

Lesson #24- Matthew Chapter 23 Questions for Discussion (With Help for Teachers):

1. Jesus issued His worst indictment against the Scribes and Pharisees, and yet He tells the multitudes and His disciples “2... The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: 3All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.” *What does it mean that they sit in Moses’ seat, and why does Jesus say that we should do what they say?*

Help for Teachers:

This excerpt from Matthew Henry’s commentary is very helpful to understand.

“Now, in this discourse,

I. Christ allows their office as expositors of the law; The scribes and Pharisees (that is, the whole Sanhedrim, who sat at the helm of church government, who were all called scribes, and were some of them Pharisees), they sit in Moses' seat (v. 2), as public teachers and interpreters of the law; and, the law of Moses being the municipal law of their state, they were as judges, or a bench of justices; teaching and judging seem to be equivalent, comparing 2 Chr. 17:7, 9, with 2 Chr. 19:5, 6, 8. They were not the itinerant judges that rode the circuit, but the standing bench, that determined on appeals, special verdicts, or writs of error by the law; they sat in Moses's seat, not as he was Mediator between God and Israel, but only as he was chief justice, Ex. 18:26. Or, we may apply it, not to the Sanhedrim, but to the other Pharisees and scribes, that expounded the law, and taught the people how to apply it to particular cases. The pulpit of wood, such as was made for Ezra, that ready scribe in the law of God (Neh. 8:4), is here called Moses's seat, because Moses had those in every city (so the expression is, Acts 15:21), who in those pulpits preached him; this was their office, and it was just and honourable; it was requisite that there should be some at whose mouth the people might enquire the law, Mal. 2:7.”

We still see today many dishonorable men that fill legitimate offices that require respect, not because of the man but because of the office. When Ananias ordered that Paul be smitten and Paul replied against this unlawful act, it was brought to Paul’s attention that Ananias was the high priest. Immediately Paul responded with respect for the position, “Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.” (Acts 23:5).

Jesus followed His statement to “observe and do” (listen to the teachings of the law and be doers of the law and not just hearers) with a command to “but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.” The Scribes and Pharisees were hypocrites. This teaching of Jesus to observe but don’t imitate fits with Jesus’ parable of the wheat and tares, that both grow together until the harvest.

These religious leaders loved the attention of men. Phylacteries were small scrolls that contained four paragraphs of the law. They were worn on the forehead and left arm (Numbers 15:38) to remind the Israelites that they were a peculiar people to God, but the Pharisees made theirs jumbo sized, as if to say that they were more religious than others. The same was true of the borders of their garments, God had told His people to make borders or fringes on their garments to again remind them that they were His peculiar people. The Scribes and Pharisees weren't satisfied with that, but felt the need to make theirs jumbo sized, so that they stood out among the people.

Everything these religious leaders did was tainted by their enormous ego, so that thankfulness and humility before God because of His mercy and grace was replaced with pride and entitlement. They insisted that they be addressed with titles of importance and that they be given positions of prominence at any kind of public gathering. Jesus sternly warned His disciples to not be like that.

2. Jesus pronounced eight “woes” here against the Scribes and Pharisees (interestingly Jesus pronounced eight blessings in the sermon on the mount in chapter 5). *Discuss each “woe”.*

Help for Teachers:

“But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” ...

- I. “... for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.”

Not only did they reject Jesus and thereby their only hope of salvation, but they hated Him so much because of their jealousy that they publicly refuted Him and sought to stop anyone that would follow Him from doing so. At first with verbal assault, but soon it would be with imprisonment and death if that's what it took. So fierce would their hatred be that they would even chase the disciples of Jesus into other cities to stop the preaching of Jesus.

- II. “... for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.”

It appears that these religious hypocrites gained the trust of widows by flattery and pious appearance and deceived them into donating so much of their sustenance that it left them desolate. Some historians say that it was common for the Pharisees to make long prayers for someone in exchange for a donation. Perhaps Paul had this same thing in mind when he wrote in 2 Timothy 3:6, “For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women

laden with sins, led away with divers lusts,” or in 1 Timothy 6:5, “Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.” Even now, most of us know stories of widows and the elderly that fell victim to our modern TV evangelists and sent them massive amounts of money. How offensive to God it must be when in contempt of His command to protect and nurture those most vulnerable, they are victimized and made prey by those that claim to be representing God.

- III. “... for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.”

Not at all for the glory of God, but for their own notoriety and reputation and profit, these religious leaders were most industrious, going to great lengths to make “proselytes” (new converts to their cause). Even among their own ranks there were variations in religious application of the law, with each rabbi contending to have a greater reputation than his peers.

Their rejection of Jesus and His gospel was pressed into the heart of these converts the Jewish leaders made, and following the prideful example of their teacher, the student became just like his master, only twice as determined and prideful... “twofold more the child of hell”. Conversely, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:10, “But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.” Paul was equally as industrious as the Pharisees, and we should be also. But unlike the Pharisees, Paul and our motive must be the glory of God, not self.

- IV. “Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! 17Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? 18And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. 19Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? 20Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. 21And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein. 22And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon.”

Motivated by personal status, prestige, and gain, these religious leaders perverted the truth to embed in the minds of the people they ruled over to bring their money and gifts to the temple, declaring these to be of greater significance than the actual temple or the altar. How else could these hypocrites get their greedy hands on the people's wealth?

You don't have to know too much about the law to know that one of the ten commandments states that you will not bear false witness (lie), yet these "teachers" instructed the people that swearing by the altar or the temple was not binding but taking an oath in the name of the gold of the temple or the gift on the altar, that was binding. Whether the gold of the temple or the temple itself, whether the gift on the altar or the altar itself, all are by and for God and an oath taken under any pretense is at the end, binding before God.

What the law actually says concerning validation of oaths is found in Deuteronomy 6:13, "Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name." We previously looked at the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:33-37, "Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil."

- V. "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. 24Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel."

The Scribes and Pharisees are here condemned by Jesus for tediously adhering to the showy things of the law but disregarding the more difficult but less visible parts of the law. As Jesus points out, they made a big public show of tithing (Luke 18:12) but left elderly parents without care by teaching people to promise the assets they could have used to help their parents as "corban" (It seems anything over which this word was pronounced was irrevocably dedicated to the temple, except for land which could be redeemed before the year of jubilee. This term appears in Mark 7:11.) You can imagine why the Pharisees pushed the people to dedicate their assets *to the temple*. Micah 6:6-8 says, "*Wherewith shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He hath shewed*

thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

The Scribes and Pharisees strained at a gnat, the minor things by comparison. None of the law is minor and all should be strained at, but the Pharisees had created and emphasized laws of their own, "the traditions of the elders". These man-made requirements became more important than the actual laws of God. In favor of the material gain they acquired by the mandates of their traditions, they overlooked the weightier matter of the fifth commandment to honor father and mother, and thus "swallowed a camel" (as one example).

- VI. 25Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. 26Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.

Only God could choose such a perfect illustration to demonstrate the depths of foolishness and deception when we make a show of religion. A cup is intended for the purpose of holding food or drink that is to be taken into the body. Its function is the inside, where what is going into your body that will affect your health is stored. That is what is important, that the inside is clean and free from rot and bacteria that will spoil the food and poison the body. It's nice if the outside is decorative and ornamental as well, but to have outward showiness that deceives the user into thinking that the inside is clean and safe when it is not, is horrible.

- VII. 27Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. 28Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

Continuing the thought of the inside compared to the outside, Jesus now takes it to the extreme of saying that these religious pretenders were dead, only looking to be alive outwardly. Some commentators say that it was the custom of the Jews to whiten graves only to make them more identifiable and that this was the duty of the overseers of the highways. The reason was that if someone touched a grave, they became unclean for seven days (Deut.19:16). According to this line of thought, the Scribes and Pharisees, in their display of pompous religiosity, would have appeared to wise and godly men to be carefully avoided, to prevent being defiled by their deceptiveness. The New Testament gives us many warnings to beware of and refuse false teachers and teachings.

VIII. 29Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, 30And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. 31Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. 32Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.

Jesus points out the incredible hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees. They memorialize the tombs and graves of the very men that God had sent to foretell of His coming but reject the King that they had prophesied of, even as He stood in their presence. Not only that, but their forefathers rejected the message of the prophets and killed the messengers. And now the very Word of prophesy was in their midst, and they had every intention of killing Him, and did. All this they did as they boasted that if they had been living in the days of the prophets, they would not have murdered them. Jesus declared that they condemned themselves by their own words; they were descendants of murderers of the prophets and were now poised to do the same and worse.

3. Verses 33-39 are Jesus closing remarks to the Scribes and Pharisees. *What are some major points you see in this passage?*

Help for Teachers:

Jesus' words are so often the words of compassion and grace and mercy that many forget that He is the rightful judge of all (Acts 17:31). Here he calls these religious imposters snakes... a brood of snakes... venomous, crawling in the dust and mire of the earth, deadly serpents.

He asks the shocking question, "how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" More terrifying that these words come from the one that will judge the quick and the dead (2 Tim 4:1) and whose sentence is without remedy. But even as He asks the question, Jesus provides the hope, "I send unto you..."

Though they are going to kill Him, He, the all-powerful Son of God and Son of man, declares that He will send to them "prophets, and wise men, and scribes", men of no less stature than the ones their fathers had murdered, to deliver to them the message that salvation is only by the very blood that they will shed. And Jesus will send them, all the while knowing that many that He sends to preach the gospel they will kill. As the very people (Israel, represented here by their leadership) that God called out to bring the world to Himself now deny Him, He invites them into the church that He is building.

Though His prophets and wise men and scribes may suffer and die at the hands of these rejecters of truth, our loving Savior sees and cares for each, so much that He declares that He will hold accountable, from the beginning of mankind till the last martyr, all that harm His servants. Why does Jesus backdate the guilt of these Jewish persecutors all the way to Abel? Because the blood that Jesus was about to shed, His own blood, was for the remission of sins for all who believe for all time, to make unto Himself a righteous people. The Jewish people, under the leadership of these “serpents”, were about to shed the blood of the One by who’s blood every person that will ever be saved must be saved.

Jesus knows every person that has ever been and ever will be slain for their faith, from Abel that was killed by Cain, to a man named Zacharias, a prophet they stoned for his call to repentance in the last days of the kings (2 Chron 24:17-22). Many scholars believe this is also prophetic of another Zacharias, whose martyrdom is recorded by the Jewish historian Josephus just before the destruction of the temple by the Romans, an event that would happen years after Jesus spoke these words.

Jesus, knowing what was about to happen, laments for Jerusalem. How many times, as they rebelled and responded with hatred and murder in their hearts, had God reached out to this people with love and compassion and pleaded that they repent and return to Him. They refused, they “would not”, so Jesus declares, “Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.”

This time Israel had rejected Christ, the gospel offer, and for that there was and is no remedy, “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him;” (Hebrews 2:3), “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” (John 14:6), “He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:” (John 1:11-12).

Christ’s intention was to gather a people to Himself. How often had He tenderly, as a chicken clucks to her chicks to call them in and protect them under her wing, had Jesus reached out to this people, and “ye would not”. He now pronounced their fate, “Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.” Their city would be destroyed, worse for them, their temple that they so prized would be destroyed. Jesus would leave the temple and thus it would be desolate. No matter how ornate and glorious the building, it is vain and empty if Christ departs (Jesus departs the temple for the last time in chapter 24:1). The glory would depart from the nation of Israel as the doors would open wide to the nations. Israel’s blindness to truth would never be overcome until the day that he returns in great glory, “Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen.” (Rev 1:7).