

When you are learning to drive, you pay special attention to yellow warning signs. Beware of a moose crossing. Beware that Phillips Field Road is slippery during winter. Beware that you are in a school zone and children may be crossing the street. Beware of the yellow warning signs so you don't get into an accident.

Although the bible does not have yellow warning signs, there are many cautions and warnings starting with the prophets in the Old Testament. When the Prophet Isaiah spoke, he issued Oracles of Reproach. He was speaking on behalf of God and warning people what was wrong and what was right in the eyes of God. ⁱ

Woe! To “those who rise early in the morning in pursuit of strong drink, lingering late inflamed by wine” (Isa 5:11). We know that abuse of alcohol is very destructive, but Isaiah is more concerned about the consequences of our actions and our relationship to God. When we hunger and thirst too much for the things of this world, we act very selfishly. We ignore the needs of others. We fail to feed the hungry and offer drink to the thirsty. When we ignore God, innocent people suffer.

Woe! To “those who call evil good, and good evil, who change darkness to light, and light into darkness, who change bitter to sweet, and sweet into bitter!... Woe! (To) those who acquit the guilty for bribes and deprive the innocent of justice! Their root shall rot and their blossom scatter like dust; For they have rejected the instruction of the LORD of hosts and scorned the word of the Holy One of Israel” (5:20, 23-24). If we ignore God's ways, if we fail to heed his warnings, if we fail to repent, there are deadly consequences. Woe to those who reject God, they will suffer eternally, they will forfeit the promise of heaven as they embrace hell.

Our actions have consequences, and we are judged by God for our failure to do good or our choices to do wrong. In the tradition of Isaiah, Jesus pronounces a series of woes or warnings. “Woe to you Pharisees! You pay tithes of mint and of rue and of every garden herb, but you pay no attention to judgment and to love for God” (Lk 11:42). Jesus warns the Pharisees that they pay too much attention to insignificant matters and neglect what is most important to God.

What is the greatest commandment? “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (Lk 10:27). Woe! Don't be selfish. Look out for your neighbor. Care for the widows and orphans. Clothe the naked. Visit the sick and imprisoned. Share with the person in need. Be fair, help others.

Woe to you Pharisees who are full of pride! You seek praise from men and ignore the desires of God. The Lord seeks a humble and contrite heart (CCC 2559). It is hard to be humble when we think we are perfect in every way! It is difficult to listen to God when we are so convinced of our own righteousness.

Woe to you Pharisees who misinterpret God's laws and lead people astray! You will be judged harshly for leading people away from God rather than helping people to know and love God.

The final warning of Jesus is addressed to the scholars of the law. “You impose on people burdens hard to carry, but you yourselves do not lift one finger to touch them” (Lk 11:46). Let us step back from the scholars of the law and look at the example of Jesus. He died on the cross for our salvation. He lifts more than a finger; he lifts the heavy cross to free us from the burden of sin. He sacrifices his life to set us free.

Woe! Beware! Caution! Jesus is the one to follow. Jesus is the way and the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). His is the voice to listen to and the example to heed.

Woe! “If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do” (Jn 13:14-15).

Woe! “This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:12-13).

Woe! “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:16-17).

¹ Gadenz, Pablo T. The Gospel of Luke. Pg. 23.