

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 28: Woes to the Scribes and Pharisees

Matthew 23:1-39

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

At the doctrinal level, Matthew 23 confronts the deadliest counterfeit of true faith: hypocrisy, the religion of the outside that never reaches the heart. Jesus exposes a worship that performs for human eyes, exalts itself with titles and honors, majors in minor rules while neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness, and keeps the cup clean on the outside while greed festers within. The chapter teaches with great clarity that God desires truth in the inward parts, that true greatness is humble service, and that no amount of external religion can substitute for a heart made new. It also raises, in the warning against calling anyone father, rabbi, or master, the question of human religious authority, which must be handled carefully: Jesus is guarding the unique place of God and Christ over the conscience, not establishing a rule about every use of a word.

Yet the chapter aims squarely at the heart, because the disease Jesus names is one every religious person can catch, including faithful church members and especially teachers. The danger is not out there among ancient Pharisees; it is the ever-present temptation to do good to be seen, to love the seat of honor, to keep up appearances while the inside goes untended. Teach so that no one in your class watches the woes from a safe distance. The same Lord who exposed the Pharisees is examining us.

So pursue both targets, and let the chapter's own movement guide you. Lead your students through the searching, surgical woes until they feel the exposure, and then lead them to the tears of Jesus over Jerusalem, where the heart of God is laid bare. Send them home not crushed but cleansed, drawn out of performance and into humble, heartfelt devotion, and gathered, willingly this time, under the wings of the One who longs to save them.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus charges the scribes and Pharisees that "they preach, but do not practice" and that they do their deeds "to be seen by others" (vv. 3, 5). What does this passage teach about hypocrisy and about the kind of righteousness God actually desires?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open by helping your class hear the central charge of the chapter in verses 3 and 5. The scribes and Pharisees "preach, but do not practice," and whatever they do they do "to be seen by

others.” Hypocrisy in the New Testament is precisely this gap between the public face and the private reality, between the words on the lips and the state of the heart.

Set this against what God actually desires. The Lord “looks on the heart,” not on the outward appearance (1 Samuel 16:7). Jesus had already taught in the Sermon on the Mount that acts of righteousness done to be seen by others receive their reward in the seeing and nothing more, while the Father sees and rewards what is done in secret (Matthew 6:1–6). God is not impressed by performance; He desires truth in the inward being.

Help your students understand why this is so serious. Hypocrisy is not a minor flaw; it is a counterfeit of the very thing God most wants, a heart that is His. It deceives others, it deceives the self, and it cannot deceive God. The Pharisees were not irreligious; they were intensely religious, which is exactly why their hypocrisy is such a sobering warning to the devout.

Then point to the righteousness God does desire: a life where the inside and the outside match, where deeds flow from a heart that genuinely loves God, done whether or not anyone sees. This is not a call to abandon visible good works, for Jesus also said to let our light shine (Matthew 5:16), but to do them from a true heart and for God’s glory rather than our own.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hypocrisy as the gap between outward profession and inward reality
- God looking on the heart, not on the outward appearance (1 Samuel 16:7)
- Righteousness done for the Father who sees in secret (Matthew 6:1–6)
- The seriousness of hypocrisy as a counterfeit of true devotion
- Genuine good works flowing from a heart that loves God

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you notice a gap between your public face and your private heart?
- Why does God care so much more about the heart than the appearance?
- How can good works be visible without becoming a performance?

Question 2

Student Question:

The Pharisees loved the place of honor, the best seats, and the public greetings (vv. 6–7). Where in your own life do you find yourself craving recognition, status, or the approval of others more than the approval of God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question fastens on verses 6 and 7, where the Pharisees love “the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.” Their religion had become a means to a deeply human craving: to be seen, honored, and looked up to.

Help your students recognize how universal this craving is. The hunger for recognition, status, and approval is not a Pharisee problem; it is a human problem. It hides in our resentment when others get credit, in our quiet fishing for compliments, in the way we curate how we appear, in the disappointment we feel when our service goes unnoticed.

Press gently into specifics. Where does each person look for their worth in the eyes of others? For some it is at work, for some online, for some even in church, where service can subtly become a way to be admired as spiritual. The question is not whether we ever receive honor but whether we crave it more than we crave the approval of God.

Offer the remedy: living before an audience of One. When God's approval becomes the approval we most want, the opinions of others lose their tyrannical grip. Encourage students to name one place where they will deliberately seek God's pleasure rather than human applause this week, perhaps by serving where no one will see.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The craving for human approval as a snare for the religious heart (John 12:43)
- Seeking the honor that comes from God rather than from people
- The freedom of living before an audience of One
- Service corrupted when it becomes a means of being admired

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you most crave recognition or status from others?
- How would living for God's approval change your daily choices?
- What is one act of unseen service you could do this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus warns His disciples, "call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven," and likewise warns against the titles rabbi and instructor (vv. 8–10). What is Jesus teaching here about religious titles and human authority, and what is He guarding against?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question takes up the much-discussed verses 8 through 10, where Jesus tells His disciples not to be called rabbi, not to call anyone on earth their father, and not to be called instructors, "for you have one Father, who is in heaven," and "one instructor, the Christ." Handle this carefully, because the verse is often misread in both directions.

First establish what Jesus is not doing. He is not forbidding the ordinary use of the word father for a parent; the New Testament freely speaks of earthly fathers (Ephesians 6:4), and Paul calls himself a spiritual father to those he led to Christ (1 Corinthians 4:15). He is not banning every

use of a title. Jesus is using vivid, deliberately strong language to drive home a principle, as He often does.

Now name what He is guarding against. The Pharisees loved these honorific titles because the titles fed their pride and set them up as spiritual authorities over others' consciences, in the place that belongs to God alone. Jesus is warning against exalting any human religious authority, any title or office, to a place of mastery over the conscience that belongs only to God our Father and Christ our one Teacher and Lord. Our ultimate Father is God; our ultimate Teacher is Christ; and no man may take that place.

This is precisely why the passage gives no warrant for any office or title that sets a man between the believer and God, whether a papal father over the whole church or any hierarchy claiming mastery over the conscience. Christ alone is Head of His church (Colossians 1:18), and all of us are brothers and sisters under one Father (v. 8). The New Testament does provide for elders, deacons, preachers, and teachers who serve and oversee the local congregation, but they serve under Christ, never in His place, and never lording it over the flock (1 Peter 5:1–3). The whole thrust of Jesus' words is downward, toward humility, not upward toward grand titles.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus guarding the unique authority of God the Father and Christ over the conscience
- A warning against exalting human religious titles and authority, not a rule about every word
- No human office set between the believer and God; Christ alone the Head of the church (Colossians 1:18)
- All believers as brothers and sisters under one Father (v. 8)
- Elders, deacons, and teachers who serve under Christ, never lording it over the flock (1 Peter 5:1–3)

Discussion Prompts

- What is Jesus actually guarding against in warning about titles?
- Why does it matter that Christ alone is the Head of His church?
- How can those who lead in the church serve without taking Christ's place?

Question 4

Student Question:

After warning against grand titles, Jesus says, "The greatest among you shall be your servant" (v. 11). Where is God calling you to find your worth not in being recognized or in authority over others, but in humble, often unseen service?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question follows the antidote Jesus prescribes in verse 11: “The greatest among you shall be your servant.” Right after warning against the love of titles and honors, Jesus completely redefines greatness. In the kingdom, greatness is measured not by who is served but by who serves.

Help your students feel how counter-cultural this is. The world measures greatness by position, recognition, and authority over others. Jesus turns the pyramid upside down. The truly great are those who stoop, who serve, who give themselves away, often without applause. He Himself will model it within days, taking a towel and washing feet, and finally giving His life.

Press the question into specific places. Where is each person tempted to find worth in being recognized or in having authority over others, rather than in humble service? For one it may be at home, for another at work or at church. The question invites them to locate where they are still climbing the world’s ladder rather than taking the lower place.

Point them to the example and the freedom of it. Christ “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:3–8). When we find our worth in being God’s beloved, we no longer need status to feel significant, and we are freed to serve gladly in hidden places. Ask each student to name one humble, unseen act of service they will embrace this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- True greatness redefined as humble service (v. 11; Mark 10:42–45)
- Christ’s self-emptying as the pattern of Christian greatness (Philippians 2:3–8)
- Finding worth in being God’s beloved rather than in status
- The freedom to serve in hidden places without applause

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you still measuring yourself by the world’s idea of greatness?
- What humble, unseen service is God inviting you into?
- How does finding your worth in God free you to serve gladly?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus repeatedly calls them “blind guides” who major in minors, tithing herbs while neglecting “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness” (vv. 23–24). How can a person be scrupulous about religious details and yet miss the heart of God, and what are the weightier matters He names?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question takes up verses 23 and 24, one of the sharpest of the woes. The Pharisees carefully tithed even their garden herbs, mint and dill and cumin, while neglecting “the

weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.” Jesus’ vivid image seals it: they strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

Clarify that Jesus is not dismissing attention to detail; He says of the tithing of herbs, “these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” (v. 23). The problem is not that they were careful about small things but that their carefulness about small things became a substitute for the great things, a way to feel righteous while their hearts were far from God’s priorities.

Draw out the weightier matters He names. Justice, mercy, and faithfulness echo the prophets, especially Micah 6:8: to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. These are matters of the heart toward God and neighbor, and they cannot be reduced to a checklist. It is possible to be meticulous about religious forms and yet be unjust, unmerciful, and unfaithful.

Bring it home searchingly. We can do the same thing, prizing the details of religious life, attendance, vocabulary, procedures, while neglecting whether we are just, merciful, and faithful in how we treat people. Help your class ask where their own scruples might be majoring in minors while the weightier matters go untended, and how to keep both, the details done from a heart set on what matters most.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The weightier matters of justice, mercy, and faithfulness (v. 23; Micah 6:8)
- The danger of majoring in minors while neglecting the heart of God’s law
- Attention to detail rightly kept but never as a substitute for love
- Religion that is meticulous in form yet unjust and unmerciful in fact

Discussion Prompts

- Where might your religious scruples be majoring in minors?
- What do justice, mercy, and faithfulness look like in your daily relationships?
- How can you keep the details without neglecting the weightier matters?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus says they were careful to clean the outside of the cup while the inside was “full of greed and self-indulgence” (vv. 25–26). Where in your life have you been tending the outside, the appearance, while neglecting what God sees on the inside?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question fastens on the vivid image of verses 25 and 26: the Pharisees cleaned “the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.” Jesus says, “First clean the inside of the cup, that the outside also may be clean.” The order matters: a clean inside produces a clean outside, but a polished outside hides a filthy inside.

Help your students see the universal temptation here. It is far easier to manage appearances than to deal with the heart. We can keep our outward behavior respectable, our reputation polished, our church attendance steady, while greed, lust, bitterness, or pride go untended within, where only God sees.

Press the question gently into specifics. Where has each person been tending the outside, what others see, while neglecting the inside, what God sees? The very effort that goes into appearances can be energy stolen from the harder, deeper work of repentance and inward change.

Point to the gospel order of cleansing. We cannot scrub the inside clean by willpower; that is the work of Christ, who cleanses us within. But we must stop hiding and bring the inside to Him honestly. Encourage students to name one inward thing, a hidden attitude or sin, that they will stop covering and bring to the Lord this week, trusting Him to cleanse it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The priority of inward cleansing over outward appearance (vv. 25–26)
- The temptation to manage reputation rather than deal with the heart
- Christ as the one who cleanses us within, not mere self-improvement
- Honest confession as the path out of hidden sin (1 John 1:8–9)

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you been tending the outside while neglecting the inside?
- What hidden attitude or sin do you need to stop covering?
- How does trusting Christ to cleanse you within change the way you repent?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus compares them to whitewashed tombs, beautiful outside but full of death within, and to a long line that murdered the prophets (vv. 27–32). What does this reveal about the difference between an external religion and a heart truly made new, and why can outward religion never substitute for it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question takes up the haunting image of verses 27 and 28, the whitewashed tombs. Tombs were whitewashed before Passover so pilgrims would not accidentally touch them and become unclean. They looked clean and bright on the outside but were full of dead bones within. Jesus says the Pharisees “outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Help your class feel the force of the image. The problem is not merely inconsistency; it is death within. An external religion, however beautiful its surface, cannot give life. It can paint the tomb, but it cannot raise the dead inside. This is the difference between a polished exterior and a heart truly made alive by God.

Connect this to the verses that follow, where Jesus charges them with honoring the tombs of the prophets their fathers killed, even as they fill up the measure of their fathers (vv. 29–32). External religion not only fails to give life; it often opposes the very work of God while congratulating itself on its devotion. The same men who built monuments to dead prophets would soon kill the Son.

Then teach why outward religion can never substitute for a new heart. God promised under the New Covenant to write His law on the heart and give a new spirit (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26), and the New Testament calls us to be born again and made new in Christ (John 3:3; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Reformation of the outside is not enough; we need regeneration of the inside, the death and resurrection life that comes through union with Christ. Lead your class to want not a whitewashed tomb but a heart made truly alive.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The contrast between external religion and a heart made new
- Outward religion as a tomb that cannot give life (vv. 27–28)
- The New Covenant promise of a new heart and spirit (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26)
- The necessity of being born again and made new in Christ (John 3:3; 2 Corinthians 5:17)
- External devotion that can oppose the very work of God

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between a polished exterior and a heart made alive?
- Why can outward religion never substitute for a new heart?
- Where do you long for God to make you alive within rather than merely respectable?

Question 8

Student Question:

Jesus exposes how they used clever oaths and fine distinctions to appear devout while evading real obedience (vv. 16–22). Where are you tempted to use technicalities, fine print, or self-justifying reasoning to look obedient while avoiding what God actually asks?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self question draws on verses 16 through 22, where Jesus exposes the Pharisees' elaborate system of oaths. They taught that swearing by the temple meant nothing, but swearing by the

gold of the temple was binding; swearing by the altar meant nothing, but by the gift on the altar was binding. Jesus calls them “blind fools” and dismantles the whole scheme.

Explain what was really going on. These fine distinctions were not honest theology; they were a clever way to appear devout while leaving loopholes to escape one’s word when convenient. Religion was being used to manufacture technicalities, a way to look obedient and pious while evading actual obedience and integrity.

Press the question into the modern heart, for this temptation is alive and well. We too can use fine print and self-justifying reasoning to keep the letter while dodging the spirit: technically I did not lie, technically I am not responsible, technically the rule does not cover this. We become our own clever lawyers, building cases for why we do not really have to do what God plainly asks.

Point to the cure Jesus implies. He calls instead for simple, transparent integrity, the kind He taught in the Sermon on the Mount: let your yes be yes and your no be no (Matthew 5:37). The person whose heart is right has no need of loopholes. Ask each student to name one place where they have been lawyering around God’s clear will, and to choose plain obedience instead.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The misuse of technicalities to appear obedient while evading real obedience
- Integrity and transparent honesty as marks of a true heart (Matthew 5:33–37)
- Self-justification as a subtle form of disobedience
- Keeping the spirit of God’s will, not merely the letter

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to use fine print or reasoning to dodge God’s clear will?
- What would simple, transparent obedience look like in that area?
- Why does a right heart have no need of loopholes?

Question 9

Student Question:

The chapter that thunders with seven woes ends with Jesus weeping, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (v. 37). What does this lament reveal about the heart of God toward sinners, how does it hold together with the woes, and what does it mean that they “were not willing”?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson, and it is also the most tender, so handle it with care. After seven thunderous woes and a sober warning of judgment on that generation

(vv. 33–36), the chapter suddenly breaks open into grief. Jesus cries, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (v. 37).

First, marvel that the same Jesus who pronounced the woes now weeps. The woes and the tears are not in conflict; they spring from the same heart. God’s anger against hypocrisy is real, but it is the anger of love, not of cold contempt. He does not delight in the death of the wicked but longs for them to turn and live (Ezekiel 33:11). The thunder and the tears together give us the true heart of God: holy enough to hate sin fiercely, loving enough to weep over the sinner.

Dwell on the tenderness of the image. A hen gathering her chicks under her wings is a picture of warmth, shelter, and self-giving protection; a hen will spread her wings over her brood even against fire. This is how Jesus describes His longing for the very city that would kill Him within the week. He yearned to save them, to shelter them, to gather them home.

Now sit with the heartbreaking words, “and you were not willing.” Here is the great mystery and the great responsibility of human freedom. Jesus longed to gather them; the obstacle was not any lack of love or power in Him, but their unwillingness to come. This stands squarely against any idea that people are saved or lost apart from a genuine response, or that God’s call is only for some secretly chosen few. The call was sincere and the longing was real; they would not. The gospel invitation is genuine and universal, and it can be genuinely refused, which is why this lament is so full of sorrow.

Bring it home with both warning and comfort. The warning: it is possible to be the object of Christ’s longing love and still perish, not because He was unwilling to gather us, but because we were not willing to come. The comfort: the wings are still spread. The same Lord who wept over Jerusalem stands ready to gather all who will come to Him. Lead your class to do what Jerusalem would not, to run willingly under the sheltering wings of the One who loves them enough both to warn and to weep.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The heart of God that grieves over sinners and longs to save them (Ezekiel 33:11; v. 37)
- The unity of God’s holy anger against sin and His tender love for the sinner
- Christ’s longing pictured as a hen sheltering her brood under her wings
- The genuine, universal gospel call that can be truly refused (‘you were not willing’)
- Human responsibility in salvation, against the idea of an irresistible call to a secret few
- The continuing offer of refuge to all who will come willingly to Christ

Discussion Prompts

- How do the woes and the tears together reveal the true heart of God?
- What does ‘you were not willing’ teach about our part in receiving or refusing Christ?

- Where do you need to come willingly under the sheltering wings of Jesus?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter, the woes and the weeping. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you out of religion-for-show and into true, humble, heartfelt devotion to God this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole chapter and press it home. Matthew 23 has held up an unflinching mirror: religion that preaches but does not practice, that performs for human eyes, that loves titles and seats, that majors in minors, that polishes the cup and whitewashes the tomb while the heart goes untended. And it has shown us the heart of God, holy enough to thunder and loving enough to weep.

Name the chapter's gift to us. These woes are not meant merely to condemn long-dead Pharisees; they are a searchlight for our own hearts, and a mercy. It is far better to be exposed now and cleansed than to go on whitewashing a tomb. Help your students receive the chapter as surgery from a loving Physician, not as a beating.

Invite each person to be specific. Where in this chapter did the Lord put His finger? Is it the deed done to be seen, the craving for recognition, the love of status, the neglected weightier matters, the untended inside of the cup, the loophole, the unwillingness to come? Give them a quiet moment to name one place and one humble, heartfelt response.

Close, as the chapter does, with the wings spread wide. The Jesus who exposes our religion-for-show is the same Jesus who longs to gather us under His wings. Let your students leave not crushed but cleansed, drawn out of performance and into genuine devotion, gladly choosing this week to be willing where Jerusalem was not.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The woes as a loving searchlight for self-examination, not mere condemnation
- Repentance from religion-for-show into genuine, heartfelt devotion
- Specific, concrete change as the fruit of true conviction
- The sheltering love of Christ as the home to which the convicted heart returns

Discussion Prompts

- Where in this chapter did the Lord most clearly expose your heart?
- What single, humble step will you take this week toward genuine devotion?
- How can this class pray for you as you come willingly to Christ?