

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 23 (PART 1)

Matthew 22 was filled with interactions between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day, namely the Pharisees & Sadducees. Matthew 23 is full of commentary on the system & mindset of the current religious system of Jesus' day. Sadly, there's plenty that remains in our time.

Matthew 23:1-3

v. 1 - Jesus isn't just talking to his disciples, he's also addressing the crowds.

"Chair of Moses" - representative of the authority of Moses and his teaching. Also some ancient synagogues had a literal chair where the leader of the synagogue would sit.

v. 3 - all that they tell you, do and observe, but don't do what they do - this is such a convicting statement both summarizing and indicting the religious system of Jesus' time. From the "chair of Moses" they would speak the true words of God and encourage obedience and devotion to the God of Abraham. But they would not practice what they preach.

Matthew 23:4-7 - Jesus' Rebuke Of The System & It's Leaders

"Phylacteries" were small leather cases containing OT scripture verses, worn on the arm and forehead by Jews, especially when praying. The custom was derived from such OT passages as Exod 13:9; 16; Deut 6:8; 11:18.

Tassels refer to the tassels that a male Israelite was obligated to wear on the four corners of his outer garment according to the Mosaic law (Num 15:38; Deu 22:12). (NET Bible Note)"

Jesus exposes a few problems:

1 - They hold a high standard for living for God, but do not follow it themselves, nor do they actually help their listeners meet the standard. (**v. 4**)

2 - When they do the deeds of Scripture, they do it to be noticed. Their motivation for obedience to the Torah is to be regarded by others. (**v. 5**)

3 - They love being noticed and honored by people. As a result, their appearance, habits, and interactions are strategic for their own ego inflation. (**v. 5-7**)

Matthew 23:8-10 - Titles & Aspirations - titles mentioned: rabbi, teacher, father, leaders

Rabbi - title of respect, meaning "my great one," or "my superior one," used in Jesus' day for Jewish religious teachers. The Greek word *ῥαββί* (*rhabbi*) is borrowed from the Hebrew word *רַבִּי* (*rabbî*), which originally meant "my Lord" or "my Master."

According to Matthew 23:7, “rabbi” was evidently used as a common title of address for the Jewish scribes and Pharisees; however, in the NT it is most commonly used as a title of respectful address when others were speaking to Jesus. By the time of the writing of John’s Gospel, the title “rabbi” meant “teacher”; and this John says explicitly in 1:38 and implicitly in 3:2. (NASB Definition)

ESV Study Bible - “Jesus' disciples should not try to gain authority over one another as teachers or masters, since Jesus is ultimately each disciple's teacher and master (you have one teacher . . . one instructor), to whom the disciple is accountable. Jesus does not literally forbid use of the titles "teacher," "doctor," or "father" for all time in all circumstances, but he prohibits his disciples from using these terms in the way the Pharisees used them, in a spirit that wrongly exalted leaders and reinforced human pride.”

Matthew 23:11-12 - The Way of Jesus

Jesus doesn’t just critique, he offers a better way forward. He calls his followers to servant leadership. To focus on the needs of others and not just do good when other people are watching or will praise you. It has been said that humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. Rather than focusing on exalting yourself, we’re called to focus on serving others and giving glory and attention to God.

Those who will exalt themselves will be humbled. Those who humble themselves will be exalted.

This is an important statement from Jesus - not only because he’s teaching his disciples what he’s looking for in his new community, but he is also connecting his way to the ancient way of the prophets, who often spoke about this standard as it related to political leaders, the nations of the world and the judgement at the end of the age.

Isaiah 2:11-18 (NLT) - Human pride will be brought down, and human arrogance will be humbled. Only the LORD will be exalted on that day of judgment. 12 For the LORD of Heaven's Armies has a day of reckoning. He will punish the proud and mighty and bring down everything that is exalted. 13 He will cut down the tall cedars of Lebanon and all the mighty oaks of Bashan. 14 He will level all the high mountains and all the lofty hills. 15 He will break down every high tower and every fortified wall. 16 He will destroy all the great trading ships and every magnificent vessel. 17 Human pride will be humbled, and human arrogance will be brought down. Only the LORD will be exalted on that day of judgment. 18 Idols will completely disappear.

Isaiah 5:15-16 (NLT) - Humanity will be destroyed, and people brought down; even the arrogant will lower their eyes in humiliation. 16 But the LORD of Heaven's Armies will be exalted by his justice. The holiness of God will be displayed by his righteousness.

Isaiah 13:11 (NLT) - "I, the LORD, will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their sin. I will crush the arrogance of the proud and humble the pride of the mighty.

Isaiah 66:1-3a (NLT) - This is what the LORD says: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Could you build me a temple as good as that? Could you build me such a resting place? 2 My hands have made both heaven and earth; they and everything in them are mine. I, the LORD, have spoken! "I will bless those who have humble and contrite hearts, who tremble at my word. 3 But those who choose their own ways-- delighting in their detestable sins-- will not have their offerings accepted...

Ezekiel 21:24-27 (NLT) - "Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Again and again you remind me of your sin and your guilt. You don't even try to hide it! In everything you do, your sins are obvious for all to see. So now the time of your punishment has come! 25 "O you corrupt and wicked prince of Israel, your final day of reckoning is here! 26 This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "Take off your jeweled crown, for the old order changes. Now the lowly will be exalted, and the mighty will be brought down. 27 Destruction! Destruction! I will surely destroy the kingdom. And it will not be restored until the one appears who has the right to judge it. Then I will hand it over to him.

Ezekiel 34:2-4 - "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds, the leaders of Israel. Give them this message from the Sovereign LORD: What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? 3 You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. 4 You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty.

Micah 6:8 - He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Zephaniah 2:1-3 - Gather together-- yes, gather together, you shameless nation. 2 Gather before judgment begins, before your time to repent is blown away like chaff. Act now, before the fierce fury of the LORD falls and the terrible day of the LORD's anger begins. 3 Seek the LORD, all who are humble, and follow his commands. Seek to do what is right and to live humbly. Perhaps even yet the LORD will protect you-- protect you from his anger on that day of destruction.

Malachi 4:1-2 (NLT) - The LORD of Heaven's Armies says, "The day of judgment is coming, burning like a furnace. On that day the arrogant and the wicked will be burned up like straw. They will be consumed-- roots, branches, and all. 2 "But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. And you will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture.

We probably hear Jesus' words about humility and imagine them as a fresh, new teaching that overturns the pride of the Pharisees, and in one sense, they are. But Jesus is also standing firmly in the long tradition of Israel's prophets who preached that the proud will be humbled, the humble will be lifted up, leaders will be judged for how they treat the vulnerable. Jesus is not merely offering a moral correction; he is speaking as the great prophet of God, warning the exalted and calling his followers into the ancient, Spirit-shaped way of the kingdom.

This word was for the Jewish leaders who heard it. It was for the crowds watching. It was for the disciples who would soon become the leaders of the early church. And it is for us today. We must be on guard against the same temptations the Pharisees fell into pride, self-importance, a desire for recognition, and a disconnect between knowing the Scriptures and actually living them.

The church, especially in the modern western world hasn't always done a good job of this and certainly needs to hear the words of Jesus from Matthew 23 again.

How the Church Today Might Need to Hear These Words:

1 - When the church values charisma over character - We are often drawn to gifted leaders who can preach, lead, or inspire, but skill is not the same as holiness. Many modern church scandals didn't happen because leaders lacked theological knowledge, but because humility, accountability, and servant-heartedness were neglected. True spiritual leadership flows from character, not charisma.

2 - When Christians know Bible facts but don't show Christlike love - Many believers can quote Scripture, debate theology, and defend doctrine but struggle to forgive, show mercy, or serve quietly. Jesus warns that knowledge without love leads to hypocrisy.

3 - When the church prioritizes appearance over authenticity - Pressure to look spiritually polished, always "doing great," always victorious can make real struggles feel unwelcome. And in a social-media world, even good works can become curated moments rather than genuine obedience. Can a good deed be done if it isn't going to be posted?

4 - When religious expectations are placed on people without help or compassion - Some churches require high standards of holiness, giving, or service, yet provide little support for the weak, broken, or struggling.

5 - When the church forgets the vulnerable - Jesus and the prophets consistently rebuked leaders who neglected the poor, sick, and marginalized. The Pharisees upheld religion but ignored justice.

6 - When Christians treat the church as a place to be honored rather than a place to serve - Jesus overturns the idea of status in God's community. The church is not built on VIP seating, insider access, or special recognition - it is built on washing-feet type service.

7 - When churches align more with political tribes than kingdom values - Like the Pharisees and Sadducees, Christians today can become entangled in political identity, defending their "side" more passionately than they defend Christ's humility and compassion. We also are in danger of compromising our witness to gain power or favor.

We cannot assume that knowing a lot is the same as living what we know. Jesus' critique of the Pharisees is not aimed at their lack of information but their lack of transformation. The great barometer of spiritual maturity is love for God and the people around us. We may not have a special seat in the synagogue or a special title - but we do have a name and a calling. We are Christians, followers of the Christ. And that carries with it a responsibility to look, live and love like our leader.