

Matthew 23:1-24 – “Hypocrisy Confronted”

Since Jesus came into Jerusalem on this Passover season, starting with the Triumphal Entry in Matthew 21, the religious leaders have been attempting to find fault with Jesus. They’ve been trying to expose Him as a false teacher, but now Jesus flips things on these religious leaders, and He now unleashes His exposé on them. And boy, these guys are going to get an earful and it’s deliciously good!

Summary Statement:

The pride and hypocrisy of Israel’s religious leaders are exposed by Jesus who unleashes a strong indictment against them in the form of 8 woes.

1. Pride of God’s Leaders – 23:1-12

23:1-4 - *Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, ² saying: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. ³ Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. ⁴ For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.*

Jesus goes right after these religious leaders, and He does so right in front of the multitudes. These religious leaders have been conducting themselves in pride and religious arrogance, but now they’re going to be knocked down as they’re exposed for who they really are.

They ***sit in Moses’ seat***... This is literally: *they’ve seated themselves in Moses’ seat*. The seat of Moses was a literal chair that sat in local synagogues in Jewish towns during this time. It was there that judges would preside over various cases that potentially violated the Law of Moses. The Pharisees and scribes were the judges of the law in this day. They interpreted and taught the Law of Moses. And when they were just passing this on to others, it was true and dependable. So Jesus says, ***observe and do***.

The problem with many of these religious leaders was they were great at telling you what to do, but living it out themselves was another story altogether (***for they say, and do not do*** – vs. 3).

- Jesus said, don’t follow their works, because it’s not lining up with what the law says.

- And in fact, they were placing heavy burdens on people. They made the law harder than it needed to be, yet they wouldn't follow these demands themselves.
- What a shame. It was totally hypocritical. This is the thing that causes many people to dismiss Christianity. They will see professing believers living a life so contrary to what they are professing. People want to see that which is genuine. They want to see a person's walk lining up with the talk.
- May we be those that are living an exemplary life. People should be able to see a difference in us not because of what we say, but because of how we live.

It's interesting because Jesus lived a life so different than these religious leaders. They thought they were the representatives of God, but when Jesus came as actually God in the flesh, He was so opposite from these scribes and Pharisees.

- **Matthew 11:28–30**, *"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."*

So why did these religious leaders conduct themselves this way? We see their motive next. It was all about using religion for recognition.

23:5-10 - *But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. ⁶ They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷ greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' ⁸ But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. ⁹ Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. ¹⁰ And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ.*

They simply wanted the fanfare. They wanted a following and to be seen by men. So to make this happen they began to exaggerate different practises to stand out and get the attention of others.

Phylacteries were small boxes of leather or wood that the Jews would bind to their forehead and to their left arm. Inside these boxes contained 4 Scriptures: Exodus 13:1-10, 11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21. These passages all speak

of taking the Scriptures and binding them as a sign on your hand, and as frontlets between your eyes (Deuteronomy 6:8).

- This is something the Lord meant figuratively, but the Pharisees saw this as an opportunity to practice their pious religion, so they carried this out literally. And as though that wasn't enough to get peoples attention, they began to make these phylacteries extra-large so they stood out even more.

They did the same with the **borders of their garments**.

- ~~Numbers 15:38–39, "Speak to the children of Israel: Tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a blue thread in the tassels of the corners.³⁹ And you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and that you may not follow the harlotry to which your own heart and your own eyes are inclined,"~~
- They made these tassels extra-long so everybody could see them and think these guys were so spiritual for having these enlarged borders or tassels.

But these religious leaders weren't just content to show their super spirituality, they wanted others to acknowledge it as well. They wanted the respect and honor from people. So they loved taking **the best places at feasts**.

When a person hosted a banquet, the guest seating was all arranged, and it was arranged by rank and class. So you didn't just come and sit where you wanted. The person with highest honor sat to the right of the host. The next one down sat on the left. And it alternated down the line. So if you're sitting way down at the end of the table you weren't very highly respected by the host. These religious leaders always wanted the seat of honor.

In the synagogue men sat on the left side and women on the right side. The leaders sat in the front facing the people. These were the **best seats** these leaders coveted.

When they were walking around the marketplace, where the crowds were, they wanted to be greeted by people in a reverential way. It stroked their egos and pride.

- But Jesus says they are not to desire these titles. **Rabbi** means master or teacher, and Jesus says you have that already in Him! We're to learn from Jesus.

- Don't use these titles of honor, and certainly don't seek those for yourselves. When we look to Jesus as our ultimate Master, Father and Teacher, we quickly realize that none of us deserve those titles, and we are then all on a level playing field compared to Him.

Now if these titles are not to be used, what do we do with verses that speak about the role of teachers in the church, and elders having positions of authority? Well, Jesus isn't so much condemning the use of titles, He's condemning the pride and pretense that many hold to with titles. Paul himself referred to himself as the Corinthians father in 1 Corinthians 4:15.

- The issue is not with what you are called. The issue lies with what you want to be called. Though I hold the title of Pastor or Teacher here at Riverside, I really don't care what I'm called. I've been called lots of different things. I see myself as an equal here, but one that's been called to serve a distinct role within the body of Christ.

23:11-12 - *But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*

Jesus has been teaching His disciples this concept repeatedly because it's such a natural position to think the best of ourselves and want the best for ourselves. But Jesus teaches that if you want to be great in God's eyes, be a servant. Think of others before yourself. Don't try and exalt yourself, rather humble yourself. Let God be the One that lifts you up rather than trying to prop yourself up.

- **James 4:6, 10**, *"But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up."*

As we continue on, Jesus is going to pronounce 8 **woes** against these scribes and Pharisees. The word woe was a term of judgment and/or grief/displeasure. Jesus is speaking these in a final display of condemnation against these religious leaders and their hypocrisy. But again, He's not speaking in total anger, but rather anguish. The chapter will end with Jesus weeping over the fact that many will dismiss Him.

In most of these pronouncements of woes He refers to the scribes and Pharisees as **hypocrites**. That term speaks of an actor, a pretender. These guys were putting on a disingenuous display of religion to be applauded by the crowds.

Interestingly, Jesus began His public ministry with pronouncing 8 blessings, known as the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. He shares His last public sermon with 8 woes. And there's an interesting contrast between the two.

2. Preying on God's People – 23:13-15

23:13 - “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

First beatitude: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* But these leaders were proud in spirit. They weren't getting in because they didn't want to receive Jesus as the way in. They were unwilling to accept Him. And they kept others out by making it more difficult than it needed to be. They turned others away from Jesus.

23:14 - Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.

Second beatitude: *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.* Instead of aiding those in need, comforting the mourning widows, they took advantage of them. It was not uncommon to come to widows and help them with the management of their home and finances. But these religious leaders would come acting all holy and righteous. They would make long prayers to seem so religious and command authority. Then they would use that to garner support from the widows, often times ripping them off for their own personal gain. It was worthy of great condemnation.

23:15 - “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

Third beatitude: *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.* These scribes and Pharisees wouldn't know meekness if it smacked them upside the head. They were going after people no matter how far away they were. Their goal was not to add people to the family of God, but rather to their own legalistic system of religion. They just wanted to add more people under them. The original pyramid scheme. In so doing these proselytes became an even greater son of hell as they were as their zeal early on was greater than that of their leaders.

3. Perverting God's Law – 23:16-24

23:16-19 - *“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.’¹⁷ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold?¹⁸ And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.’¹⁹ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift?*

Jesus loved to use some sanctified sarcasm, some holy humor. **Blind guides** is a bit of an oxymoron. You don't want them to be leading the way. But that's exactly what was happening. These religious leaders were leading people right off a cliff.

They would make their oaths and swear by the temple but then would say it wasn't binding because you need to swear by the gold of the temple. They used trickery to be greedy. They weren't seeking righteousness but sneakiness. They looked for the loopholes.

- Jesus said in **Matthew 5:6**, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”*
- These religious leaders put a whole lot of emphasis on the gold and the gifts. This is what they coveted. This is what they hungered for over righteousness.

But Jesus makes clear the temple is what gives the gold its importance. The altar makes that gift of value.

23:20-22 - *Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it.²¹ He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it.²² And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it.*

There's no immunity when you make an oath. Swearing by the temple is to swear by everything on it and the One who dwells in it – God. It doesn't get any more binding than that.

- Jesus already dealt with this in Matthew 5:33-37 when He taught that we should not be swearing at all. We shouldn't have to if our word is true. He essentially said, *‘let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’ (Matthew 5:37).*

23:23-24 - “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. ²⁴ Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”

These leaders made themselves look so spiritual by majoring on the minors. These guys be out there dividing up all their spices and such, so meticulously being careful to tithe an exact amount of such a small thing, yet someone could be getting mugged in the street and someone’s desperately calling for help and they’d be, ‘knock it off, I’m trying to be sure I’m giving my exact portion to God.’ They looked very spiritual for doing this, but they were completely missing the heart of what God desired.

- Giving to God was good, but don’t neglect the more important things. This is why we read in the Old Testament that God desires mercy and not sacrifice (see 1 Samuel 15:22, Hosea 6:6, and Micah 6:6–8).

We end with another humorous picture illustrating what the scribes and Pharisees were basically doing. They were straining out the smallest of the unclean insects, a gnat, while ignoring the largest of the unclean animals, a camel. They went to great lengths to be sure they didn’t digest a gnat all the while ignoring the fact they’re consuming a camel.

- This is the absurdity when we begin to live a legalistic life. We get so focused on the minor things, that we easily overlook the greater things, or the more important things.

I’m so glad God doesn’t make it hard for us to come to Him and be in relationship with Him. Let’s not complicate it or try to fuel ourselves by a legalistic self-righteousness. Live in His Word and live out His Word.

Points to Ponder:

1. Would someone know you are a Christian without you saying a word? Are you living out what you believe and speak?
2. Do you struggle with having approval of people over the approval of God? Live your life for the praise and glory of God above all.
3. Are there more ‘weightier matters of the law’ that you have overlooked?