

## Lesson 20: Chapter 23 “Religious Hypocrisy”

### Servant’s preparation:

[http://www.suscopts.org/pdf/presentations/biblestudy/NT/Matthew/Matthew\\_23.pdf](http://www.suscopts.org/pdf/presentations/biblestudy/NT/Matthew/Matthew_23.pdf)

### Brief introduction:

At the beginning of each lesson in the bible study of St. Matthew, please mention this book overview.

- ✓ Who is St. Matthew? He was one of the twelve disciples; he was a tax-collector before Jesus called him to follow Him.
- ✓ Who did he write his gospel to? The Jews, it is designed to prove that Jesus is the Messianic king of Old Testament (OT) prophecy.
- ✓ What is its theme? Jesus is the King of the Heavenly kingdom, Israel’s long-awaited Messiah.

### Remember:

Last lesson , chapter 22, Jesus responds to questions and challenges from religious leaders. The parable of the wedding feast emphasizes that God extends a broad, persistent, and generous invitation to all, and that a response of genuine repentance and transformation is expected.

In response to a question about the greatest commandment, Jesus identifies loving God and loving one's neighbor as the foundation of all the law and the prophets.

### Memory Verse:

*23:12 “And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

### Lesson Opener:

Imagine you saw a group of men throwing a person in to a river. The person crawls out so this time they tie a heavy object to him and throw him in again.

How will you feel? How will you act? What will you say? It would be completely right for you to be angry, to speak harshly, to be rude, and to call them “murderers” or whatever other name fit their behavior. Your compassion for the person would actually stir up righteous anger toward these people’s behavior. And that is what we are seeing from Jesus here in this chapter.

Sometimes doctors must take extreme actions to revive someone who has almost died. These could include shots of adrenaline, bursts of electricity from a machine, or “violent” CPR. Generally, a doctor will slowly increase these things in order to “shock” the person awake. Well, the religious leaders were spiritually dead. They were extremely cold to Jesus and not sensitive to anything He said. Jesus was not going to be with them

much longer. So, He said some very strong things as a last-ditch hope to shock them awake from their spiritual apathy.

### **Lesson Goal:**

Examine your own hearts and motives, ensuring that your actions align with your faith. Remember the importance of humility, service, and genuine love for God and others.

### **Lesson Body:**

#### **Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)**

The Pharisees and scribes had sought to discredit Jesus with the Crowds. After He had secretly condemned them in His parables, He publicly rebuked them in this chapter.



Here are a few points of what they have done to deserve those woes.

#### **1-Teaching Without any Work: v 1-4:**

The Lord had to declare the woes before the multitudes and the disciples, not to scandalize the scribes and the Pharisees, but to warn His people lest these by their actions, be an offense to them, lest His people fall in what the others have fallen in.

He, in all compassion and gentleness, said to the crowds ‘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.’

What they spoke of was not of their own, and neither was it the fruit of their wicked hearts, but it was the fruit of the seat of Moses on which they sat. As for their deeds, these were fatal sermons that carried the fruits of their defiled hearts. This is why the Lord encouraged the multitudes to listen to them regarding what springs from the chair [God’s law], and not what springs from their hearts.

Let us accept the servants’ words, and not follow their weaknesses and their wickedness, as well as not judge their actions.

God's commandment is not impossible to perform, but when it springs from teachers who do not struggle for it, the multitudes find it too difficult to bear. The teachers have bind it not to carry it with the people, but to burden others with it. But as for them, they do not even think of moving it with their finger. Their goal was to appear holy before men.

## **2. Asking for the foremost positions: v5-12**

God commanded the Jews to keep His laws in front them day and night. But the Pharisees interpreted this commandment literally. They used to write the commandments on small leather strips, twist them, and bind them on their heads, to carry them every day before people.

These bandages were called 'Phylacteries', derived from a Greek word meaning protection. According to their thinking, he who has this on, has special kind of protection. So, the Pharisees did not understand that they had to carry the commandments in the heart and not on the body.

In verses 8-10, Jesus advised the people not to single out their religious leaders for excessive titles of honor and praise that would make them equal to God the Father and the Messiah.

Does the Lord Jesus want us merely to cancel the titles 'teacher, father, rabbi' regarding the spiritual people?

No, but we are not to know for us earthly physical rulers, fathers or teachers away from Christ, we should rather know them as spiritualists in Him.

What is dangerous is that the leaders seek leadership instead of service.

## **3. Wronging Others yet practicing Worship: v13-14**

Eight woes are given in this chapter. In this judgment Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees of hindering God's plan for humanity and shutting themselves and others out of heaven by rejecting Jesus' Gospel message of salvation.

**4. Being an offense to others: v15.** They try to win people but then their evil deeds cause those people to stumble and never return to God again.

## **5. The materialistic outlook in worshipping: v16-22**

Hypocrisy destroys the vision of the teachers. They see the temple's gold better than the temple itself, and the oblation of more value than the altar itself. Those leaders say: "He who swears by the gold of the temple or the oblation is committed to the vow, or he who swears by the temple itself or the altar itself is of no importance". That is all twisted and does not make sense because the temple and the altar are more important.

## **6. Being literal in the commandment, and spiritless: v23-24**

Why did they tithe even their spices? Was this not a good thing?

They appear, when carrying out the commandment, to be extremely meticulous for the sake of appearances. They have hatred in their hearts, jealousy and envy, and they leave out truth and faith. But they appear as lovers of the truth. The Jewish leaders teach the people to care for the tithing more than the poor and widows because they benefit from these offerings.

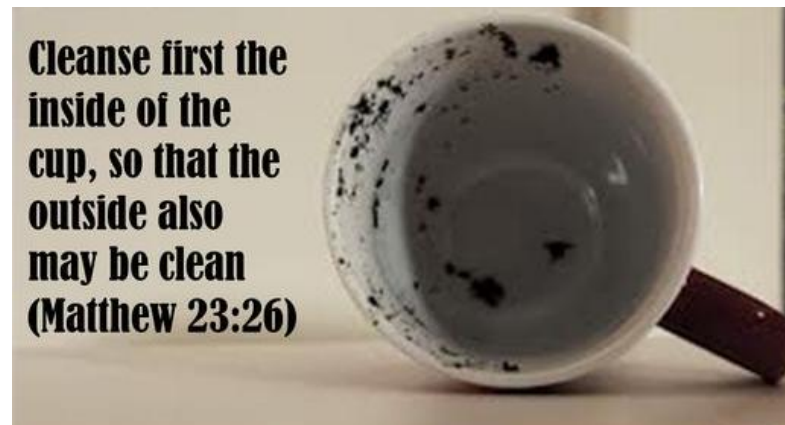
They strain the wine lest they drink an insect by mistake, but they swallow a camel [forbidden animal to eat it]. Jesus is using exaggeration to make His point that the Pharisees and scribes, who claim to be the most religiously observant of the covenant people were failing in the adherence to the spirit of the Law.

**Application:** As believers, we need to be careful to focus on the majors. We must not stray away from the heart of what it means to follow Jesus. We must not pick out or focus on minor things and let these things distract us, divide us, or in any way become the end goal rather than a means to the end.

Do not focus on the minors. Be well balanced in your faith. Remember 1 Corinthians 13, which says that if we do all kinds of amazing things for God, but do not have love, we are nothing.

### **7. Appearances in worshipping, yet with no life. V25-28**

For people's sake, they appear as being meticulous, not only in carrying out the commandment, but also in the rituals. They were very concerned about the cleanliness of the cup and the plate from the outside, yet they did not care what they carried inside because it was unseen. Then therefore seemed like beautiful white graves from the outside, but from the inside they were full of rotteness and every defilement.



Indeed, it is very dangerous for man to be concerned about the outer appearances in worshipping, without encountering the Lord Jesus Himself, the essence of our worship and mystery of our life.

They honored the prophets by building monuments to them, instead of following their teaching or imitating their lives.

**Application:** We should be careful about doing certain things to impress others.

Do not try to tell others often about the good things that you did, either the money you gave, the time you spent, or how you helped others.

Do not often talk about yourself. Instead ask about others. Do not always try to get the public or "spotlight" position. Instead, be willing and happy to serve in the background. Do not seek appreciation or thanks from others for the tasks that you did or get upset when they didn't give it. Instead, help others with no thought of reward. What are some things which we may tend to do to try to impress others?

Is there any thought of impressing others or getting recognition? Make sure that the reasons you do these things are pure. Ask God to give you a humble heart, a heart of service.

## **8. Those Resisting the Truth under the Cover of Religion: v31-36.**

By killing Christ, the Jewish leaders will fill up what is lacking in the iniquity of their fathers until the measure is full; until as much has been committed as God can possibly bear, and then shall come upon them all this blood, and they shall be destroyed.

Their crime would greatly exceed that of their fathers because they would kill the Lord of the prophets who their fathers had killed.

This generation did this, and they would reap the consequences. Only 40 years later Jerusalem was conquered and its people scattered.

### **Jesus Laments over Jerusalem (23:37-39)**

Verse 37 – We see Jesus' heart of compassion. Even in the face of their scorn and rejection, He still thought of them as His children. He loved them and wanted to protect them and care for them if they only accepted Him. But they didn't.

St. Augustine thinks the Lord drew the similarity between Him and the hen, because when it embraces its eggs, or little ones, her body is greatly weakened, and its feathers drop off, due to her care of her little ones. It is as if this is a symbol to the work of the Lord Jesus, who came down for us, carrying our frailties in His love and divine care.

### **Takeaway and Discussion questions:**

- What practical steps can we take to ensure our religious practices are not merely outward shows but sincere acts of faith?
- How can we balance adherence to religious rules with prioritizing justice, mercy, and faith?
- In what ways does Jesus' criticism of those appearing righteous externally but are internally corrupt challenge us to cultivate inner righteousness?
- How do you respond to Jesus' assertion that the greatest must be a servant?
- What steps can we take to avoid the pitfalls of religious hypocrisy outlined in the "Eight Woes"?
- What does the sorrowful prophesy about Jerusalem tell us about the consequences of rejecting Jesus?