

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 28: Woes to the Scribes and Pharisees -- Matthew 23:1–39

We are used to a gentle Jesus, and rightly so. But in Matthew 23 we meet a Jesus who thunders. After days of being tested and trapped by the religious leaders, He turns to the crowds and to His disciples and lets loose the most blistering words in all the Gospels. Seven times He cries, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” It is not the outburst of a man who has lost his temper. It is the grief and the holy anger of God against a religion that looks magnificent on the outside and is rotting within. If you have ever been wounded by religion that was all show, this chapter will feel like vindication. If you have ever practiced it, this chapter will feel like surgery.

Listen to the charges. These men “preach, but do not practice” (v. 3). They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on others while lifting not a finger themselves (v. 4). They do their deeds “to be seen by others” (v. 5), widening their phylacteries and lengthening their tassels so everyone will notice how spiritual they are. They love the places of honor, the best seats, the greetings in the marketplace, the flattering titles (vv. 6–7). It is religion turned into a performance, faith repurposed as a stage for the self. And Jesus will not pretend it is harmless.

But notice where He aims. He calls them hypocrites who clean the outside of the cup while the inside is full of greed (v. 25), whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the surface and full of death within (v. 27). The danger He names is not that they believe too much but that their hearts and their hands do not match their words. And He warns His own disciples against the very same disease, against loving titles and seats and being called teacher, father, and master in the place that belongs to God alone. The cure He prescribes is startling and simple: “The greatest among you shall be your servant” (v. 11).

And then, just when the thunder seems endless, the storm breaks into tears. Jesus looks out over the city that has killed the prophets and cries, “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). The same lips that pronounced the woes now weep over the people who would not come home. Here is the heart of God toward hypocrites and rebels: not cold contempt, but a longing love that grieves to see them lost. Come and let Jesus expose the religion of show in your own heart, and then come and let Him gather you under His wings.

Group Discussion: Seven times Jesus cries, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” because their outward religion did not match their inward reality (vv. 25–28). Why do you think hypocrisy provokes such strong words from Jesus, and where do you see the temptation toward religion-for-show in our own day, including in ourselves?

Personal Reflection: Jesus says the Pharisees did their deeds “to be seen by others” (v. 5). When you are honest, where do you find yourself doing good things mainly so that others will notice, and what would it look like to do them for an audience of One?

Read Matthew 23:1–39

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?

7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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”?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 Samuel 16:7, the Lord looks not on the outward appearance but on the heart; Micah 6:8, what the Lord requires, to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly; Matthew 6:1–6, doing acts of righteousness in secret before the Father who sees; Philippians 2:3–8, the humility and self-emptying of Christ as our model of greatness; Luke 18:9–14, the Pharisee and the tax collector and the one who went home justified.