

The Church of the Servant King

Mid-Week Bible Study

The Gospel of Matthew

(Mid-Week_Matt23)

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 23

Context – Matthew 23 serves as a climax to a series of confrontations and controversies with the Jewish religious leaders as Jesus entered Jerusalem (e.g. 21:23 – 22:46).

- Jesus' authority is questioned as He enters the Temple area (21:23ff).
- The chief priests and Pharisees perceive Jesus' parables to be about them, but they do not take Him for fear of the multitudes (21:45-46).
- The Pharisees and Herodians attempt to trap Jesus with questions about taxes and money (22:15-22).
- The Sadducees attempt to trap Jesus with a question that weaves the intricacies of the Mosaic Law in regard to Levirate marriage responsibilities with marital status in heaven, thus posing a veiled question in regard to the resurrection (22:23-33).
- The Pharisees and scribes question Jesus about the greatest commandment (22:34-40).

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? Whose Son is He?"

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) – a metaphor for being in a position of recognized authority over the Jewish people.¹ 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.

7 "You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you:
8 THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS,
BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. (Matt 15:7-8)

5 And the disciples came to the other side of the sea, but they had forgotten to bring any bread. 6 And Jesus said to them, "Watch out and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." 7 They began to discuss this among themselves, saying, "He said that because we did not bring any bread." 8 But Jesus, aware of this, said, "You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? 9 "Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets full you picked up? 10 "Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many large baskets full you picked up? 11 "How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." 12 Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (Matt 16:5-12)

¹ Jewish synagogues had an official chair called "Moses' seat."

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 (cf. 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 picture 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....?

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' 44 "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt 5:43-48)

Was Jesus inconsistent in teaching principles of love, humility, and even prayer for one's enemies as found in the Sermon on the Mount (chps. 5-7, esp. 5:43-48) only to later pronounce woes of judgment upon these religious leaders? The answer is "no" for at least two reasons.

- 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.
- Jesus also possessed objectivity – a component of the divine power sphere.² Jesus is the prototype of a human who operated perfectly in the power of God – not the power of man.

As well as having taught the beatitudes, Jesus taught that He came not to bring peace, but a sword (10:34) and presented Himself as a judge (7:21-23).

34 "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 "For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW; 36 and A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD. (Matt 10:34-36)

21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' (Matt 7:21-23)

² Components of the divine power sphere include: yieldedness, objectivity, humility, momentum, personal love for God, agape love for man, momentum testing and sharing God's joy and happiness.

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 believer 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 motivated by the ascetic trend of the sin nature. Will the world evaluate this man's discretion accurately?

Principle: The believer must possess objectivity if the believer desires to be like Jesus Christ in His humanity.

Principle: Objectivity is characterized by the ability to identify old-man thinking and views not in line with Scripture on the one hand while having agape love and respect toward a person holding wrong views on the other hand.

Principle: Objectivity is characterized by the ability to distinguish between how the believer should treat all other believers and unbelievers (i.e. with agape love and respect) and one's assessment of the positions and views they promote (e.g. old-man thinking and human viewpoint or new-man thinking and divine viewpoint).

THE HYPOCRISY OF THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS (23:1-12)

1 Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, 2 saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; 3 therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. 4 "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. 5 "But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. 6 "They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. 8 "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. 10 "Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. 11 "But the greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 "Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. (23:1-12)

The seat of Moses is most likely a reference to a view held by the Pharisees 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 (15:3-14; 16:12) and will do so again before all is said and done (23:16-36).

3 And He answered and said to them, "Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4 "For God said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER,' and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH.' 5 "But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God," 6 he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition.

7 "You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you:
8 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS,
BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.

9 'BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME,
TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.'"

10After Jesus called the crowd to Him, He said to them, "Hear and understand.
11"It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds
out of the mouth, this defiles the man." 12Then the disciples came and said to
Him, "Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this
statement?" 13But He answered and said, "Every plant which My heavenly
Father did not plant shall be uprooted. 14"Let them alone; they are blind guides
of the blind And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit." (Matt
15:3-14)

12 Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread,
but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. (Matt 16:12)

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; 1Tim 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)

13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. 14 ["Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.] 15 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. 16 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' 17 "You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? 18 "And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.' 19 "You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? 20 "Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. 21 "And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. 22 "And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it. 23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. 24 "You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! 25 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. 26 "You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. 27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 28 "So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. 29 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 30 and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 "So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 "Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. 33 "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? 34 "Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, 35 so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 "Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

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)

37 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. 38 "Behold, your

house is being left to you desolate! 39 "For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, 'BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!'"

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 to follow Jesus as the Messiah in spite of Jesus' warnings. This sets the stage for the concluding lament over Jerusalem.

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.