

Teachings of Jesus

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Jesus' Teaching in the Gospel of Matthew (Part XIII)

23:1-12, Jesus Rebukes the Scribes and the Pharisees

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to His disciples: Previously we've seen Jesus address his opposition directly; now He wants to teach those who believe in Him and those who are not already hardened against Him about them. In a sense, He now ignores those who have been trying to trap and oppose Him, and talks around them to those who can actually benefit from what He has to teach about the legalism and hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

We've seen Jesus warn His disciples about the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees (e.g., 15:7, 16:5-12). Now He's warning the crowds, too.

Commentator William Barclay says that the Talmud describes seven different types of Pharisees; six of them bad:

- The Shoulder Pharisee, who wore all his good deeds and righteousness on his shoulder for everyone to see.
- The Wait-a-Little Pharisee, who always intended to do good deeds, but could always find a reason for doing them later, not now.
- The Bruised or Bleeding Pharisee, who was so holy that he would turn his head away from any woman seen in public – and was therefore constantly bumping into things and tripping, thus injuring himself.
- The Hump-Backed Pharisee, who was so humble that he walked bent over and barely lifting his feet – so everyone could see just how humble he was.
- The Always-Counting Pharisee, who was always counting up his good deeds and believed that he put God in debt to him for all the good he had done.
- The Fearful Pharisee, who did good because he was terrified that God would strike him with judgment if he did not.
- **The God-Fearing Pharisee, who really loved God and did good deeds to please the God he loved.**

...Do and observe whatever they tell you: Jesus said that respect was due to the scribes and the Pharisees; not because of their conduct, but because

they sit “in Moses’ seat”; respect the office established by God, not necessarily the person or people occupying the office. The Law of God was not to lose its authority even if it was taught by wicked men.

Luther reminded his flock of this when discussing unworthy priests administering the sacraments, reminding his hearers and readers that it was God who established the sacraments and forgave sins, not the officiant, who was as much a sinner as the rest of the congregation.

Synagogues typically had a stone seat at the front where the authoritative rabbi sat, and this was known as “Moses’ seat”, since Moses was the author of the Torah (the first 5 books of the Old Testament). So that seat represented the teaching of God’s word to His people.

For they preach, but do not practice...: The hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees made them bad examples. It’s not that they were expected to be perfect, but the all-too-familiar legalism that still inhabits the church today had become an undue burden on the people of God.

Remember in Chapter 11 that Jesus taught that “My yoke is easy, and My burden is light”. The over-emphasis of law to the exclusion of God’s mercy, and the unwillingness to lead with mercy had made too many teachers burden *bringers*, while Jesus was a burden *taker*.

This teaching and others like it bore fruit in the ministry of the disciples. For example, Peter silenced the legalists in Acts 15 when he asked “Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?”

For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long...: Phylacteries (the Greek word φυλακτήρια means a preservative, a safeguard, or an amulet) were small leather boxes containing tiny scrolls with scriptures written on them, tied to the arm and head with leather straps (Deuteronomy 11:18). The “fringes” refers to the borders of their garments which were fashioned per Mosaic Law (Numbers 15:38).

It made sense to think that broader phylacteries and longer borders or tassels on their garments evoked an aura of elevated spiritual authority. Of course, Jesus exposes these practices for what they actually are: meaningless when they are not genuine expressions of faith in God.

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers: Jesus warned the people that they should not imitate the scribes and the Pharisees at this point. His followers should always remember that “you are all brethren” and that one should not be exalted above others by titles that are either demanded or received on merit.

Do not be called “Rabbi”... Do not call anyone on earth your father... do not be called teachers: Jesus warned His listeners and us against giving anyone inappropriate honor. One may have a father or teachers in a normal human sense, but should not regard them in a sense that gives them excessive spiritual honor or authority.

From the rest of Scripture, we can see that Jesus did not intend this as an absolute prohibition (some churches take it that way). We know this because – inspired by the Holy Spirit -- men in the Bible spoke of themselves with such titles. Paul, for example, called himself “father” (1 Corinthians 4:15, Philippians 2:22) and “teacher” (1 Timothy 2:7, 2 Timothy 1:11).

Rather, Jesus is speaking to the heart that loves, collects, and covets such titles for the Earthly honor, prestige, and respect they garner.

He who is greatest among you shall be your servant: We’ve seen Jesus teach this principle to His disciples before, and now He teaches it to the crowd, with the examples of the scribes and Pharisees before them as examples of how counter-intuitive this teaching might be!

Normally, people estimate greatness by how many people serve and honor them. Jesus reminded His followers that in His kingdom it should be different, and that greatness is “measured” by how we serve and honor others.

12:13-36, The Eight Woes to the Religious Leaders

These stand in stark contrast to the eight beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-11. Says commentator France:

“Such series of ‘woes’ are familiar from the Old Testament prophets (e.g. Isaiah 5:8-23; Habakkuk 2:6-19), where the tone is of condemnation, and that is the emphasis here too.”

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! The word “hypocrites” here literally refers to an actor, someone playing a part. Jesus exposed the corruption covered by the spiritual image of the scribes and Pharisees.

(1) For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces: The religious leaders kept people from the kingdom of heaven by making human traditions and human religious rules more important than God’s Word. This was seen primarily in the behaviors we’ve witnessed in Matthew: their ongoing opposition to and rejection of Jesus! Had they wanted to open the kingdom of heaven to people, they would have welcomed and received Him as the Messiah, as the Son of God.

Note: Verse 14 may not be included in your translation, or relegated to a footnote:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive the greater condemnation

It is not present in the best and earliest manuscripts of Matthew, though it is included in the Mark 12 and Luke 20 recounting of Jesus’ words. So it’s likely it was added to Matthew in some of the later manuscripts, but to be honest, we can’t be certain.

(2) You devour widows’ houses: Using clever schemes and dishonest dealing, the some Pharisees were known to claim widows’ houses for the synagogue – in the name of “good stewardship”.

For a pretense make long prayers: These were likely prayers used only to build a spiritual facade for the sake of garnering larger offerings.

Charles Spurgeon:

“These words prove that there are degrees of punishment, as there are gradations in glory. All the ungodly will be judged and condemned by the Righteous Judge, but ‘the greater condemnation’ will be reserved for the hypocrites.”

(3) You travel land and sea to win one proselyte: Their zeal for evangelism did not mean their hearts were right with God. They went to great lengths to “win” others to the congregation, but they were bringing people to darkness, not light, with their actual intentions.

Paul seemed to be thinking about this same idea in Romans 10:2 where he observed that some of the Jewish people of his day had “a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.”

Carson:

“A sizable body of scholarship convincingly argues that the first century A.D. till the Fall of Jerusalem marks the most remarkable period of Jewish missionary zeal and corresponding success.”

This reminds me of the sometimes extraordinary “evangelistic” efforts of pseudo-Christian groups today. They are courageous and energetic messengers, but they carry a false message. I don’t believe the individual missionaries I’ve met with have evil intent in their hearts, but rather have been very effectively deceived by their leaders and teachers. The net result, however, is ultimately no different.

(4) Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing: Out of obedience to God’s Word they refused to swear by the name of God (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!

Barclay:

“To the Jew an oath was absolutely binding, so long as it was a binding oath. Broadly speaking, a binding oath was an oath which definitely and without equivocation employed the name of God; such an oath must be kept, no matter what the cost. Any other oath might be legitimately broken.”

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. Why? Because the altar is the established meeting place between God and man, and our altar is Jesus Himself and His work on the cross.

(An aside: Having never been separated from God the Father by sin, Jesus Himself needed no altar. He had a perfectly open -- and to us somewhat mysterious -- relationship with His Father. Perhaps like Adam before the fall?!)

(5) You pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin: Their tithing was meticulous and noteworthy, but utterly hypocritical because it served to soothe the guilt of their neglect of the weightier matters of the law. It's not only possible, but common to be distracted by trivial matters in order to ignore the important ones.

Jesus enumerates the "weightier matters" so there is no wondering or debate about what He means: "justice and mercy and faithfulness." Remember, very recently he had answered the question about "which is the greatest commandment" by enumerating two great principles. He doesn't let us use "lawyer ourselves" into an answer more suitable to our fleshly desires; He always goes right to the heart of the matter, which is His heart!

Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel: Jesus illustrates their folly with an amusing illustration of someone so committed to a kosher diet that he would not swallow a gnat because it was not bled properly (and therefore not kosher!), but would swallow a camel whole instead. A memorable picture of someone whose sense of proportion is completely out of whack.

(6) You cleanse the outside of the cup: The scribes and Pharisees were satisfied with the superficial; the *appearance* of righteousness. Clean on the outside, with utter disregard for the corruption on the inside. But in fact *true* outward righteousness *starts on the inside*.

(7) You are like whitewashed tombs: It was customary to whitewash tombs before Passover so that no one would touch one accidentally, making themselves ceremonially unclean. Jesus said these religious leaders were like these whitewashed tombs – pure-looking on the outside, but dead on the inside.

Paul called the High Priest a "whitewashed wall" in Acts 23:3. Not a compliment!

You also outwardly appear righteous to men: God is never fooled by what we show on the outside. He sees what we actually are, not what we appear to be to other men. Scary? Maybe at times. But should also be a great comfort. We don't have to waste energy hiding from God, we can't deceive Him, so we might as well throw off pretense and be ourselves with Him.

(8) You build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous: They claimed to venerate the prophets of old (the dead ones), but they rejected living prophets, showing that in their hearts they were in fact the children of those who murdered the prophets in the days of old.

Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt: This is really heavy, especially for the disciples. With these words Jesus prophesied about how these men, these Jewish leaders, would complete the rejection of the prophets that their "fathers" began by persecuting His disciples, whom He would send to them.

Serpents, brood of vipers: This carries the idea of "family of the devil." These men took great (and undeserved) pride in their heritage, thinking they were spiritual sons of Abraham. Instead, Jesus tells them they were more like sons of the devil.

Jesus spoke so strongly about these Jewish leaders for two reasons. First, He did not want the disciples or the crowds to be deceived by them. Second, He *loved* these men. These men were far from God, and they needed to be warned of coming judgment. What Jesus really wanted was their repentance, not their judgment.

From the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Barachiah: Here Jesus speaks of the righteous martyrs of the Old Testament. Abel was the first, and -- in the way that the Hebrew Bible was arranged -- Zechariah was the last (2 Chronicles is the last book of the Hebrew Bible, and Zechariah's story is found in 2 Chronicles 24). Abel's blood cried out (Genesis 4:10), and Zechariah asked that his blood be remembered (2 Chronicles 24:22).

Note: Some translations say "Jehoiada" instead of "Barachiah". Others may not have the "son of [whichever]" at all. The "son of..." clause is not in all manuscripts, which explains that. As to the different names, both names have the same essential meaning, "praise/blessing of Yahweh" and so may both have been used to refer to the man. Also, double/alternate names were not unusual among the Jews (Matthew/Levi, for example!)

23:37-39, Jesus Laments for Jerusalem

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem: Luke 19:41 tells us that Jesus wept as He looked over the city of Jerusalem, and thought about its coming judgment while saying these words. Jesus wanted to protect them from the terrible judgment that would eventually follow their rejection of Him.

It is recorded that Jesus wept only two times: here, at the pain of knowing what would befall those who reject Him, and at the tomb of Lazarus.

‘Tis true that Jesus harshly rebuked the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, and others who sought to undo Him and His mission, but this heartfelt cry shows us that He didn’t hate them; His heart broke for them.

How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings: Jesus wanted to protect, nourish, and cherish His people the Jews, even as a mother bird protects the young chicks.

France:

“The image of a hen (Greek is simply ‘bird’) protecting its young is used in the Old Testament for God’s protection of his people (Psalm 17:8; 91:4; Isaiah 31:5; etc.).”

When we sin, God does not hate us; in ways we probably cannot understand, He *sorrows* for us, knowing all the ways that our sin and rebellion destroys our life. How confounding that He also has a complete grasp and control of the end of our story, and has secured victory over that same sin for us!

The words “how often I wanted” are an indication that Matthew knew Jesus had visited Jerusalem many times before (as recounted in the Gospel of John), even though Matthew himself only mentions this last visit.

You shall see Me no more till you say, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!” When Jesus comes again, all of Israel, which is to say, all of His people, including His Jewish people as well as all of His gentiles, will welcome Him as the Messiah saying, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!”