

Matthew 23:1 ¶ Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples,
Matthew 23:2 Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat:
Matthew 23:3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, *that* observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.
Matthew 23:4 For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay *them* on men's shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers.

Matthew notes that Jesus is speaking to the multitudes and His disciples as this chapter opens, but you know the religious leaders were still present. He acknowledged that the scribes and Pharisees “sit in Moses’ seat”; in other words, they had assumed the position of religious authority in the nation. It does not mean, however, that they were rightly representing God. He also seems to acknowledge that they teach according to the law, but their words are empty; they do not practice what they teach. Jesus explained that they were to be obedient to God’s law, but they were not to follow the example of the Pharisees because they did not practice what they taught. They are quick to burden the people with demands and responsibilities, but they showed no compassion toward the people as they struggled to meet these demands.

The last chapter closed with a question directed toward the Pharisees concerning what they thought about the Messiah. The Messiah was to be their deliverer. Their primary thought was that He would be a physical deliverer, but His primary purpose was to provide spiritual deliverance. It seems that Jesus wants the people to consider His teaching in contrast to that of the Pharisees and realize that He is their Messiah. They taught so as to burden the people, but Jesus taught with a heart to easing the burdens of the people. I am reminded of words He spoke previously.

Matthew 11:28–30 “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

John MacArthur made a good observation: “You see the word of God is not corrupted even in the mouth of a false prophet. It remains the powerful word of God. So if they teach what Moses taught, you must respond.”

Coffman also made a good observation on this section: “The evil and inconsistent life of the scribes and Pharisees was a strong deterrent to the acceptance of God's will in that day; and similar evil on the part of Christian teachers in all ages has the same hindering results.”

Matthew 23:5 But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments,
Matthew 23:6 And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues,
Matthew 23:7 And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.

Jesus noted that the scribes and Pharisees do all their works to be seen of men— e.g., their phylacteries were broad and conspicuous, and the same was true of the borders of their garments. These actions were intended to show that they were more spiritual than other men. They loved to take the seats of honor at feasts and the chief seats in the synagogues, they loved getting special attention as they walked down the streets, and they loved being called Rabbi (Master)!

According to Easton's Dictionary, phylacteries "consisted of strips of parchment on which were inscribed these four texts: Exodus 13:1-10; 11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:18-21, and which were enclosed in a square leather case....This case was fastened by certain straps to the forehead just between the eyes."

The border of the garments were significant based on an instruction from the Lord to Moses recorded in Numbers. The purpose was to serve as a constant reminder to obey the commandments of the Lord.

Numbers 15:37–40 "And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue: And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the LORD, and do them; and that ye seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring: That ye may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy unto your God."

These religious leaders obviously thrived on a works mentality and actually believed this was pleasing to God. Jesus taught, however, that God looks on the heart and is not pleased with a spirit of pride that seeks to parade one's spirituality.

Matthew 6:1–6 "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly. And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."

Matthew 23:8 But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren.

Matthew 23:9 And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven.

Matthew 23:10 Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ.

Jesus is basically saying that you should not seek to emulate their attitude of

pride. Jesus declared that we should not call any man master except Christ or any man father except God, our Father in heaven. Those who follow Christ are all brothers and children of God the Father; we are servants of God. All honor and glory are to be directed to God the Father and His Son Jesus, not to any man.

I decided to look at the Greek for the words “Rabbi” in v 8 and “masters” in v10. The first designates one who is your master; the second refers to a teacher. It is important to note that Jesus is saying that only He has the ultimate authority in both areas of one’s life.

Scripture goes on to reveal that He gifts others through the Holy Spirit to serve as leaders and teachers under His authority to minister to the church.

Ephesians 4:7–12 “But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men....And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:”

Matthew 23:11 But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant.

Matthew 23:12 And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.

The Lord’s declaration in these verses goes against all that our culture promotes. He declared that the greatest among us are those who are your servant. Those who seek to exalt self will be humbled, and those that humble self will be exalted. This was another direct slap in the face to the Pharisees.

Obviously, Jesus is teaching from a heavenly perspective—not a worldly one.

Matthew 23:13 ¶ But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.

At this point Jesus begins to address the scribes and Pharisees directly with a series of woes. Jesus uses the word “woe” to denote judgment against them. By calling the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites, He is identifying them as spiritual in name only. Their teaching will result in not only keeping themselves out of the kingdom of heaven, but also will prevent many others from entering it as well.

How are they doing this? By mishandling the word of God with false teaching. They refused to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and, in turn, influenced many others not to accept Him as well. Had they been teaching the truth of scripture, they would have recognized Jesus.

John 5:36–39 “But I have greater witness than that of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me.... And ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not. Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have

eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.”

Matthew 23:14 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.

The second woe—Jesus accused the religious leaders of taking advantage of widows, a class of people who were basically defenseless against them and could have greatly benefitted from their compassion. I can't help but make a comparison to the false teachers on TV today that take advantage of the poor to their own profit.

Jesus also noted that they prayed long prayers just to appear more spiritual. Considering the way Jesus paired these two accusations, John Gill suggested that these prayers were possibly made as a pretence on behalf of the widows after bilking them of their money and/or property.

Adam Clarke offered the following enlightenment: “They were in vogue for their long prayers, which they continued sometimes three hours; that **perhaps they sold them**, as do the Roman priests their masses, or pretended others should be more acceptable to God for them; **and so might spoil devout widows by the gifts or salaries they expected from them.**”

“ye shall receive the greater damnation” – This phrase once again suggests that there are degrees of punishment in hell.

Matthew 23:15 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.

The third woe—Jesus accused them of traveling far and wide to make just one convert only to mislead him with their false teaching. “To make one a twofold child of hell” sounds like he would have been better off having never come in contact with them and deceived by their false teaching. If they had never been deceived by the false teaching of the Pharisees, they might have come to saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

Guzik makes the following observation: “In this respect, the religious leaders were similar to Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses today. They were courageous and energetic messengers, but with a false message.”

Matthew 23:16 Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor!

Matthew 23:17 Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold?

Matthew 23:18 And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty.

Matthew 23:19 Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar

that sanctifieth the gift?

The fourth woe—Jesus rebuked them for their whole teaching regarding swearing or making an oath in the name of _____. (fill in the blank) They considered an oath affirmed by swearing by the gold of the temple more binding than swearing by the temple alone. Jesus notes that they are fools and lacking in understanding as revealed by considering a simple question—“What is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifies the gold?” They also considered an oath affirmed by a gift offered on the altar as more binding than affirming it by the altar. Once again they showed themselves to be fools and void of understanding as revealed by a similar question—“What is greater the gift, or the altar that sanctifies the gift?”

Exodus 29:37 “Seven days thou shalt make an atonement for the altar, and sanctify it; and it shall be an altar most holy: whatsoever toucheth the altar shall be holy.”

Matthew 23:20 Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon.

Matthew 23:21 And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein.

Matthew 23:22 And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon.

The Savior then goes on to declare that any oath affirmed by the altar included everything that touched it. Any oath affirmed by the temple included the One that dwelt there (believed to be God). Any oath affirmed by heaven includes God, the one that sits on that throne.

The way they categorized the oaths that were more binding was in direct connection to their intended goal—accumulating wealth and possessions.

What is important to note is that they considered some oaths, promises or commitments to be more binding than others. That same type of thinking still prevails today. A person’s word is not considered his bond; it is always subject to circumstances and/or intent.

Matthew 23:23 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier *matters* of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.

Matthew 23:24 Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.

The fifth woe—Jesus notes that though the scribes and Pharisees are diligent to pay their tithes, even down to the herbal condiments, they neglect the more important matters of “the law, judgment, mercy, and faith.” Yes, to tithe was correct, but they should not have neglected the more important matters.

“the law” – a reference to God’s law as revealed in His word

“judgment” – a reference to justice that is based on truth and without partiality

“mercy” – a reference to showing compassion

“faith” – a reference to moral conviction of the truthfulness of God and His word

One commentator reminded me of the words of the prophet Micah that sum up our responsibility before God in much the same way.

Micah 6:8 “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”

To “strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel” is to have one’s priorities all wrong.

JFB offers further enlightenment: “It was the custom, says TRENCH, of the stricter Jews to strain their wine, vinegar, and other potables through linen or gauze, lest unawares they should drink down some little unclean insect therein and thus transgress” the law.

Leviticus 11:41 “And every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth shall be an abomination; it shall not be eaten.”

Matthew 23:25 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.

Matthew 23:26 Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that *which* is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.

The sixth woe—Jesus continues by accusing the scribes and Pharisees of concentrating on how they appear to others outwardly while neglecting spiritual cleanliness of the heart and mind. He even pinpoints the sins of extortion and excess as those evidencing that they were spiritually unclean—sins that were rooted in their focus on self to the detriment of others. He warned them that they should take care to be spiritually clean; that would then be evidenced in their outward appearance. I can’t help but be reminded of the words of Paul.

*Ephesians 5:25–27 “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; **That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word**, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.”*

It is God’s word that cleanses us—not the words or traditions of men.

Once again, it is important to note as stated by Gill: “...these men preferred the rituals of the ceremonial law, and the traditions of the elders, above the duties of the moral law; and reckoned that the latter were nothing, if the former were wanting....”

Matthew 23:27 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead *men’s* bones, and of all uncleanness.

Matthew 23:28 Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

The seventh woe—Jesus basically emphasizes the truth of the previous woe with this pronouncement. This time He compares the religious leaders to “whited sepulchers,” tombs kept beautiful on the outside, but inside they contain the dead and all the uncleanness associated with death. Though they might appear righteous to other men, God sees into their hearts of hypocrisy and sin. Scripture declares this truth many places.

Genesis 6:5 “And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

1 Samuel 16:7 “...for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.”

1 Chronicles 28:9 “And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for the LORD searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts:”

Psalms 44:20–21 “If we have forgotten the name of our God, or stretched out our hands to a strange god; Shall not God search this out? for he knoweth the secrets of the heart.”

Psalms 139:1–2 “O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off.”

Acts 15:8 “And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us....”

Guzik adds the following cultural insight: “It was the custom of the Jews of that time to whitewash the tombs in the city of Jerusalem before Passover so that no one would touch one accidentally, thus making themselves ceremonially unclean.”

Matthew 23:29 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous,
Matthew 23:30 And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.

Matthew 23:31 Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets.

Matthew 23:32 Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.

Matthew 23:33 Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?

The eighth woe—Jesus pronounces the final woe against the religious leaders using yet one more example of their hypocrisy. He notes how they build tombs to honor the prophets and adorn the graves of righteous men of old, all the while declaring that they never would have persecuted and killed these men if they

had lived in those days. Jesus reminded them that they were the children of the very men that killed the prophets; as such, they are just as guilty in this day as their fathers were in their's. They are headed to hell just as surely as were their fathers. The proof—They are already planning to kill Jesus, the promised Messiah, One who is greater than all the prophets.

I think I would pause and think before getting on the “amen” bandwagon against the Pharisees. Have you ever thought: “I wouldn’t have been as foolish as Eve to fall for the trickery of the serpent.” “I wouldn’t have been as foolish as Adam to blatantly disobey my Creator.”

I think we all like to think we would have done better. However, I know that if I had been Eve, I would have done the same. The difference in me and the scribes and Pharisees is that by God’s grace I recognized my sin and my need of the Savior.

Matthew 23:34 ¶ Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and *some* of them ye shall kill and crucify; and *some* of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute *them* from city to city:

Matthew 23:35 That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.

Matthew 23:36 Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.

At this point Jesus begins to prophesy. He declares that He will send them (yet future) prophets, wise men and scribes to testify to the truth of His message. I think it is significant to note that this is yet another of His affirmations that He is one with God. He goes on to say that they will kill and crucify some of these men (e.g., Stephen and James). Some they will flog in their synagogues and persecute to the point of following them from city to city. Because of this, they will stand condemned for the righteous blood that had been shed on earth from “the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar.”

I understand this in the same way that I understand we are all guilty of Adam’s sin. These men were in essence condemned as guilty for the sin of all godly men—from the murder of Abel to the death of Zechariah (specific identity not verified; possibly the prophet Zechariah)—when guilty of killing even one (i.e., Jesus).”

“All these things....” – This phrase looks ahead to the judgment pronounced in the following verses.

Matthew 23:37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, *thou* that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under *her* wings, and ye would not!

Matthew 23:38 Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.

Matthew 23:39 For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.

The chapter closes with words that reflect the heart of God on behalf of these men and the people that follow them. Yes, He is angry at their hypocrisy; however, His heart has ever been that they would turn from their wicked ways and accept Him as their Savior. He addresses the religious leaders and nation collectively by identifying with the city of God they have polluted—Jerusalem. The purpose of sending the prophets and other messengers of His word has ever been to gather His people together in faith and tenderly care for them—as a hen takes care of her little chicks. The sad truth: "...and ye would not!"

"How often..." – So many times the Lord sent His prophets and basically begged His people to turn to Him in faith and experience His blessings—but they would not. Finally, He sent His only Son, the promised Messiah, and Him they are planning to kill.

God will never force one to accept Him; it is a matter of one's choice! I like this quote from Spurgeon: "It is the will of God that saves; it is the will of man that damns."

Because of their rejection of Jesus, Jerusalem and the people of Israel will suffer great destruction.

Jesus then declares that He will not return (to establish His kingdom is implied) until they are ready to welcome Him believing that "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." From the scripture we know that will not happen until the end of the seven-year period known as the 70th week of Daniel or Jacob's trouble. This will all be explained further in the next two chapters when Jesus explains in more detail the time of His coming to His disciples.