

Matthew

Chapter 23

By

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MATTHEW CHAPTER 23

JESUS WARNS ABOUT THE BEHAVIOR OF THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS (23:1-12)

Jesus begins to denounce the religious leaders in front of the multitudes. He will speak to the crowds about the doctrine and behavior of these religious rulers.

Matt. 23:1 Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples,

Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples From the debate and parables of chapters 21-22 against the religious rulers, we now move to direct attack. He will publicly expose the failings and hypocrisy of the religious leaders. Jesus addresses His remarks to the disciples and the crowds, not to the Pharisees (in vs. 2-12).

However in 13-36 the style changes to a direct address against them in the form of seven denunciations. The target of the attack is the legalism of the Pharisees.

Matt. 23:2 saying, “The Scribes and Pharisees sit upon the seat of Moses.

saying, “The Scribes and Pharisees Strictly speaking, only the Scribes were the successors of Moses. Many of the Scribes were also Pharisees but not all Pharisees were Scribes.

sit They consider themselves Moses successors therefore they occupy his seat.

upon the seat of Moses. Moses seat is a figurative expression for the teaching authority, or those officially responsible for interpreting and applying the laws of Moses. They were heirs of Moses authority by an unbroken tradition.

Matt. 23:3 Therefore, all things whatever they say to you, do and keep, but do not do according to their works, for they say, but do not do.

Therefore, all things whatever they say to you, do and keep, Jesus accepts the legitimacy of their function but questions the way they exercise it.

but do not do according to their works, Follow their words, not their actions

for they say, but do not do. They do not practice what they preach. “Do as I say, not as I do!”

Matt. 23:4 For they tie up heavy loads, that are hard to carry, and place them upon the shoulders of men. But they themselves are not willing to lift their finger to move them.

Note on a variant reading: Some manuscripts do not have the phrase *hard to carry*.

For they tie up heavy loads, Compare that to the yoke of Jesus (11:28-30).

that are hard to carry, and place them upon the shoulders of men. But they themselves are not willing to lift their finger to move them. Their legalism cannot help lighten the loads.

Matt. 23:5 For they perform all their works to be seen of people; for they make their phylacteries wide, and the tassels of their garments long;

For they perform all their works to be seen of people; The thing that inspires their works is the praise of others, not God.

for they make their phylacteries wide, The phylacteries (*tefillim*) are small leather boxes containing scrolls of texts from Exodus and Deuteronomy. “Make wide” could refer to the size of the straps by which they were bound to the forehead and left arm of Jewish men when they pray, or it could refer to wearing them during the rest of the day not only during the prescribed hours of prayer.

and the tassels of their garments long; The size of the tassels was a matter of debate among the Rabbi’s.

Matt. 23:6 For they love the chief place at the banquets, and the first seats in the synagogues.

For they love the chief place at the banquets, This is in contrast to the “last place” which the Lord told His disciples to take at the banquets (Luke 14:7 ff.).

and the first seats in the synagogues. Compare this to Jesus’ continual comments about how disciples in the kingdom are to place themselves last, not first.

Matt. 23:7 And the greetings in the market places, and to be called ‘Rabbi,’ by people.

Note on a variant reading: Some manuscripts have the words *Rabbi, Rabbi* instead of the one *Rabbi*.

And the greetings in the market places, They loved the attention.

and to be called ‘Rabbi,’ by people. Rabbi means “my master.”

Matt. 23:8 But you yourselves do not be called ‘Rabbi;’ for there is one teacher for you, and you are all brothers.

But you yourselves The *you* is emphatic in Greek.

do not be called ‘Rabbi;’ We are not to consider ourselves as anyone else’s master.

for there is one teacher for you, and you are all brothers. The followers of Jesus are to recognize that there is only one authoritative teacher.

Matt. 23:9 And do not call anyone your ‘father’ on the earth, for One is your Father—He who is in heaven.

Note on a variant reading: Instead of the first use of *your father*, some manuscripts read *a father to you* while a few manuscripts do not have the word *your* at all.

And do not call anyone your ‘father’ on the earth, Father in the sense of a title of honor.

for One is your Father—He who is in heaven. Likewise they are to recognize only one heavenly Father. The verse warns about giving men a title that belongs to God and Him alone.

Matt. 23:10 And do not be called teachers, because one is your Teacher—the Christ.

And do not be called teachers, Again we are not to take titles belonging to God. This is repeating what He has said in verse eight but in a slightly different form.

because one is your Teacher—the Christ. There is only one authoritative teacher.

Matt. 23:11 And he who is greatest among you will be your servant.

And he who is greatest among you will be your servant. This is a shorter form of what Jesus has already said (20:26). Disciples of the kingdom should live in total contrast with the Pharisees who attempted to lord over others.

Matt. 23:12 And whoever will exalt himself, will be humbled, and whoever will humble himself, will be exalted.

And whoever will exalt himself, will be humbled, and whoever will humble himself, will be exalted. The status-conscious Pharisees and Scribes should not be the standard for the disciples of Jesus. True greatness lies in humility and servanthood.

JESUS CONDEMNS THE HYPOCRISY OF THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS (23:13-36)

A series of woes will now come from Jesus denouncing the hypocrisy of those who were the spiritual leaders of the country. These people, who were supposed to be the guardians and interpreters of God's law, had not lived up to their position. This direct denunciation, for the most part, is done in the second person plural (you).

Matt. 23:13 Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you are shutting up the kingdom of heaven before humankind. For you yourselves are not entering in nor are you permitting the ones coming in to enter.

Woe to you, The series of woes given are similar to those of the Old Testament prophets (Isaiah 5:8-23; Hab 2:6-19). In all these cases, the tone is one of condemnation. The series of woes are the opposite of the series of blessings that our Lord earlier gave (5:3-12). The beatitudes are the correct way to please God while the way of the Pharisees is the wrong way.

Scribes and Pharisees, Now He speaks directly to the Scribes and Pharisees. The first three woes deal with their teachings.

The question as to whether the Pharisees were present for this denunciation has been answered in several ways by commentators:

1. Many simply avoid answering the question.
2. Others believe the Pharisees were present but kept themselves in the background.

3. They are present and Jesus speaks face to face with them.
4. They were not present at all. Their presence is mentioned at 22:41-46 but nowhere is it noted in chapter 23. If this be the case, all seven woes were given for rhetorical affect.

hypocrites! In six of these woes Jesus calls them hypocrites. The term used by Jesus could mean:

1. His opponents simply did not know Him when they slandered His character. This would allow them to be making an honest mistake similar to the Apostle Paul (1 Timothy 1:13-15).
2. They knowingly and wickedly slandered Him. When we consider the other uses of the term in Matthew (6:2,5, 16; 15:7,8; 22:18) the meaning is clear—they were frauds', deceivers, those who put on a form of godliness but their hearts were far from Him. Therefore there is no indication here, or anywhere in Matthew, that these people persecuted Jesus out of honest motives.

Because you are shutting up the kingdom of heaven before humankind. It describes the effect of Pharisaic legalism on entering the kingdom of heaven. Luke tells us they are taking away the key which gives the knowledge of salvation (11:52). They had failed in their divinely appointed task of teaching Israel.

For you yourselves are not entering in This direct rebuke to them continues the harsh things Jesus has already said about their ways.

nor are you permitting the ones coming in to enter. Jesus has brought the true way of salvation and the Pharisees, by their teaching, have made it impossible for those who follow them to enter in to His salvation. The implication is that the true way of salvation comes only through Jesus and not these religious leaders.

This does not mean, however, that the Pharisees are stronger than God in the sense that they themselves can keep people out of the kingdom of heaven—the Pharisee's cannot thwart God's program!

Both in their hypocritical lifestyle and their doctrine (works equals righteousness) the Pharisees were opposed to Jesus

Matt. 23:14 [Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, even while for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.]

Note on a variant reading: This verse, which is in Mark 12:40, is lacking in some manuscripts of Matthew.

Matt. 23:15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you travel over the land and the sea to win one convert, and when it happens, you have made him the twofold son of Gehenna as yourselves.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! The second woe will reveal the results of their hypocritical teaching.

Because you travel over the land and the sea to win one convert, There is nothing wrong in making converts. Jesus will tell His disciples to go out and make converts (see 28:19). God had instructed His people, from the beginning, to have a missionary faith (see Genesis 22:18; Exodus 12:49; Leviticus 19:34; 1 Kings 8:41-43; Ezra 6:21; Psalm 72:8-17; 87; Isaiah 54:2,3; 56:3-8; 60:1-3; Jeremiah 39:15-18; Joel 2:28-32; Amos 9:11, 12; Zechariah 9:23; Malachi 1:11). There is also the example of Jonah whom God sent to the

people of Nineveh.

These converts or proselytes can be put into a couple of different categories. Some were called worshippers of God (Acts 16:14; 18:7)

and when it happens, you have made him the twofold son of Gehenna as yourselves. But the second woe concerns the type of religious converts they make—one destined for hell. The idea of a twofold son may refer to the frequent tendency of the disciple to be more zealous than his teacher. In this case their converts would be all the more perverted in their teaching.

Matt. 23:16 “Woe to you, blind guides, the ones who say, ‘Whoever will swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever will swear by the gold in the temple, he is obligated to perform it.’

“Woe to you, blind guides, The next woe concerns their blindness with respect to oaths.

the ones who say, ‘Whoever will swear by the temple, This subject had already been dealt with in 5:33-37. The background of this denunciation is the substitution of trivial oaths for serious ones.

it is nothing; but whoever will swear by the gold in the temple, The gold to them was the most important.

he is obligated to perform it.’ They believed the temple was not as important as the gold in it.

Matt. 23:17 “Fools and blind (ones)! For what is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold?”

“Fools and blind (ones)! The idea behind these terms is not so much an insult as to describe their actual situation.

For what is greater, Jesus is going to show them the absurdity of their debates over this issue. He again uses the typical Rabbinic practice of asking them a question.

the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? He illustrates this nit-picking feature of the Pharisees. Do they really think the gold is more important than the temple itself?

Matt. 23:18 And, ‘Whoever will swear by the altar, it is nothing, but whoever will swear by the gift that is upon the altar he is obligated to perform it.’

And, ‘Whoever will swear by the altar, it is nothing, but whoever will swear by the gift that is upon the altar he is obligated to perform it.’ They made the gift more important than the altar.

Matt. 23:19 You blind (ones)! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that sanctifies the gift?

Note on a variant reading: Some manuscripts have *Fools* before *Blind ones*.

You blind (ones)! Which is greater: Again they need to answer the question.

the gift, or the altar that sanctifies the gift? The answer is obvious—the altar is greater than the gift offered on it.

Matt. 23:20 Therefore, he who swears by the altar, is swearing by it, and by everything that is on it.

Therefore, he who swears by the altar, is swearing by it, and by everything that is on it. If you swear by the altar you are swearing by everything connected with it.

Matt. 23:21 And he who swears by the temple, is swearing by it, and by the one who is dwelling in it.

And he who swears by the temple, is swearing by it, and by the one who is dwelling in it. Those who swear by the temple are also swearing by God.

Matt. 23:22 And he who swears by heaven, is swearing by the throne of God, and by the One sitting upon it.

And he who swears by heaven, Heaven again is used symbolically as God's throne. If you swear by one, you are swearing by the other.

is swearing by the throne of God, and by the One sitting upon it. If you swear by heaven then you are also swearing the One who sits on the heavenly throne.

Matt. 23:23 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you pay a tenth of the mint, dill and cummin, and you have neglected the weightier matters of the Law—judgment and mercy and faith. These things are necessary to do while not neglecting the others..

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! The fourth woe concerns their hypocrisy in tithing

Because you pay a tenth of the Jesus is not denouncing the fact that they tithed. It was what they were tithing that was the problem.

mint, This was a small garden herb. His problem with them is in their sense of proportion.

dill and cummin, More small garden herbs. All three of these were used to flavor food.

The Pharisees overdid the ordinance to tithe (Leviticus 27:30-33; Deuteronomy 14:22-29). Nothing in the law of Moses commands to tithe such things as these. The Old Testament context commands tithing of grain, wine, and oil—the three great crops of the field not the garden herbs. As was true with other matters such as hand-washing, fasting, the Sabbath observance, and a host of other issues, these religious leaders went beyond what the law commanded.

and you have neglected the weightier matters of the Law— What made matters worse was their lack of stress on the real important issues—this was the concern of Jesus.

judgment Instead of the three things they were observing, Jesus lets them know the three things that are missing. The first is judgment or justice. They were unjust with their treatment of John the Baptist as they will shortly be with Jesus.

and mercy God had told the people before that they desired mercy rather than sacrifice. He did not mean to say that He did not want them to sacrifice, rather He wanted them to remember to be merciful along

with offering their sacrifices. The Pharisees had obviously forgotten this truth.

and faith. Instead of trusting God to take care of them, they were taking the matters into their own hands with all sorts of schemes to benefit themselves.

These three attributes, judgment, mercy and faith, would be another summary of the meaning of the law. Again it was not the outward show that God was looking for but rather the inward motivation by which people acted.

These things are necessary to do He is stressing that they have forgotten to take care of the more important issues. Micah 6:8 states the matter clearly: “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what the Lord requires of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

while not neglecting the others. Yet the other parts are to be observed. The commandments God have given do not have to be removed, they merely have to be obeyed with correct spirit.

Matt. 23:24 You blind guides! You strain out the gnat, but swallow the entire camel.

You blind guides! You strain out the gnat, He shows their lack of sense for proportion by this picture of straining out the smallest of creatures out of a drink to avoid impurity (Leviticus 11:20-23).

but swallow the entire camel. Yet a camel (also impure Leviticus 11:4) is swallowed whole. The joke may have been aided by an Aramaic pun on *qalma* (gnat) and *gamlā* (camel).

Matt. 23:25 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

Note on a variant reading: Instead of the word translated *self-indulgence* or *intemperance* there are other readings in the manuscripts. These include *unrighteousness*, *uncleanness* or *evil*.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and the dish, “Rabbinic debates on the relative importance of the inside and outside of utensils in matters of ceremonial purification are well documented” (France, p. 329).

but inside they are full of greed Again the stress on the inward aspect, not the outward show.

and self-indulgence. The fifth woe focuses on the difference between the external and internal.

Matt. 23:26 You blind Pharisee! First cleanse the inside of the cup and the dish, in order that the outside may also be clean.

Note on a variant reading: After the phrase *inside of the cup* some manuscripts read *and of the dish*.

You Jesus now addresses the individual Pharisee switching from the plural to the singular.

blind Pharisee! First cleanse the inside of the cup and the dish, in order that the outside may also be clean. Take care of the more important thing first, the inside.

Matt. 23:27 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which

appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of bones of dead men and all uncleanness.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, Tombs were whitewashed regularly at festival times to ensure that passers by did not inadvertently touch them and so become defiled (Mishnah *Shekalim* 1:1).

which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of bones of dead men and all uncleanness. The reference could also be to funeral urns or bone containers which were beautified with a marble and lime plaster.

Matt. 23:28 In this same way, on the outside you appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

In this same way, on the outside you appear righteous to men, A very telling comparison.

but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Outwardly religious, inwardly lawless.

Matt. 23:29 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! This woe describes the hostility they have to God's true messengers and predicts the outcome.

You build the tombs of the prophets They would build monuments to the prophets who had been killed. In the first century there was a great emphasis on building beautiful tombs. This practice included those who had been long-dead. For example, Herod built new marble monument over David's tomb (Josephus, *Antiquities*. 16. 179-182).

and decorate the graves of the righteous. In doing this, they would acknowledge that these people were righteous.

Matt. 23:30 And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers in the shedding of the blood of the prophets.'

And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, They claim they would have acted different from those who came before.

we would not have been partakers in the shedding of the blood of the prophets.' If they would have been there, these prophets and righteous ones would not have been killed.

Matt. 23:31 So that you are testifying against yourselves that you are the descendants of the ones who murdered the prophets.

So that you are testifying against yourselves that you are the descendants of the ones who murdered the prophets. Though they symbolically honor the prophets they are the ones who kill them. For all their pious words, these current leaders are still the sons of the fathers who killed God's messengers.

Matt. 23:32 You yourselves, then, fill up, the measure of your fathers!

You yourselves, then, fill up, the measure of your fathers! There is much irony in this command of Jesus. They will indeed fill up the complete measure of what their father's have previously done—by killing God's ultimate messenger, the Messiah. Consequently, Jesus' own generation will be the ones who will incur the ultimate punishment from God (the destruction of the city, temple and the exile of the people).

Matt. 23:33 Snakes! Offspring of vipers! How will you escape the judgment of Gehenna?

Snakes! Offspring of vipers! How will you escape the judgment of Gehenna? In 3:7 John the Baptist pictured them as a brood of vipers fleeing wrath, Jesus says their flight is futile.

Matt. 23:34 Because of this, behold, I myself am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes. Some of them you will kill and crucify; and others you will flog in your synagogues and will persecute from town to town.

Because of this, behold, I myself am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes. Some of them you will kill and crucify; and others you will flog in your synagogues and will persecute from town to town. Jesus has been sending forth disciples in the same role as the Old Testament prophets.

Matt. 23:35 So that there will come upon you all the righteous blood that had been shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel, to the blood of Zechariah, son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.

So that there will come upon you all the righteous blood that had been shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel, to the blood of Zechariah, son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. The cumulative effect of the rejection and murder of all God's spokesmen is graphically traced from Abel to Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:22), who were the first and last martyrs of the Old Testament. There is a problem as to the exact relationship of Zechariah with Barachiah (see question at the end of this chapter).

Matt. 23:36 For truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

For truly I say to you, all these things will come upon The coming of Jesus, and His rejection by His own people, will be climaxed in judgment that cannot be delayed.

this generation. In this context this seems to refer to those hearing His words.

JESUS LAMENTS OVER JERUSALEM (23:37-39)

Jesus mourns over the city of Jerusalem and pronounces judgment upon the temple.

Matt. 23:37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones the ones sent to her, how many times I desired to gather your children together, in the same manner as a hen gathers together her brood under her wings, but you were not willing.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones the ones sent to her, The fate of Jerusalem is now the subject. Jerusalem is representative of the nation.

how many times I desired to gather your children together, in the same manner as a hen gathers together her brood under her wings, but you were not willing. Please notice that they *would* not believe, it is not that they *could* not (see also John 5:40 where the responsibility of not believing is placed squarely on their shoulders).

Matt. 23:38 Behold, your house is left to you desolate.

Note on a variant reading: Some manuscripts do not have the word *desolate*.

Behold, your house is left to you desolate. He is speaking of the destruction of the temple.

Matt. 23:39 For I say to you, you will not see me again from now until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’

For I say to you, you will not see me again from now until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’ This will occur when He comes the second time.

SUMMARY TO CHAPTER 23

The strongest words of condemnation in the Bible are found in this passage. Jesus denounces the behavior of the religious leaders. He lists seven specific woes against them. Jesus shows their religiosity is done for the purpose of impressing others, rather than impressing God. As He earlier had taught His disciples, our righteous deeds need to be done in secret where God will reward us openly. The Pharisees received their payment in full by enjoying the acclaim of humanity rather than the Lord.

Finally, Jesus pronounces judgment upon the city and the temple, setting the stage for His discourse on the end of the age.

QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 23

QUESTION: WAS ZECHARIAH THE SON OF BERACHIACH?

Jesus, in quoting the Old Testament, made a statement about the martyrs Abel to Zechariah son of Berachiah. The problem is that the last martyr was not Zechariah the son of Berachiah but rather the son of Jehoida. There are several possible ways in which to deal with this difficulty.

1. Like so many other persons mentioned in Scripture the father of the murdered man had two names—Jehoida and Barachiah.
2. In one of the early copies of Matthew’s gospel, a copyist remember the name of the father of the minor prophet and erroneously put it into the text.
3. Many times in Scripture the term father (2 Chronicles 24:22) means grandfather.

Any of these possible solutions will work.