taught on oaths in the Sermon on the Mount back in Matthew 5 & 6. Rather than teach through that again, let me just summarize here by saying that the scribes and Pharisees had developed an elaborate system of oaths that essentially allowed them to lie based on technicalities. If you used certain words the oath could be ignored. It reminds one of our legal system today, which allows so many guilty people to escape prosecution because the evidence was illegally obtained, or their Miranda rights were not read to them, or evidence is allowed to be suppressed for one reason or another. I'm not necessarily objecting to these laws, because frankly some of them were necessary because of excesses practiced by police and prosecutors, but it's nevertheless sad that the legal system is often more concerned about procedure than in finding the truth. What Jesus argues for is total honesty. We wouldn't need oaths at all if our yes always meant yes and our no, no.

The next three woes are all on the same general theme, so I have lumped them together.

**Woes #4-6: They pay more attention to the external than the internal. (23-28)**

**#4: They strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. (23-24)** This is quite a word picture, and it has become a very common aphorism, though many who use it are probably unaware that it originated with Jesus. The particular practice He describes with this word picture is tithing. The Pharisees were scrupulous with their tithing, even getting out their spice racks to count out one of every ten dill seeds. But while they were obsessive-compulsive with such details they neglected the weightier issues of justice, mercy and faithfulness. Jesus doesn't criticize their tithing but their imbalance, not what they do but what they leave undone.

I think this failure on the part of the Pharisees is not very different from that of some Bible students who get so caught up in minutiae that they miss the real import of the Scriptures. That can happen with prophetic details or signs and symbols or detailed word studies that become so important to us that application fades into the background.

**Woe #5: They are ceremonially fastidious but allow corruption on the inside. (25-26)** In verse 25 Jesus accuses the Pharisees of keeping their rites and rituals with extreme care (being ceremonially immaculate, eating only Kosher food, avoiding any work on the Sabbath, etc.) but being spiritually rotten and repulsive on the inside. The only cure for this condition is to clean the inside of one's life through repentance; then the outside becomes automatically clean, for the person becomes obedient for the right reasons.

**Woe #6: They go out of their way to appear pure and righteous, but it's all a sham. (27-28)** The theme is the same here, but the word picture is different. If you've ever been to Israel you understand the meaning of "whitewashed tombs." On the Mount of Olives facing the temple mount, and just across the Kidron Valley from the wall of Jerusalem, are thousands upon thousands of tombs. A few are large and elaborate, but most of them look like concrete vaults about the size of a casket. Since the whole Mount of Olives consists of solid rock, the dead are not buried underground but in these vaults. These tombs are all whitewashed and the reason for it goes back over 3000 years.

According to the book of Leviticus a person who touched a dead body or a tomb became unclean for seven days. With so many tombs right next to the city wall there was always the danger that pilgrims, unfamiliar with the landscape, might touch a tomb unwittingly on their way to the temple, and thus they would be deprived of the privilege of entering the temple to worship. More importantly to the Pharisees, they would be unable to present their tithes and offerings. And so they passed regulations that required everyone to whitewash the tombs of their relatives every spring before Passover. The Mount of Olives would literally glisten in the sunlight.

Of course, whitewash may make a tomb look nice on the outside, but it is still a place of death. Likewise the religious leaders might appear holy in their white robes, their broad phylacteries, and their large leather-bound Torahs, but inside they were spiritually dead.

**Woe #7: They profess to honor the heroes of the faith while contradicting everything they stood for. (29-32)** I can't help but think here of some liberal politicians who despise the military and undermine it at every opportunity, but the same individuals jockey to be seen at Veterans' Day parades. Jesus claims these Pharisees would have been on the speaker's platform honoring the prophets of Israel, lauding their teaching and their courage, and vehemently denying that they would ever have participated in shedding the blood of these innocent spokesmen for God. However, at this very moment they are plotting to kill Jesus, the One to whom all the prophets witnessed. In fact, within 48 hours they will have carried out their dastardly deed. That will be the final measure of the murderous conspiracies of their ancestors against all of God's true prophets.

Now, having examined the seven woes we come to the third section of this amazing chapter.

**Jesus condemns religious phonies to hell and predicts destruction on Israel, but that will not be the last word. (33-39)**

The diatribe of Jesus against the scribes and Pharisees reaches its zenith in verse 33 as He turns toward them and cries, “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?!” The term for snake here is a general one, but “viper” speaks of a small poisonous snake indigenous to Palestine that was very hard to detect. It looked like a dried twig, and when a person collecting wood for a fire picked one up he would be bitten and often die. (Paul was bitten by such a viper on the Island of Malta Acts 28:3, 6). Vipers therefore had the reputation for being both deadly and deceitful. How apropos as a description for these false religious leaders!

**Jesus predicts that they will continue to persecute the righteous. (34).** Even after Jesus is dead, the bloodshed will continue. They will proceed to kill those He appoints to proclaim the truth. Surely included among these are His apostles, all of whom but one apparently would suffer a martyr’s death. The book of Acts is full of accounts of the Jewish religious leaders killing, crucifying, flogging, and pursuing these emissaries of the Gospel. Paul himself was persecuted from city to city—in Pisidian Antioch, in Iconium, in Lystra, in Thessalonica, in Berea, in Corinth, in Caesarea, and in Jerusalem.

**He will hold them accountable for the deaths of all the martyrs. (35-36)** Verse 35 offers a frighteningly somber judgment upon the scribes and Pharisees, as Jesus holds them personally responsible for all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of Abel, whose brother killed him in Genesis 4, to the shedding of Zechariah’s blood, which is reported in 2 Chronicles. It’s interesting, friends, that the order of the Hebrew Bible is different from that of our English Bible, and the last book of the Hebrew Bible is our 2 Chronicles. I think Jesus is using an expression that would best be translated in English as “all the righteous blood shed from Genesis to Revelation.” He claims they are guilty of all these murders because they are spiritually aligned with those who actually did them.

But Jesus does not delight in this coming judgment! He is not anxious to bring revenge on His enemies. And that is why I am so grateful for the last three verses of this chapter.

**Still He laments their lack of faith and promises hope for the future. (37-39)** There may not be any hope for these particular religious phonies, but there is for the nation. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.” It was just a few days earlier when Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday that he wept over city and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.” A privilege was given to Israel that is absolutely unique in the history of mankind. The Messiah Himself came from them and to them. He came as their Lord and Savior. He taught and healed and exhorted and entreated. But they rejected Him and in so doing brought God’s wrath and judgment upon themselves. The result is seen in verse 38: “Look, your house is left to you desolate.” And in less than one generation Jerusalem was wiped off the map and the Jewish people were dispersed for almost 19 centuries.

Yet, that is not the final word. Jesus says in verse 39, “I tell you, you will not see me again.” What a tragic statement that would be were it not for the last phrase, “until you say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” Those are the words used by the crowds during the Triumphal Entry, but they were not spoken with understanding and faith. Yet one day the risen Christ will return to this earth, and those same words will be used by Israel to hail her Messiah in faith.<sup>i</sup>

Two weeks from today we will examine Matthew 24, the Olivet Discourse, in which Jesus speaks of the signs of the end of the age. We will consider whether there are unique evidences that the Second Coming may be soon. But, friends, the most important issue is not what will happen to Israel when Jesus comes but whether you are ready to meet God today. Any one of us may well die before the Second Coming.

Religious phonies are all around us, teaching false doctrine, leading people astray, living lives of hypocrisy. We cannot say we have not been warned. God holds us responsible for rejecting them and instead living lives of truth and integrity before Him.

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i. The prophet Zechariah speaks of that day in Zech. 12:8-10:

*On that day the LORD will shield those who live in Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them will be like David, and the house of David will be like God, like the Angel of the LORD going before them. On that day I will set out to destroy all the nations that attack Jerusalem.*

*"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son."*