

Matthew Chapter 23

Verses 1-2:

Jesus' last condemnation of the Pharisees fills chapter 23 entirely.

This now represents His final and official rejection of them at the temple, their own stronghold of influence and security.

See parallel passages (in Mark 12:38-40 and Luke 20:45-47).

“Sit in Moses' seat” (Greek kathedra, “seat of authority”):

This represents the synagogue chair, which symbolizes the origin and authority of their teaching.

Matthew 23:1 "Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples,"

To the common people that were about him in the temple.

The high priests and elders, Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, having left him, being all silenced by him.

And now, lest on the one hand, the people seeing the ignorance and errors of these men detected by Christ, should be tempted to conclude there was nothing in religion.

And to neglect the word and worship of God, on account of the concern these men had in it.

On the other hand, because of their great authority and influence, being in Moses's chair, lest the people should be led into bad principles and practices by them (Scribes, Pharisees, etc.).

He directs them in what they should observe in them and what not.

That they were not altogether to be rejected, nor in everything to be attended to.

And warns them against their ostentation, pride, hypocrisy, covetousness, and cruelty.

And, at the same time, removes an objection against himself, proving that he was no enemy to Moses, and the law, rightly explained and practiced.

He said this “to his disciples”; not only the twelve, but to all that believed in him, and were followers of him.

Matthew 23:2 "Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat:"

“In Moses' seat”:

The expression is equivalent to a university's "chair of philosophy."

To "sit in the chair of Moses", was to have the highest authority to instruct people in the law.

The expression here may be translated "(they) have seated themselves in Moses' seat".

Stressing the fact that this was an imaginary authority they claimed for themselves.

There was a legitimate sense in which the priests and Levites had authority to decide matters of the law (Deut. 17:19).

But the scribes and Pharisees had gone beyond any legitimate authority and were adding human tradition to the Word of God (15:3-9).

For that Jesus condemned them (verses 8-36).

Verses 3-6:

"They make broad their phylacteries":

A phylactery was an amulet consisting of a strip of parchment, that was inscribed with certain portions of the Pentateuch, which was rolled and placed in a small metal cylinder inside a square leather case.

The cases were attached by the Jews with straps to their foreheads and to the back of their right hands, following a strictly literal interpretation of (Deuteronomy 6:8-9).

They were normally worn only during prayer, but the Pharisees appear to have worn them always and to have made them especially conspicuous.

"The borders of their garments" were the fringes worn in obedience to (Numbers 15:38-39).

"Uppermost rooms" might be better said "chief places."

Matthew 23:3 "All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, [that] observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not."

"Observe ... and do not":

I.e., insofar as it accords with the Word of God.

The Pharisees were prone to bind "heavy burdens" (verse 4), of extra biblical traditions and put them on others' shoulders.

Jesus explicitly condemned that sort of legalism.

This is very interesting.

These scribes and Pharisees knew the letter of the law.

They have learned the Law of Moses with no exceptions.

They are quick to preach that everyone had to keep the law.

There was just one catch to all of this.

They preached against the very things they did themselves.

They were without excuse, because they sinned with full knowledge that it was wrong.

Jesus said it was okay to listen to them, but don't pattern your life after theirs.

Matthew 23:4 "For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay [them] on men's shoulders; but they [themselves] will not move them with one of their fingers."

"They bind heavy burdens":

This phrase is derived from the custom of loading animals.

The load or burden is bound up and then laid on the beast.

So the Pharisees appointed weighty burdens, or grievous and heavy precepts, and insisted that the people should obey them, though they lent no assistance.

The "heavy burdens" refer not here to the traditions and foolish customs of the Pharisees, for Jesus would not command the people to observe them.

But they clearly mean the ceremonies and rights appointed by Moses, which Peter says neither.

Acts 15:10 "Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?"

Those rites were numerous, expensive, requiring much time, much property, and laborious.

The Pharisees were rigid in requiring that all the people should pay the taxes, give of their property, comply with every part of the law with the utmost rigor, yet they indulged themselves, and bore as little of the expense and trouble as possible.

So that where they could avoid it, they would not lend the least aid to the people in the toils and expense of their religious rites.

“With one of their fingers”:

In the least degree.

They will not render the least aid.

Matthew 23:5 "But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments,"

“Phylacteries”:

Leather boxes containing a parchment on which they are written in 4 columns.

These are worn by men during prayer, one on the middle of the forehead and one on the left arm just above the elbow.

The use of phylacteries was based on an overly literal interpretation of passages like (Exodus 13:9-10; Deut. 6:8).

Evidently the Pharisees would broaden the leather straps by which the phylacteries were bound to their arms and foreheads, in order to make the phylacteries more prominent.

“Enlarge the borders of their garments”:

Jesus Himself wore them, so it was not the tassels themselves that He condemned, only the mentality that would lengthen the tassels to make it appear that one was especially spiritual.

These scribes and Pharisees were much like the leaders of many religions today.

They put needless burdens on others and bare no burdens themselves.

With them, their religion was just a formality.

It really had no real meaning to them.

It really was just a front put up to make others conform to the way they wanted things.

You really could not call this true belief, it is just religion.

This religion that they were practicing was just so others could see them.

In the Sermon on the Mount, this type of religion was described as; they loved the glory of men more than the glory of God.

This religion had much pomp and show.

They were more eager for the praises of men, than of God.

Matthew 23:6 "And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues,"

"The uppermost rooms at feasts":

The word "rooms," here, by no means expresses the meaning of the original.

It would be correctly rendered the uppermost "places or couches" at feasts.

To understand this, it is necessary to remark that the custom among the Jews was not to eat sitting, as we do, but reclining on couches.

The table was made by "three" tables, raised like ours and placed so as to form a square, with a clear space in the midst, and one end open.

Around these tables were placed cushions capable of containing three or more people.

On these the guests reclined, leaning on their left side, with their feet extended from the table, and so lying that the head of one naturally reclined on the bosom of another.

To recline near to one in this manner denoted intimacy, and was what was meant by lying "in the bosom" of another (John 13:23; Luke 16:22-23).

As the feet were extended "from" the table, and as they reclined instead of sitting, it was easy to approach the feet behind, and even unperceived.

Thus (in Luke 7:37-38), while Jesus reclined in this manner, a woman that had been a sinner came to his feet "behind him," and washed them with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head.

She stood on the outside of the couches.

So our Savior washed the feet of his disciples as they reclined on a couch in this manner (see John 13:4-12).

Whenever we read in the New Testament of "sitting" at meals, it always means reclining in this manner, and never sitting as we do.

The chief seat, or the "uppermost" one, was the middle couch at the upper end of the table.

This the Pharisees loved, as a post of honor or distinction.

“Chief seats in the synagogues”.

The seats usually occupied by the elders of the synagogue, near the pulpit.

The meaning is, they love a place of distinction (see the notes at Matthew 4:23).

Verses 7-12:

“Rabbi” is from a Hebrew word (literally, “my great one” or “my teacher”).

Christ’s disciples are to “call no man your father” meaning in a spiritual sense.

“Masters” (verse 10), is literally “guides” “leader,” or “teachers”.

“Servant” means “minister” or “attendant.”

Matthew 23:7 "And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi."

“Rabbi” means my master.

These positions in the community and at special occasions were fought over, because if you sat in this position, you were thought of as someone with great authority.

Jesus told us in another Scripture, to not think of ourselves too highly.

“To be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi”, this word literally signifies great.

It was a title given to eminent teachers of the law among the Jews; a title of honor and dignity, denoting authority and ability to teach.

They were gratified with such titles, and wished it given to themselves as denoting superiority.

Every time it was given to them it implied their superiority to the persons who used it, and they were fond, therefore, of hearing it often applied to them.

There were three titles in use among the Jews, Rab, Rabbi, and Rabban, denoting different degrees of learning and ability, as literary degrees do among us.

Pride and arrogance have been the downfall of many.

This attitude of wanting the community to look up to you, like they wanted position here, had nothing to do with worshipping God.

Most people who go to church for this reason get very little out of church.

God loves a humble spirit.

In many cases, people who want great positions in churches are not in church to worship God. They are there to be seen by their neighbors.

Verses 8-10:

“Rabbi ... father ... masters”:

Here Jesus condemns pride and pretense, not titles per se.

Paul repeatedly speaks of “leaders” in the church, and even refers to himself as the Corinthians “father” (1 Cor. 4:15).

Obviously, this does not forbid the showing of respect either (1 Thess. 5:11-12; 1 Tim. 5:1).

Christ is merely forbidding the use of such names as spiritual titles, or in an ostentatious sense that accords undue spiritual authority to a human being, as if he were the source of truth rather than God.

Matthew 23:8 "But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, [even] Christ; and all ye are brethren."

"But be not ye called Rabbi":

Do not be ambitious of any such title or be elated with it, should it be given you; nor look upon yourselves as men of power and authority over others.

As having the dominion over men's faith or a power to make laws for others and impose them in a magisterial way.

Nor bind and loose men's consciences at pleasure, as these men do.

For one is your master, even Christ; meaning himself, the true Messiah, the head of the church, King of saints, and Lord of all.

Who had all power in heaven and in earth, to make laws, appoint ordinances, and oblige men to receive his doctrines, and obey his commands.

And all ye are brethren; not merely as the descendants of Adam, but as in a spiritual relation.

The children of God and Disciples of Christ and so have no superiority one over another.

The same as regarding the disciples; both as believers and Christians.

Partakers of the same grace; and standing in the same relation to God, Christ, and one another.

Matthew 23:9 "And call no [man] your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven."

“And call no man your Father”:

This does not, of course, forbid us to apply the term to our real father.

Religion requires all proper honors to be shown to Him (see Exodus 20:12; Matthew 15:4; Ephesians 6:1-3).

But the word "father" also denotes "authority, eminence, superiority, a right to command, and a claim to particular respect."

In this sense, it is used here.

In this sense, it belongs eminently to God, and it is not right to give it to people.

Christian brethren are equal.

Only God has supreme authority.

He only has a right to give laws; to declare doctrines that shall bind the conscience; and also to punish disobedience.

The Jewish teachers affected that title because they seem to have supposed that a teacher formed the man, or gave him real life, and sought, therefore, to be called father.

Christ taught them that the source of all life and truth was God, and they ought not to seek or receive a title which properly belongs to him.

Matthew 23:10 "Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, [even] Christ."

“Neither be ye called masters”:

That is leaders or guides, for this is the literal meaning of the word.

It refers to those who go before others; who claim therefore, the right to direct and control others.

This was also a title conferred on Jewish teachers.

Neither of these commands forbids us to give proper titles of civil office to men, or to render them the honor belonging to their station (Matthew 22:21; Romans 13:7; 1 Peter 2:17).

They prohibit the disciples of Jesus from seeking or receiving mere empty titles, producing distinctions among themselves, implying authority to control the opinions and conduct of others, and claiming that others should acknowledge them to be superior to them.

Here again, we see that we should not try to elevate ourselves to the position of God the Father, or God the Son.

We must not try to bring them down to our level or try to push ourselves up to their level.

Matthew 23:11 "But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant."

“But he that is greatest among you”:

Either who really is so, having more grace, and greater gifts bestowed upon him, than others.

Which doubtless was the case of some of the disciples, or who desired to be the greatest, was ambitious of, and affected a superiority over others, and to be in the highest post and place, as it is certain some of them did.

This was what they were often contending about among themselves, who should be greatest: and Christ here seems to have regard to that vain spirit, which appeared among them; and his view is, to check and restrain it: "shall be your servant"; or "let him be your servant".

Service is the way to honor; he that would be most esteemed ought to do the most work; and the man that has the most grace, and the greatest gifts, ought to employ them for the use and benefit of others (see Matthew 20:27).

Matthew 23:12 "And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted."

“Whosoever shall exalt himself”:

The way to arrive at the highest degree of dignity, in the sight of God, is by being willing to become the servant of all.

Nothing is more hateful in His sight than pride; to bring it into everlasting contempt, God was manifest in the flesh.

He who was in the likeness of God took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of man, and humbled himself unto death.

1 Peter 5:6 “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.”

After this, can God look upon any proud man without abasing him?

Spiritual lordship and domination, ecclesiastical luxury, pomp, and pride, must be an abhorrence in the sight of that God who gave the above advices to his followers.

But he gives us more grace.

That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" James 4:6).

Another lesson, which our blessed Lord teaches here is, that no man is implicitly to receive the sayings, doctrines, and decisions of any man, or number of men, in the things which concern the interests of his immortal soul.

Christ, his Spirit, and his word, is the only infallible teacher.

Every man who wishes to save his soul must search the Scriptures, by prayer and faith.

Reader, take counsel with the pious; hear the discourses of the wise and holy: but let the book of God ultimately fix thy creed.

A good example of the above is that the head, or pastor, of the church is called a "minister".

They are to minister to the needs of the people.

It is a little bit like a balloon.

If you blow yourself up too much, the balloon will burst.

That is what happens to people as well.

Let someone else build you up.

Do not get to thinking too highly of yourself.

When you do you are riding for a fall.

Verses 13-15:

"Ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men" is another way of saying, "you put stumbling blocks in the way of the sinner coming to repentance and conversion."

"Devour widows' houses" means extort money from the helpless and bring them into debt and bondage, while making an outward show of religion.

"The greater damnation," that is, a more severe sentence.

"Proselyte:"

The Pharisees often sought proselytes for the sake of their own gain, under the guise of religion.

Matthew 23:13 "But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! 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."

“Neither suffer ye them”:

The Pharisees, having shunned God’s righteousness, were seeking to establish a righteousness of their own (Rom. 10:3).

And teaching others to do so as well.

Their legalism and self-righteousness effectively obscured the narrow gate by which the kingdom must be entered.

Matthew 23:14 "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation."

“Long prayer”:

Their prayers are said to have been often three hours in length.

One rule among them, was to meditate an hour, then pray an hour, and then meditate another hour, all of which was included in their "long prayers or devotions" which they continued sometimes (three hours).

They claimed a very exact knowledge of the law and a perfect observance of it.

They pretended to extraordinary justice toward the poor, friendship for the distressed, and willingness to aid those who were in embarrassing circumstances.

“For ye devour widows' houses”:

“That is, the goods in the houses of such as were left with fatherless children, and but little to support them.

Who being left alone, and none to advise them and being weak, and prone to superstition; these greedy dogs, as Isaiah calls them, who could never have enough, easily imposed upon them.

They wormed them out of all their substance, stripped them bare of the necessities of life, prevailed on them to sell their houses and goods, and bestow them on them.

Or got their little estates into their hands, pretending to take care, and dispose of them for them, to their advantage.

This verse does not appear in the earliest available manuscripts of Matthew, but does appear in Mark.

Matthew 23:15 "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! 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."

“Proselyte”:

A Gentile convert to Judaism.

“Child of hell”:

I.e., someone whose eternal destination is hell.

A hypocrite is someone who says one thing, and does something totally different.

He shows the world one face, and lives an entirely different life at home.

This perhaps, could be why so many preachers' children turn away from the church.

They see their parent showing the church world one face, and then they are totally different with the family.

“Twofold more the child of hell”:

That is, twice as bad.

To be a child of hell was a Hebrew phrase, it is signifying to be deserving of hell, and to be awfully wicked.

The Jewish writers themselves say that the proselytes were "scabs of Israel," and "hindered the coming of the Messiah" by their great wickedness.

The Pharisees gained them either to swell their own numbers, or to make gain by extorting their money under various pretenses.

And when they had accomplished that, they took no pains to instruct them or to restrain them.

They had renounced their superstition which had before somewhat restrained them, but the Pharisees had given them no religion in its place to restrain them, and they were consequently left to the full indulgence of their vices.

Verses 16-22:

These verses illustrate the Pharisees' false teaching in regard to oaths.

"Temple" (Greek naos, "sanctuary"):

Our Lord teaches that all oaths are equally binding, and no man can expect to escape their consequences before God by making distinctions such as these.

Matthew 23:16 "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!"

"It is nothing":

This was an arbitrary distinction the Pharisees had made, which gave them a sanctimonious justification for lying with impunity.

If someone swore "by the temple", or by the altar (verse 18, or heaven, verse 22), his oath was not considered binding, but if he swore "by the gold of the temple," he could not break his word without being subject to the penalties of Jewish law.

Our Lord makes it clear that swearing by those things is tantamount to swearing by God Himself.

Matthew 23:17 "[Ye] fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold?"

"The temple that sanctifieth the gold":

To sanctify is to make holy.

The gold had no holiness but what it derived from the temple.

If in any other place, it would be no more holy than any other gold.

It was foolish then, to suppose that was more holy than the temple, from which it received all the sanctity which it possessed.

Matthew 23:18 "And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty."

"The altar":

The altar of burnt-offerings, in the court of the priests.

It was made of brass, about 30 feet in length and breadth, and 15 feet in its height (see 2 Chronicles 4:1).

On this altar were offered all the beasts and bloody oblations of the temple.

“The gift that is upon it”:

The gift or offering made to God, so called because it was devoted or "given" to him.

The gift upon this altar was always beasts and birds.

Matthew 23:19 "[Ye] fools and blind: for whether [is] greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?"

“The altar that sanctifieth the gift”:

The altar, dedicated to God, gave all the value or holiness to the offering, and must therefore be the greatest or of the most importance.

If therefore, either bound to the fulfillment of an oath, it must be the altar.

Exodus 29:37 “For seven days make atonement for the altar and consecrate it. Then the altar will be most holy, and whatever touches it will be holy.”

Matthew 23:20 "Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon."

“Whosoever therefore shall swear by the altar”:

Not that Christ allowed of swearing by the altar, or by the temple, or by heaven, or by any creature, animate or inanimate; for such swearing is elsewhere disapproved of by him, and thus is forbidden.

but if a man did swear by the altar, he ought to know, and consider that he not only sweareth by it, but by all the gifts, and offerings that are brought, and laid upon it,

And by all things thereon.

Whatever gifts and sacrifices are offered upon it; which, by being put there, become holy, as the altar itself.

So that he that swears by the altar, swears also by the gifts of the altar; and consequently, according to their own traditions, such oaths must be binding.

Matthew 23:21 "And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein."

“Him that dwelleth therein”:

That is, God.

The temple was his house, his dwelling.

In the first, or Solomon's temple, he dwelt between the cherubim in the most holy place.

He manifested himself there by a visible symbol, in the form of a cloud resting on the mercy-seat, (1 Kings 8:10, 1 Kings 8:13; Psalm 80:1).

Matthew 23:22 "And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon."

“The throne of God”:

Heaven is His throne (Matthew 5:34).

It is so called as being the place where he sits in glory.

Jesus says, here, that all who swear at all do in fact, swear by God, or else that the oath is good for nothing.

To swear by an altar, either a gift, or either a temple is of no force unless it be meant to appeal to God himself.

Matthew Chapter 23 Questions

1. Jesus stated the scribes and Pharisees sat where?
2. Should the multitude listen to them?
3. Should the multitude follow them? Why?
4. What was the catch to their preaching?
5. What did the scribes and Pharisees lay on men's shoulders?
6. What was Phylacteries associated with?
7. Whose praise were they seeking?
8. What does "Rabbi" mean?
9. Why did they want the chief seats?
10. What two things have been the downfall of many?
11. What kind of spirit does God love?

12. Who alone should be called Father?
13. Who is our master?
14. Why is the leader of the church called a minister?
15. When you get to thinking too highly of yourself, what is about to happen?
16. Besides calling the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites, what did He call them?
17. When you swear by heaven, what are you really swearing by?