

Matthew 23

Woes to Pharisees

- In this chapter Jesus continues His critique of Israel's leaders with some of the harshest words in all Scripture.
- We do well to listen and learn of what is important in Jesus' thinking.
- As we read this chapter we might ask - Are the concerns expressed here common within the epistles? Rom.2:1-3; I Tim.6:17; Jas.2:14-26

1. Israel's leader's profession contrasted with their performance. (23:1-12)

"¹ Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes 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 And they tie up heavy loads, 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 And 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 by men, Rabbi. ⁸ But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And do not call anyone on earth your father for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. ¹⁰ And do not be called leaders for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. ¹¹ But the greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.

- This section repeats a lot of the material found earlier in Matthew ().
- Jesus recognized that Israel's teachers were culpable, not in their doctrine but in their deportment.
- The importance of humility is again stressed. Pride is the queen of sins. It is the essence of spiritual rebellion.

2. Examples. (23:13-36)

¹³ But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because **you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men** for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

- You condemn others as unfit for the Kingdom while being unfit yourselves.
- "Do not judge lest you be judged" (ch.7:1)

- Do we exclude others with our “high standards” while not living up to them ourselves?

¹⁴ [Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because **you devour widows’ houses**, even while for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you shall receive greater condemnation.]

- Note that this verse does not appear in the oldest and best manuscripts of Matthew. It was probably added later to harmonize with the parallel accounts in Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47.
- The leaders used their power as jurists to adjust claims against wealthy widows to the benefit of religious leaders.
- Do we pretend to be motivated by spiritual ideals when in reality we are more interested in personal material and social gain?

¹⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about 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**.

- They corrupted their converts by their example and culture.
- How healthy is the spiritual culture you create for new converts?

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, he 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 upon it, he is obligated.' ¹⁹ You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? ²⁰ Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. ²¹ And he who swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. ²² And he who swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.

- They would make clever distinctions in parsing the words used in making their oaths so that they did not have to abide by them if it was not in their interest. This was a technical loophole to avoid the obligations of their own promises.
- Do we find a way to cry “illegal procedure” when someone criticizes us or calls us on something we had promised but failed to deliver?

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!

- They were great at the outward disciplines of certain aspects of the Law while neglecting the social responsibilities and ethics of the Kingdom.
- Do we find certain “religious” activities indispensable to our faith (worship, giving, certain social restraints, etc) while having no problem with more important ethical responsibilities (gossip, slander, lack of forgiveness, failing to keep our word, etc).

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.

- They were careful to protect carefully matters of outward cleansing while on the inside they were dirty being very self-centered.
- Is our outward posture carefully disciplined while our “real” inner life is out of control?

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 Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

- They were dead on the inside while working very hard to appear pure and spiritually healthy and mature.
- Do we live two lives?

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 Consequently you bear witness 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 shall 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 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 shall come upon this generation.

- They were careful to stand above those who were blind in the past while not realizing that they were just as foolish and blind.
- Verse 35 refers to incidents recorded in Gen.3 (the beginning of the Hebrew Bible) and II Chron. 24:20-22 (at the end of the Hebrew Bible). This would suggest that Jesus is suggesting that he has in mind the persecuted saints from one end of the Scripture to the other.
- Do we see ourselves as more insightful and wiser than those who have made mistakes in the past while we make the same or worse mistakes in the present?

3. God's heart contrasted with that of Israel's leaders. (23:37-39)

³⁷ O 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 shall not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

- The contrast between “I wanted” and “you were unwilling” is dramatic.
- We cannot help but be struck by the two contrasting images of Jesus in this chapter - the harsh critique and the tender hen. God's strong feelings on both fronts should not be ignored.