

Matthew's Gospel ch.23

Jesus and the Pharisees

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
NKJV Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

Matthew 21-23 focus on the activities of the Lord Jesus in the temple at Jerusalem in the days leading up to His crucifixion:

1. 21:12-17. Following His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey five days before the Passover,¹ Jesus cleansed the temple of the money changers and dove sellers. Because the Jewish religious leaders didn't accept Him as the Messiah, He went out of the city and back to Bethany.²
2. 21:18-23. Jesus disputed with the different groups of Jewish officials.³

But the discourse of chs.24-25 were spoken exclusively to His disciples (cp. 26:1). Therefore, we often overlook the significant fact that Matthew 23 is the record of the last public teaching of the Lord. In comparison to Mark's and Luke's accounts, Matthew 23 includes an extended record of Christ's direct rebuke to the Jewish religious leaders. He comprehensively condemns them in eight statements, each beginning with the words, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!"⁴

For today's talk, I'll divide Matthew 23 into four sections:

1. Vv.1-12: The Lord Jesus warned the common people and His disciples about these Jewish religious leaders.
2. Vv.13-32: His denunciation of their blatant hypocrisy.
3. Vv.33-36: His declaration of their inevitable fate.
4. Vv.37-39: His lament over Jerusalem.

His warning

I'll read vv.1-12 from the NKJV:

"Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 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. 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. But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be

called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.'"

Matthew ch.22 closes with this poignant comment, "No one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare question Him anymore" (v.46). That's because, with His answers to their questions, He'd silenced the chief priests, the scribes, the lawyers, the elders -all of them, especially the Sadducees and the Pharisees. But not before He'd confounded them with His question as to whose Son the Christ is (vv.41-45).

Then within their hearing, He turned to the crowds and His disciples to warn and to instruct them to distinguish between their leaders' teaching of the Scriptures and these leaders' practices. He told those Jews, who listened to and accepted His authoritative teaching, that the scribes sat in Moses' seat and as such, everyone was obliged to observe the pure law of God, whenever they were taught just that. However, the people must not follow the religious practices of the scribes and Pharisees because they didn't practise what they preached.

The scribes belonged to the religious party of the Pharisees, who dominated the Jewish people with their 'holier than thou' attitude and their pretension to ultra moral purity. It's true that when this party first formed that their motives were commendable, to separate themselves from the then lax moral practices of the Jews. But over the decades, their pride in their superior sanctity of life and supposed devotion to God corrupted their thinking. Scrupulous observance of rabbinical legislation became more important to enforce upon the ordinary Jewish people than simple compliance to the law of Moses. Their traditions, based on rabbinical interpretation of the word of God, annulled the commandments of God (15:6). Hence the Lord stressed the importance of the Scriptures for two reasons:

1. The Pharisees teachings were heavy burdens, which only wearied people. By contrast He offered, "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" (11:29).
2. These religious leaders made little attempt to practise anything that they preached. On the contrary, their works exposed their hearts. Everything they did was to draw attention to themselves. Theirs was a showy religion, 'Look at how pious I am!' They exaggerated the commands of Deuteronomy 11:18 and tied large leather pouches containing scrolls of the Scriptures onto themselves, but there was no evidence they also held them in their hearts and souls and minds (23:5a). Likewise, the command of Numbers 15:38-39 concerning tassels in their garments (v.5b). They were also ostentatious, regarded themselves superior to other people, and took pride in their self-appointed pre-eminence (vv.6-7).

In vv.8-12, the Lord advised His disciples not to be like the Pharisees. Specifically, that none of them should laud it over their fellow believers because they were all brethren, and He their one Teacher and God was their only Father. They were to be humble, serving one another. In Luke 12:1, He told them that above everything else they must beware of the leaven [that is, the doctrine, Matthew 16:12] of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. In Matthew 23:13-32, the Lord exposed their blatant hypocrisy (cp. 6:1-6 & 16-18) and eight times over condemned them with one word, "Hypocrites!"⁵ A hypocrite is a person who pretends to be godly when they're not.

His denunciation

So, I'll now read vv.13-32:

“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. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretence make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. 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. 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.’ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? 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.’ Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it. 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. Blind guides, you who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers’ guilt.”

Having warned the crowds and his disciples of the characteristics of the Pharisees’ doctrine, the Lord Jesus exposed them eight times, beginning with the word, “Woe!” each time. “Woe!” wasn’t used as an expression of grief, but of forthright denunciation.

In the first “Woe!” (v.13), the Lord stated the primary reason for His utter condemnation of them.

“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.”

They’d totally rejected Him and resisted the gospel of the kingdom He’d preached. They considered themselves righteous enough to qualify for the kingdom and scorned both John the Baptist and the Lord, whose single message was,

“Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (3:2 & 4:17).

Paul, a former fellow-Pharisee gave this witness against them.

“They have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God” (Romans 10:2-3).

How sad for them and how tragic for the common people, who they deceived and didn’t allow to enter the kingdom to which they should have been signposts, not barriers! In Luke 11:52, the Lord said that they actually took away the key of knowledge concerning the kingdom. Their wrong interpretation of the Old Testament effectively blocked any true understanding of Jesus being the true Messiah. They regarded the Lord as an impostor, a false Messiah, because He attacked their system of religion.

There can be nothing more shameful than what the Lord said, in His second “Woe!”, that these scribes and Pharisees were guilty of preying on widows, who in those times, were the most needy and vulnerable in society (v.14). In Malachi 3:5 God stated that He was against those who exploited orphans and widows. In Matthew 23:14, that action was coupled with long, pretentious prayers these scribes and Pharisees made in the synagogues and on street corners, directly ignoring Solomon’s advice,

“Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; therefore let your words be few” (Ecclesiastes 5:2).

That’s why the Lord said that they’d receive a more severe punishment than other sinners at the judgement. Let’s remember that James wrote,

“Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted [that is, uncontaminated] from the world” (James 1:27).

The third “Woe!” concerned their zeal to win converts with their religious propaganda, which resulted in their proselytes becoming twice as bad as themselves (v.15). And destined for the same place of eternal condemnation (cp. 8:12).

Therefore, these scribes and Pharisees were described in the fourth “Woe!” as blind guides, who only led their followers astray (v.16a). The Lord then details their perverted religious values in the remaining four “Woe!”s.

In vv.16-22, the Lord denounced the sliding scale of values that the scribes and Pharisees had assigned to oaths. According to them, the seriousness of swearing an oath was determined by rabbinic traditions, which provided ‘get-out-clauses’ from obligations to fulfil some oaths. Much of these ‘legalistic’ distinctions was purely fanciful and imaginary teaching, but crucially, it proved their spiritual blindness. Twice the Lord called them, “Fools and blind!” (vv.17 & 19) as with clear logic He dismissed their ridiculous deceptive relative valuing of things invoked when a person took an oath. It was so obvious that the temple was greater than the gold in it and that the altar was greater than the sacrifice placed upon it. Then in vv.21-22, He reminded them that the Law viewed oaths as ultimately invoking the Name of God (e.g., Leviticus 19:12), and therefore there were dire consequences for non-fulfilment of any oath. The taking of oaths is not necessary for Christian believers. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Master himself forbade oaths:

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God’s throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the

great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one (Matthew 5:33-37).

In the fifth "Woe!", (vv.23-24), the Lord didn't condemn the scribes and Pharisees for their attention to detail when they tithed, but He did criticise their total lack of appreciation of their greater moral obligations to the weightier requirements of the Scriptures, those of righteous judgements, showing mercy, and faithful dealings (cp. Micah 6:8 & Hosea 6:6). So He said, in their pernicky tithing of small things. But their wilful neglect of these more important matters, they were, "Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" (v.24). Gnats were common contaminants in fermenting wine, which could be filtered out. By using these exaggerated metaphors, the Lord revealed just how spiritually blind they were. The first and second commandments (22:38-39) had no place in Pharisaic philosophy!

The sixth "Woe!" concerned their pernicious insistence on external cleanliness of crockery (v.25), which the Lord had previously explained didn't spiritually defile a person, see ch.15 over the issue of unwashed hands. In 15:18-20, He spelt out what did make people unclean in God's sight:

"Those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man."

This is what He meant in 23:25 about the crockery metaphorically being full of greed and self-indulgence. Then He demanded that they give utmost priority to their inward cleansing,

"First cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also" (v.26).

The seventh "Woe!" fully exposed their inward corruption. The Lord likened them to whitewashed tombs, lime plastered on the outside to look beautiful, but inside were full of dead people's bones and every kind of impurity (v.27). He unsparingly condemned them:

"Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (v.28).

In the eighth "Woe!", the Lord focussed on the way they built memorials to honour the prophets and godly of former times, whom their forefathers had rejected and killed (v.29). He said it was the height of hypocrisy for them to declare that thereby they'd shown themselves to be of a different nature to their forefathers (v.30). The truth of the matter was that by their actions they'd shot themselves in the foot, so to speak, and actually given testimony that they were of the same character as their forefathers (v.31). That led the Lord to suggest that they then finish what their ancestors had started for they were completely blinded by their own self-righteousness and remained guilty sinners (cp. John 9:39-41).

His declaration

The Lord's final words to the scribes and the Pharisees, in vv.33-36, are both His final assessment of them and a prediction of their continuing obstinate refusal of Him:

"Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, 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, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.”

In these verses, the Lord Jesus declared himself to be Jehovah who had, and would still, send His servants to Israel to plead with them and to forewarn them of their fate if they didn't repent. He'd persistently put up with this nation's obstinacy throughout their entire history. But through their rejection of Christ and the Gospel, which His apostles preached to them after His resurrection, their judgement became inevitable. It will fall upon "this generation", which is a descriptive way of speaking of the nation of Israel in their continuing unbelief and spiritual adultery until Christ's second coming (v.36 & 24:29-34). The accumulated guilt for the murders of God's servants, beginning with Abel (Genesis 4:8) through to the last, Zechariah (2 Chronicles 24:21-22) will fall upon apostate Israel.⁶ I spoke about the meaning of this term, "this generation", in some detail in talk T1319 on Matthew 17, when I referred to the Lord's sigh,

“O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?” (17:17).

His lament

I'll now read vv.37-39:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’”

We may have got the impression that the Lord spoke harshly to the scribes and the Pharisees when He pronounced the eight “Woe!”s upon them. Certainly, He delivered His message in clear, unmistakable terms, but these final words to the city of the great King (5:35) convey His immense grief over His earthly people. On His final journey toward Jerusalem, He'd uttered the same lament (Luke 13:32-34). Upon His arrival at Jerusalem, He'd also wept over the city as He thought of its overthrow by the Romans in A.D.70, because the Jews didn't know the time of their visitation, that is, they were blind that their Messiah had come (Luke 19:41-44).

He especially wanted them to understand that their temple was to be deserted by God. Its destruction also occurred in A.D.70, and it has never been rebuilt. Today we know that the state of Israel was re-formed 75 years ago, but the nation still continues to be “this generation” in wilful unbelief. However it has a bright future when Christ appears to them at His second coming. Malachi 3:1 prophesies that the Lord will suddenly come to His temple then emerge as Israel's Warrior-King.⁷ It's then that the Jewish remnant will recognise Him as their Messiah and, as He predicted in v.39, they'll use the words of Psalm 118:26,

“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!”

They'll also admit,

“The stone which the builders [that is, the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day] rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was

the LORD's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it" (vv.22-24 cp. Matthew 24:33-46).

Jerusalem from that time will then be named, "The LORD Is Here" (Jeremiah 48:35) and saved Israel will be the head of the nations of the world in Messiah's earthly kingdom, in which He is King of kings and Lord of lords.

I finish today's talk by quoting Matthew 24:1a,

"Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple [for the last time]."

But not before I also ask the searching question of us all, 'How much of our practice of Christianity, both as individuals and as church fellowships, is pharisaic in nature, which the Lord abhors and condemns?'

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Matthew 23, entitled 'Jesus and the Pharisees'. Talk No. T1336.

Footnotes

1. See, "Six days before the Passover" and "The next day" (John 12:1 & 12).
2. Cp. Mark 11:9-11 with Psalm 118:25-26. The Lord should have been received and blessed by those in the temple, the house of the LORD (Psalm 118:26b). But when he went into the temple, He looked around and found He was not, so He left (Mark 11:11).
3. Mark 11:12 - 12:44 chronology shows that these intense exchanges happened over the course of two days.
 - α. 11:12-19, first day, i.e., four days before the Passover.
 - β. 11:20-12:44, second day, i.e., three days before the Passover.
4. The NJKV includes v.14, but it is omitted from NU-text (see margin). However, Mark 12:40 includes this woe-statement.
 - α. Note also that v.16 only reads, "Woe to you, blind guides..."
5. See also Matthew 6:2, 5 & 16; 7:5; 15:7, 16:3; 22:8, 24:51; Mark 7:6; Luke 6:42, 11:44, 12:56, 13:15.
6. Genesis is the first book in the Hebrew Old Testament and 2 Chronicles is the last.
7. For example, see Zechariah 12:7-9 & 14:3 & 12.

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