

The Church of the Servant King
Survey of the Bible Series
The Gospel of Matthew
(Lesson SB-MT23)

Introduction to Matthew 23

Context – Matthew 23 serves as a climax to a series of confrontations and controversies with the Jewish religious leaders (e.g. 21:23 – 22:46). The pinnacle of the entire book may be the question posed by Jesus to the Pharisees in 22:42 – “What do you think about the Christ?” The failure of these religious leaders to recognize Jesus as the Messiah prophesied in Scripture serves as the indictment, especially since they “sit in Moses’ seat” (23:2). The woes against these religious leaders are a result of their personal decisions to reject the Messiah proclaimed throughout the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures we call the Old Testament. They were hypocrites because they used the Scriptures which pointed to the Messiah and a life of self-sacrifice to their own personal advantage and glorification. On previous occasions, Jesus has denounced the Pharisees (15:7) and even warned his disciples regarding their teaching (16:5-12). However, those occasions were more private than public. In Matthew 23, Jesus is in Jerusalem just a few days before the Passover during which perhaps thousands of Jews had made a pilgrimage to the city and crowds were present everywhere Jesus went, especially to the Temple (21:12-17). Picture the scene: Jesus pronouncing woes of judgment upon the respected Jewish religious leaders in front of crowds of Jewish pilgrims. Combine that with Jesus calling them hypocrites and pointing out their false humility for the crowds to see the naked truth. You can almost sense the seething hatred of Jesus build as those of power are stripped of their power and position by the words of one man in front of their subjects.

How could a Jesus of love....? – Was Jesus inconsistent in teaching principles of love, humility, and even prayer for one’s enemies found in the Sermon on the Mount (chps. 5-7, esp. 5:43-48) to also pronounce woes of judgment upon these religious leaders? The answer is “no” for at least two reasons: 1) as you will recall from our earlier studies, the Sermon on the Mount and especially the Beatitudes contained in that sermon (5:3-12) was designed to teach the qualities which would be demonstrated in the lives of those who had accepted the Messiah and who would enter the kingdom He presented; and 2) Jesus, as Messiah, was and is God; therefore, He can possess both perfect love that would pray for His enemies “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” and at the same time pronounce judgment in perfect justice because His righteousness had been violated. Jesus taught that He came not to bring peace, but a sword (10:34) and presented Himself as a judge (7:21-23).

Principle: Those who sacrifice themselves to become a servant of others in a spiritual sense are often accused by the world of not being compassionate when they use discretion in serving others. For instance, consider the spiritual man who gives his money and time to a ministry where positive volition exists instead of giving his time and money to a philanthropic charity where human good is produced out of the ascetic trend of the sin nature.

Principle: Those who fail to understand the balance between God’s justice, righteousness, and love are subjective folk and lack the objectivity that is so vital to advance to spiritual maturity (in the case of believers). The objective believer can recognize this principle without any self-righteousness and with only the desire to see others come to a clear understanding of God’s love as most clearly expressed in the Person of our Lord Who not only taught self-sacrifice, but Who voluntarily gave His Own life for all mankind.

The Hypocrisy of the Religious Leaders (23:1-12)

The seat of Moses to which Jesus refers was the view most likely held by the Pharisees and others that the Pharisees and other religious leaders were Moses’ legal successors and that they possessed all of his authority. As a matter of fact, synagogues had a stone seat at the front

where the authoritative teacher sat. This is also supported in Scripture in the sense that there are several passages in which the phrase “to sit on xxx’s seat” meant to succeed xxx (e.g. Ex 11:5; 12:29; 1 Ki 1:35, 46; 2:12; 16:11; 2 Ki 15:12; Psa 132:12).

Verse 3 – During Jesus’ ministry, He has repeatedly criticized the religious leaders for their teaching (5:21-48; 15:3-14; 16:12) and will do so again before all is said and done (23:16-36). In addition, He has just exposed their ignorance of the true meaning of the Scriptures (22:41-46). Therefore, the only way to understand Jesus’ statement in verse 3 to “observe and do” whatever the Pharisees tell you is to understand His statement as biting irony bordering on sarcasm especially since it would be impossible to “observe and do” (v. 3a), yet “do not do according to their works” (v. 3b). Jesus is saying that since the Pharisees have presumed upon themselves the authority of Moses and since they do acknowledge the Law’s authority, then listen to them and also acknowledge the authority of the Law. However, do not follow their example.

Verse 4 – While the Pharisees were ready to impose obligations on other people, they themselves were unwilling to lift a finger to enable their followers to bear the burdens that they imposed. They may have tried to follow their own rules, but they refused to help those who collapsed under their rules. Remember from our earlier study that the Pharisees were the group that tried to make the Law practical by developing interpretations of the Law for almost every facet of daily life, e.g. how far one could travel without working on the Sabbath, etc.

Verse 5-7 – Phylacteries were small leather or parchment boxes containing a piece of vellum inscribed with four texts from the Law (Ex 13:2-10; 11-16; Deut 6:4-9; 11:13-21). They were worn on the arm or tied to the forehead according to Exodus 13:9, 16; and Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18. To make an outward show of their piety to the world, these leaders made large showy phylacteries and extra long tassels on the corners of their outer garments in obedience to Numbers 15:37-41 and Deuteronomy 22:12. These tassels were designed to remind Israel of the Law, not to serve as an outward show of professed humility. God intended for the Law to be impressed upon their heart (Prov 6:20-21). Jesus pointed out that these men were motivated by approbation lust and self-righteousness in that they loved the important seats and other places of honor. They enjoyed the respect that was shown them and the public greetings in the marketplaces. They coveted the title “Rabbi” by which ordinary people showed regard for their “wisdom.”

Principle: A man’s effectiveness in the spiritual realm is measured by how much Christ is magnified and duplicated in others not by how much he is recognized. The truly humble man in ministry knows that his ministry is only being effective when others incorporate the self-discipline and humility in their lives to become like Christ whether anyone ever says a word of encouragement or thanks to him or not. The fruit is in the changed life not the words. The Pharisees desired accolades, not changed lives. They bolstered their positions by people’s inability to keep their interpretations of the Law and the people’s homage paid to such “leaders” who could allegedly keep such strict requirements. They built themselves up on the failure of others.

Verses 8-10 – Jesus instructed His followers to not desire the title “Rabbi” or “father” or “teacher.” The term “fathers” was often used to refer to earlier teachers of the Law. The reason was that He was emphasizing a point – don’t desire titles for yourselves, desire only that Christ be exalted as God. The way up is down. Obviously, Jesus is not teaching a universal principle that these titles never be used for other Scripture acknowledges various roles and positions of leadership and authority (e.g. 15:4-6; 19:5, 29; 2 Ki 2:12; 1 Co 4:15; Gal 4:2; 1 Thess 5:12, 13; 1 Tim 5:17; Heb 12:9; 13:7).

Verses 11-12 – To master the universal spiritual truth contained in these verses in the practice of one’s life is a life long endeavor for the believer. This principle was just as true of the Age of Israel believer as it is true of the believer of the Church (i.e. Jas 4:6; 1 Pe 5:5-6). True

humility allows one to implement this in one's life without becoming a doormat and a fawning sycophant (i.e. one who is constantly seeking to please others).

The Woes of Judgment (23:13-36)

There are really seven woes of judgment in this passage since verse 14 is not found in the best and earliest manuscripts. However, if verse 14 was a part of the original, it could have referred to the Pharisees use of their position to adjust claims against wealthy widows in an unjust manner (perhaps for their own personal benefit) or to get them to bestow on them their estates.

First woe (verse 13) – Failure to recognize Jesus as the Messiah – the religious leaders are hypocrites because they refuse to acknowledge that the “kingdom of heaven is at hand” by accepting Jesus as the Messiah and they hinder anyone else from doing so also.

Second woe (verse 15) – For zealously winning others to their cause – their desire to convert others was only expanding Satan's kingdom.

Third woe (verses 16-22) – For duplicity or redefining words to their advantage – they would distinguish between swearing by the temple and by the gold of the temple, or between swearing by the altar and a gift on the altar, or between swearing by God's throne and God Who sits on the throne. By making these carefully contrived distinctions, the Pharisees were able to take an oath, but then escape responsibility through a legal technicality. To the one who was uninformed of such technicalities, but who took the oath for what it was intended, there was often adverse consequences when the Pharisee escaped responsibility.

Fourth woe (verses 23-24) – For being blind guides – The religious leaders were so concerned over the minutia of the Law that they overlooked its true intent. The followers of the religious leaders thought they were being led to a spiritual life when in reality they were being led by the spiritually blind. Jesus does not condemn their tithing of spices for that was consistent with the Law (Lev 27:30); however, He does condemn their failure to deal with the more important matters involving personal righteousness.

Fifth woe (verses 25-26) – For being overly concerned with outward show while ignoring inner righteousness – Jesus was in effect saying that if the religious leaders would give attention to inner renewal, the outside effect seen by men would take care of itself.

Sixth woe (verses 27-28) – For hypocrisy – During the period just before Passover, it was customary to white-wash graves with lime so that they might be easily identified. This allowed the pilgrims to avoid them and not become ritually unclean and thereby not be able to participate in the Passover. Jesus is saying that the religious leaders are just as much a source of defilement as are the whitewashed graves.

Seventh woe (verses 29-32) – For being just as blind as their forefathers – Jesus knew that they were about to kill Him. They professed to honor the prophets of the Old Testament and they disavowed the actions of their fathers in killing the prophets. However, in reality, they were no different and would kill the very One of Whom these prophets spoke.

Finally, in verses 33-36, Jesus likens the religious leaders to snakes or serpents. Eve was first deceived by Satan, who came in the form of a serpent that was very beautiful to look at yet inwardly cunning and full of deceit. The same was true of the outward show manifested by the Pharisees. Their externalism made them attractive to people, but the system that they proclaimed deceived people and kept them from Christ. Abel was the first person to have been murdered in the Hebrew Scriptures (Ge 4:8) and Zechariah was the last (2 Chr 24:20-22 – the last book in the Hebrew canon).

Jesus Laments Over Jerusalem and Acknowledges Its Rejection (23:37-39)

All along in this chapter, the religious leaders have been Jesus' primary target. Now, He changes the reference to "this generation" (v. 36). No doubt, Jesus was recognizing that the leaders represented the people and the people do not abandon their leaders for Jesus as the Messiah in spite of Jesus' warnings. This sets the stage for the concluding lament over Jerusalem. When Jesus stated that their house would be left desolate. By this He meant any one or a combination of several things:

- The city of Jerusalem
- The Jewish temple in the city
- The Davidic dynasty which ended with Him and to which the Jews looked for a successor to David to be the Messiah Who delivered
- The nation as a whole.