

Second Baptist Church of Doylestown
Bible Study Notes
11-21-23

Matthew 23

A Warning Against Hypocrisy – Verses 1-4

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ² “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. ³ So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴ They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

23:2-3 The Pharisees’ traditions and their interpretations and applications of the laws had become as important to them as God’s law itself. Their laws were not all bad— some were beneficial. Problems arose when the religious leaders (1) held that man-made rules were equal to God’s laws, (2) told the people to obey these rules but did not do so themselves, or (3) obeyed the rules, not to honor God, but to make themselves look good. Usually Jesus did not condemn what the Pharisees taught but what they were— hypocrites.

They Do Their Works To Be Seen, And They Live For The Praise Of Men – Verses 5-10

⁵ “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶ they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷ they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others. ⁸ “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah.

23:5 Phylacteries were little leather boxes containing Scripture verses. Very religious people wore these boxes on their foreheads and arms in order to obey Deuteronomy 6: 8 and Exodus 13: 9, 16. But the phylacteries had become more important for the status they gave than for the truth they contained.

23: 5-7 Jesus again exposed the hypocritical attitudes of the religious leaders. They knew the Scriptures but did not live by them. They didn’t care about being holy— just looking holy in order to receive people’s admiration and praise. Today, like the Pharisees, many people say they know the Bible but do not let it change their lives. They say they follow Jesus, but they don’t live by his standards of love. We must make sure that our actions match our beliefs.

23:5-7 People desire positions of leadership not only in business but also in the church. It is dangerous when love for position grows stronger than loyalty to God. This is what happened to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Jesus condemned leaders who serve themselves rather than others.

The Way Of Jesus: Service And Humility – Verses 11-12

¹¹ The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

23:11-12 Jesus challenged society's norms. To him, greatness comes from serving— giving of yourself to help God and others. Service keeps us aware of others' needs, and it stops us from focusing only on ourselves. Jesus came as a servant. What kind of greatness do you seek?

Seven Woes on the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees – Verses 13-15

¹³ **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. ¹⁵ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.**

23:13-14 Being a religious leader in Jerusalem was very different from being a pastor in a secular society today. Israel's history, culture, and daily life centered around its relationship with God. The religious leaders were the best known, most powerful, and most respected of all leaders. Jesus made these stinging accusations because the leaders' hunger for more power, money, and status had made them lose sight of God, and their blindness was spreading to the whole nation.

23:15 The Pharisees' converts were attracted to religion, not to God. By getting caught up in the details of their additional laws and regulations, they completely missed God, to whom the laws pointed. A religion of works puts pressure on people to surpass others in what they know and do. Thus, a hypocritical teacher was likely to have students who were even more hypocritical. We must make sure we are not creating Pharisees by emphasizing outward obedience at the expense of inner renewal.

The Religious Leaders Made False And Deceptive Oaths – Verses 16-22

¹⁶ **“Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.’ ¹⁷ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? ¹⁸ You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.’ ¹⁹ You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹ And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. ²² And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.**

23:16 Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing: Out of obedience to God's Word they refused to swear by the name of God (as commanded in [Exodus 20:7](#)). Yet they constructed an elaborate system of oaths, some of which were binding and some were not. It was a way of making a promise while keeping fingers crossed behind one's back.

23:17-19 For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Here Jesus emphasized that the altar itself is greater than the sacrifice made upon it. The altar is the established meeting place between God and man, and our altar is Jesus Himself and His work on the cross. Having never been separated from God the Father by sin, Jesus Himself needed no altar. He had a free and glorious relationship with His Father. It was the freedom of Adam before the fall — or even more so, because Jesus had a history of relationship with His Father that Adam did not know.

23:20-22 The location of the altar is significant: it shows that we come to Jesus and His atoning work first. The shape of the altar is significant: it is square and perfectly proportioned, stable and unshakeable. The horns of the altar are significant: they show the power of God inherent in Jesus. The position of the altar is significant: it is not raised, but is low enough for all to approach; it has no steps that would reveal human flesh. The appearance of the altar is significant: it is smeared with the

blood of sacrifice. The material of the altar is significant: it is brass, forged in the fire and able to endure the judgment of the flames.

The Religious Leaders Are Obsessed With Trivialities, And Ignoring The Weighty Matters – Verses 23-24

²³ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law— justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. ²⁴ You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

23:23-24 It’s possible to obey the details of the laws but still be disobedient in our general behavior. For example, we could be very precise and faithful about giving 10 percent of our money to God but refuse to give one minute of our time in helping others. Tithing is important, but giving a tithe does not exempt us from fulfilling God’s other directives.

23:24 The Pharisees strained their water so they wouldn’t accidentally swallow a gnat— an unclean insect according to the law. Meticulous about the details of ceremonial cleanliness, they nevertheless had lost their perspective on inner purity— in essence, they would then swallow a camel and not even notice. They were ceremonially clean on the outside but had corrupt hearts.

The Religious Leaders Are Impure Both Inside And Out – Verse 25-26

²⁵ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. ²⁷ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. ²⁸ In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

23:25-28 Jesus condemned the Pharisees and religious leaders for outwardly appearing upright and holy but inwardly remaining full of corruption and greed. Living our Christianity merely as a show for others is like washing only the outside of a cup. When we are clean on the inside, our cleanliness on the outside won’t be a sham.

The Religious Leaders Honor Dead Prophets, But Murder The Living Prophets – Verses 29-36

²⁹ “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. ³⁰ And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ ³¹ So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started! ³³ “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? ³⁴ Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. ³⁵ And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. ³⁶ Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.

23:34-36 These prophets, sages, and teachers were probably leaders in the early church who were persecuted, scourged, and killed, as Jesus predicted. The people of Jesus’ generation said they would

not act as their fathers did in killing the prophets whom God had sent to them (23: 30), but they were about to kill the Messiah himself and his faithful followers. Thus, they would become guilty of all the righteous blood shed through the centuries.

23:35 Jesus summarized the history of Old Testament martyrdom. Abel was the first martyr (Genesis 4); Zechariah was the last mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, which ended with 2 Chronicles. Zechariah is a classic example of a man of God who was killed by those who claimed to be God's people (see 2 Chronicles 24: 20-21).

Jesus Laments For Jerusalem – Verses 37-39

³⁷ **“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. ³⁸ Look, your house is left to you desolate. ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”**

23:37 Jesus wanted to gather his people together as a hen protects her chicks under her wings, but they wouldn't let him. Jesus also wants to protect us if we will just come to him. Many times we hurt and don't know where to turn. We reject Christ's help because we don't think he can give us what we need. But who knows our needs better than our Creator? Those who turn to Jesus will find that he helps and comforts as no one else can.

23:37 Jerusalem was the capital city of God's chosen people, the ancestral home of David, Israel's greatest king, and the location of the temple, the earthly dwelling place of God. It was intended to be the center of worship of the true God and a symbol of justice to all people. But Jerusalem had become blind to God and insensitive to human need. Here we see the depth of Jesus' feelings for lost people and for his beloved city, which would soon be destroyed.