

NOON BIBLE STUDY: MATTHEW 23 (PART 2)

Matthew 5-7 records Jesus' first public sermon, what we now call "The Sermon On The Mount". Jesus begins that sermon with 8 punchy statements called "The Beattitudes" - truths from Jesus' kingdom manifesto about what it really means to live the good life. 8x he will talk about "blessings", a special phrase which means happy and good. The beatitudes will describe an upside down way of looking at the world. Jesus teaches that we're blessed when we're humble, gentle and even when we are persecuted for his sake, because these values are in line with the coming kingdom and in opposition to this present evil age.

When we arrive at Matthew 23, we're going to listen in on Jesus' last public teaching. Matthew 23:1 tells us that Jesus "spoke to the crowds and his disciples" (just like he did in Matthew 5:1 and 7:28-29). This time however, Jesus is going to speak a very different message. Rather than repeating 8 blessings, he's going to give 8 (7?) "woes". The word "**woe**" is the Greek word οὐαί (ouai, 3759) and it's a mix of "condemnation, regret, and sorrow (ESV Study Bible)," the near opposite of "**blessing**". These "woes" are directed at the "scribes and Pharisees", the religious leaders of Jesus' day who should have been examples and servants to the people on God's behalf but instead were standing in the people's way of knowing and living for God. Jesus has clashed with them throughout Matthew's gospel, but this chapter records his strongest rebuke.

Matthew 23:13-28

Woe 1 - 13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

Rather than being a doorway so people could know God and enter His kingdom, the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees was closing the door.

"Hypocrites" - (ὑποκριτής, hupokrites) - In Ancient Greece - the same actor would wear different masks to indicate different parts of the play. But the mask was only something on the outside that made them look a certain way - in fact they weren't really that person. They were acting.

****a note on verse 14** - this verse is italicized in the NASB and absent from ESV and other translations because it is not found in some of the earliest manuscripts. It appears in later manuscripts that the widely read KJV had access to so it remains in some instances with a translator note. We'll consider it as it certainly aligns with Jesus' other teaching in this section.

Woe 2 - 14 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation .

This is the essence of their hypocrisy. They are taking advantage of widows, the people most vulnerable in their day, likely through extreme demands of tithe and donation and financial support while at the same time publicly praying in a way that makes people think they are holy. Jesus has already spoken out against such behavior in the sermon on the mount (see Matthew 6:1-8)

Woe 3 - 15 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

The scribes and Pharisees weren't lazy, they simply put effort into the wrong things and with wrong motives. They would put attention, resources and effort into reaching people but the end goal of their campaigns were that the "converts" were following the example of the hypocrites and not God's character.

This also speaks to religious leaders making disciples in their own image rather than pointing them to the LORD for dependence and example. This happens today when people are dependent on their leaders for their relationship with God rather than God himself. There are some leaders who prefer it this way, and Jesus rebukes that kind of system here.

Woe 4 - 16 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' 17 "You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? 18 "And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.' 19 "You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? 20 "Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. 21 "And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. 22 "And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.

The Law prohibited taking the name of Yahweh in vain (Exodus 20:7, Deut. 5:11) as well as making empty vows (Lev. 19:12; Num 30:2; Deut. 23:21-23). In a world lacking integrity, people would often "swear" by something important or great to give support to the vow or promise they were making. The Pharisees, now called "blind guides" and "blind men" by Jesus, had crafted their own standard of swearing to "help" people navigate whether or not they needed to keep an oath, based on what the oath had been sworn upon.

Jesus confronts the folly of this thinking by logically addressing the thought process of this system. If it was ok to swear by the temple and break the oath, but not if you swore on the "gold of the temple", how does that make any sense?!

We know Jesus taught his followers to simply say "yes" or "no" (Matthew 5:33-37). In this rebuke, he is also rebuking the tendency of the evil human heart to look for shortcuts, make excuses and look for the easy way out of a faithful life. That kind of thinking doesn't speak to a person who is endeavoring to love God with their whole heart, soul, mind and strength.

Woe 5 - 23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. 24 "You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"

The scribes and Pharisees were so legalistic that they were opening their spice cabinet and separating their herbs and spices to give 10% to God. If God commanded the tithe from His people, then these guys were going to apply this to every area of their lives.

Unfortunately, the problem with legalistic thinking is that it is narrow minded and typically misses the forest for the trees.

They were missing the main thing, what Jesus here calls the “weightier provisions of the law”, namely “justice, mercy, faithfulness. **(23:23)**”. The Pharisees were zealous for the things that made them look good and right in the eyes of others, but missed what really mattered.

(I love how Jesus doesn’t say it is wrong to tithe the mint, but to not tithe mint and miss love. Do both.)

“Strain a gnat and swallow camel” - A gnat was the smallest of unclean animals (Leviticus 11). A camel was the largest unclean animal. Pious Jews would sometimes strain wine or water through a cloth to avoid accidentally swallowing a gnat (and thus violating purity laws). Jesus takes this real practice and exaggerates it: “You are so focused on filtering out a tiny impurity... but you are gulping down something massive and unclean.”

Christians today can also focus on small nuanced matters and miss the more important things. We can focus on minor issues and negate major ones along the way.

Woe 6 & 7 - 25 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. 26 "You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. 27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 28 "So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

“Whitewashed Tombs” - “When the pilgrim season began in Israel they used to paint the tombs with whitewash to make them very obvious, so that nobody brushed up against them and got ceremonially defiled by accident” (Michael Green, Matthew: The Bible Speaks Today, page 244)

Mishnah Shekalim 1:1 - “And on the fifteenth day of the month of Adar, the Scroll of Esther is read in the cities...And they also repair the roads that were damaged in the winter, and the

streets, and the cisterns. And at that time they perform all that is necessary for public welfare. And they also mark the Jewish gravesites anew, so that people would know their location and avoid ritual impurity, as the previous markers may have eroded during the rainy season.” (sefaria.org/Mishnah_Shekalim.1.1)

“The second thing is that they begin to fix the public roads and ritual baths because (Passover) is coming in one month. People would need to travel to Jerusalem and purify themselves in order to take part in the (passover) sacrifice...Adar is the beginning of the dry season...It would have been difficult to fix the roads when the rains were still coming down. In addition they performed all sorts of other public duties that could not be done during the rainy season. They would mark graves with lime so that priests could see where the graves were and avoid them. During the winter the lime would wash away. Therefore, during Adar, once the rains had stopped they would reapply the plaster.” (English Explanation of Shekalim 1:1-3 via sefaria.org/English_Explanation_of_Mishnah_Shekalim.1.1.3)

These verses might sum up the scribes and Pharisees better than anywhere else. They were concerned about the outward appearance and not the inner matters of the heart. Jesus says their lives are similar to a shiny mug that has mildew and debris on the inside. He continues and says that they are comparable to a beautiful marble tomb - pristine on the outside but at the end of the day is just a container for dead bodies and decaying bones - the uncleanest of unclean.

There are two elements of religious hypocrisy. The first is rooted in appearing good to people, even though your heart is evil and far from God. The other part that the Pharisees practiced was their tendency to try and do good things for God but not care about the people around them.

God wants **sameness** from his people. He wants us to have hearts that are compassionate and who practice deeds of compassion. He wants us to worship Him and not make it about ourselves or other people. He wants us to be honest in church and at work. He wants us to be humble when we're with the rich and powerful and humble when we're with the poor and lowly.

The Pharisees had gotten it backwards. They put their effort into the outside while neglecting the inside. Jesus rebukes them, but He also invites them to change the order of operations. He wants transformation to **start with the heart**, allowing words and deeds to flow from the inside out. If the inside is clean, the outside will follow. That's an important principle in our day too, because so much energy is spent on appearances: curb appeal, clothing, makeup, tanning, jewelry, cars, the list goes on. It is very easy to polish the outside while ignoring the interior world of the soul.

My car is a good example. It often functions as a mobile office and storage unit. When life is busy, the inside can get messy fast: empty coffee cups, dirty clothes, Amazon returns, mail, books, wrappers, socks from my kids, all kinds of random things. But you might not know that, because I

have a monthly membership at Washville Car Wash. In about two minutes, I can run the car through the automatic wash and boom! → the outside looks great.

Included in my membership are free vacuums, which I genuinely enjoy using. I like the process of throwing away trash, sorting what goes back into the house, and organizing what belongs to the kids. But here's the reality: even though I *can* clean the inside any day I want, it takes more time. It requires slowing down, paying attention, making decisions, and putting in effort. So the outside gets cleaned more often simply because it's easier and faster.

None of that matters... until someone asks for a ride.

Because when I open that passenger door, everything hidden becomes visible. If cups and socks and wrappers fall out, the illusion of a “clean” car collapses. And here's where this becomes more than a car story: when people don't want to do the work of interior cleaning, they start avoiding situations that might expose what's inside. They keep others out. They isolate, parking far away from anyone else. They protect the image. If someone starts to get close or peer inside, we freak out!! In extreme cases, we've seen houses - and even cars - become so neglected on the inside, accumulating things that should have been dealt with, that they become condemned, not because of the outside, but because the interior was never tended to.

A few things for us to consider so we can flee from the way of the Pharisees and faithfully follow the way of Jesus:

1 - We don't need a perfect interior before we can love people. Some of us will always have a bit of “beach sand, rock salt, and sandwich wrappers” in our lives. Jesus isn't asking for perfection. He *is* calling us away from pretending that the outside is the primary thing.

2 - The inside deserves our time and attention. It is important to take the time to do work on our inner lives with God. Sometimes a major overhaul is needed. God is patient and present in those times. But ideally, we live in “maintenance mode”, regularly clearing out accumulated junk, confessing sin, seeking healing, and keeping short accounts with God. When that becomes our rhythm, it's 10 minutes of cleanup, not 10 hours.

3 - Most importantly, God doesn't leave us to clean the inside alone. This is the best news of all. God's Spirit is literally called *The Helper* in John 14–16. God's Spirit lives inside us to assist in the cleaning, strengthening us when the mess feels overwhelming, teaching us when we don't know what needs to go, convicting gently, not with shame but kindness. God empowers us to change and helps us maintain a healthy interior life!

Unlike the Pharisees, God does not shame you for the clutter inside. He already knows what's in there and he moves toward you, not away. The goal isn't to “look clean” on the outside but to **be alive** on the inside, filled with God's Spirit, motivated by love, and walking in humility. When the inside is tended, the outside naturally reflects the work God is doing, not through performance, but through transformation.