

The Gospel of Matthew
Week Twenty-Six
Matthew 23:1-39

Day One

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 2 "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. 4 They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. 5 "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; 7 they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'"

vs. 1-3 – **What does it mean to sit in Moses' seat?** Every synagogue had such a seat reserved for the most distinguished scribe or lawyer present who helped to interpret the Law for the people. While many of these men were evil and opposed Jesus, they were still caretakers and carriers of the Law and the interpreters for the people of how the Law should be applied to daily life. While experts in the Law externally, they had not applied the Law internally to their hearts, so were to obeyed but not emulated.

While what Jesus said may seem harsh, be reminded that some of the great Old Testament saints, including King David, Jesus' mother and John the Baptist, also "only" had the Law but were models of righteousness. The Pharisees had the same Law, but it had not changed their hearts.

v. 4 – These leaders put heavy burdens on the people they led, burdens of obedience to the Law that even the leaders were not willing to help them carry. Jesus had a heart for the people, the sheep of His pasture, and had nothing good to say about the shepherds of Israel who were not doing their job, as we referenced in a previous study:

"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" declares the Lord. Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," declares the Lord. "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 23:1-4).

vs. 5-7 – What these leaders did was all for show; they did not live out what they taught. They made a spectacle of their spirituality, trying to impress the people with their religious prowess. Nothing has changed in 2,000 years, for many leaders today flaunt their authority and many people want them to do it! They want a "strong leader,"

someone who is in charge and who is their “man of God.” This goes back to 1 Samuel 8 when the people declared their desire for and need of a king. God warned them what would happen when this leader came into power and it is similar to what Jesus described here:

But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. 8 As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do" (1 Samuel 8:6-9).

What kind of leader do you want to follow? What kind of leader do you want to be? Do you even want to lead? If not, why not?

Day Two

8 "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. 9 And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

vs. 8&9—I grew up in a denomination where we called the priest “father.” I now frequent churches where the founding or presiding pastor is often referred to as the “father” of the house. **Is Jesus prohibiting such titles?** In my mind, He was and is. I don’t believe anything should cloud or obscure the clear Fatherhood of God in any church. When men are called “father” for whatever reason, it doesn’t remind the listener of the Fatherhood of God or of the Father’s goodness. The focus is squarely and solely on the person being called “father,” and Jesus is warning against the results of such honor being bestowed on a man.

If not careful, that person begins to believe that they deserve or have earned the title and expect their followers to give them respect and honor. Look at the situation that Jesus was addressing. Those leaders did all they could to draw attention to themselves, and the title “rabbi” was part of their identity. The same has happened in the Church to those who have titles.

Christian leadership exists for the people; the people don’t exist for the leaders. That is a hard point to get across, even to the people. They want “strong leaders” and are often willing to surrender their personal sovereignty that only belongs to God to their leaders. **Are you guilty of this? As a leader, are you guilty of taking more unto yourself than permitted?** The best summary of godly leadership is found in Peter’s letter:

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but

eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away (1 Peter 5:2-4).

v. 10 – I was also in a movement where the five main leaders and founders were called the five teachers. That sounds innocent enough, but eventually the movement self-destructed. **What was the issue?** Heavy-handed leadership. It goes with the territory of titles and distinctions. People in church settings ask me regularly what they should call me. I always respond, “John. That’s what my mother calls me.” Some call me Dr. John and that’s fine, but I never insist on it and I do it more as an accommodation to them.

We have one Father, the Lord God, and one Teacher, the Lord Jesus. We must do all we can to reserve and honor those positions for them. I always said when I was on church staff that I was a member who happened to work for the church. I was no one deserving of special attention or honor. I wish other church leaders I know had that same attitude.

v. 11 – Now we return to the topic of servant-leadership, which I have written extensively about in these studies and in my books. We don’t need leaders who serve or servants who lead; we need servant-leaders, people who know how to combine the two into one role, where all their leadership is service and where their service is expressed as leadership. **Confused?** Many are and that’s why they try to emphasize one of the two roles, but have trouble combining the two. **Are you a servant-leader? Do you understand the concept? What can you do to improve?**

v. 12 – This is a simple spiritual principle. Exalt yourself and you will go down; go down and God will exalt you. Peter understood what Jesus said and wrote about it:

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

How can you humble yourself under God’s mighty hand? As leader, what can do to humble yourself on a regular basis, so you don’t begin to believe you are as good as people say you are?

Day Three

13 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. 15 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are. 16 "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' 17 You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred?

v. 13 – After Jesus addressed the poor leadership spirit and attitude of the Pharisees, He issued what is known as the seven woes, each statement beginning with the word “woe” or sadness. The first woe is due to the fact that the Pharisees were standing in the way of people entering the kingdom of God. They were not entering themselves and discouraging others from doing so. This meant that the leaders had their own agenda and were ignoring and even actively opposing God’s agenda.

v. 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 verse is not included in the NIV Bible since it is not in earlier manuscripts, so we will ignore it here.

v. 15 – The Pharisees were zealous for their way of life and would travel to gain converts to their cause. This verse causes me to wonder whether or not the apostle Paul served as such a Jewish evangelist prior to his Damascus road experience. That is pure speculation, however, since the main point here is that the Pharisees were sons of hell in Jesus’ estimation. What’s more, their converts became even worse than those who discipled them, which meant that the entire movement was getting worse and worse, as evidenced by their desire to kill Jesus. So the second woe was issued because they were reproducing themselves in all their ungodliness.

vs. 16&17 – The third woe was spoken because the leaders could no longer discern the important from the useless in spiritual matters. They were splitting hairs and focusing on that which was not important. They had no ability to discern spiritual priorities and were majoring in minor issues and regulations.

So what does God expect from His leaders based on these first three woes?

1. He expects them to help and not hinder people from coming to God. It’s not about the leader, it’s about the Lord. We should repeat this over and over again in some churches.
2. He expects His leaders to locate and develop disciples unto God and not unto themselves. Paul addressed this in the Corinthian church, when believers were saying they were of this or that leader. Spiritual leaders produce people who are loyal followers of Jesus and not themselves, their movements or their doctrine.

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task (1 Corinthians 3:5).

3. He expects His leaders to exercise spiritual discernment and teach the truly important things as determined by God’s revelation in His word.

How do you measure up as a leader on those three points? How do your leaders measure up?

Day Four

18 You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' 19 You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. 22 And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it. 23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

vs. 18-22 – Again Jesus condemned the Pharisees because they took the position of spiritual experts yet they had no sense of priorities where spiritual things were concerned. Jesus referred to them as blind men, yet these blind men were leading the people of Israel. It is again no wonder that God judged and removed them as He promised He would:

Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? "You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. "My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek for them.'" Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: "As I live," declares the Lord God, "surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but rather the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: 'Thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them.'" "For thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out." As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day.

13 "I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by

the streams, and in all the inhabited places of the land."I will feed them in a (W)good pasture, and their grazing ground will be on the mountain heights of Israel There they will lie down on good grazing ground and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. "I will feed My flock and I will lead them to rest," declares the Lord God. "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick; but the fat and the strong I will destroy I will feed them with judgment. "As for you, My flock, thus says the Lord God, 'Behold, I will judge between one sheep and another, between the rams and the male goats. 'Is it too slight a thing for you that you should feed in the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pastures? Or that you should drink of the clear waters, that you must foul the rest with your feet? 'As for My flock, they must eat what you tread down with your feet and drink what you foul with your feet!'" Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them, "Behold, I, even I, will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. "Because you push with side and with shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns until you have scattered them abroad, here fore, I will deliver My flock, and they will no longer be a prey; and I will judge between one sheep and another. "Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd (Ezekiel 34:1-23 NAS).

vs. 23&24 -- Jesus once again called the Pharisees blind and men who “majored in minors” by straining out gnats while swallowing camels. They weighed the herbs in their gardens to render 10% to God, yet they neglected the weightier matters of justice and mercy. **How strange is that?** They did the little things well, but neglected the more important things that were important to God. Jesus did not tell them that they should not tithe, but He did clearly indicate it was not as important as heart matters in regards to the treatment other people. I think Ezekiel said it all and Jesus was just delivering on God’s promise to deal with leaders who don’t lead His people as He would have them led. **What kind of a shepherd are you? Are you on God’s good list or God’s hit list? What about those whom you follow?**

Day Five

25 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. 27 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. 29 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. 30 And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!

v. 25 – Jesus came to deal with your heart not with external matters such as buildings and religious hierarchies. The Pharisees had the externals down pat, and they still do! (There are religious Pharisees in Israel today; they are legalists just like the Pharisees were.) Yet Jesus referred to them as hypocrites because they did not deal with issues like greed and self-indulgence. Those are not two characteristics anyone would have thought of concerning the Pharisees because they masked them so well, which is why Jesus called them hypocrites. Jesus knew and knows the heart.

vs. 26-28 – Jesus taught that it wasn't the external that made a person unclean but rather what came out of the heart. If you deal with internal issues, the externals will correct themselves. And this isn't even necessarily about sinful matters like greed. Let's say you are afraid yet you learn to mask it with an appearance of security, when you are really insecure. You are pretending to be the person you want to be, but until you deal with the fear in your heart, your actions and attitude will never be real or correct. **So what internal issues are keeping you from being the person that God wants you to be? That you want to be?**

vs. 29-31 – Talk is cheap yet the Pharisees thought they were millionaires because their talk sounded so good and authentic. They claimed that if they had been alive in the days of their forefathers, they would not have killed the prophets. They were deceived for they *would* have killed them just as their fathers did. **How do I know this?** Because Jesus said so in Luke (and later in Matthew):

"For this reason also the wisdom of God said, 'I will send to them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and some they will persecute, so that the blood of all the prophets, shed since the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the house of God; yes, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation'" (Luke 11:49-51).

A person can talk a good game, as the saying goes, but God knows the heart and will reveal the truth eventually. I can't help but think of this in terms of what Jesus said earlier: If you fall on the stone – which is admitting the reality of what's in your heart – then you will be broken to pieces, but there is still hope. If you wait until the stone falls on you, you will be crushed and it will be bad. **Are you ready and willing to ask God to show you the reality of your heart, your internal state? Are you willing to admit that perhaps what you say isn't consistent with your internal reality?** If so, then you are in a good place. If not, you may be closer to the Pharisees than you think.

v. 32 – Of course, they would fill up the measure of the grandfather's sins by putting Jesus to death, God's supreme Apostle and Prophet. And this was also part of their deception that was playing out. They said they would not have killed the prophets and they were about to kill Jesus. That is the depth to which some people's deception will go. Don't let that happen to you.

Day Six

33 "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? 34 Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. 35 And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.

v. 33 – Jesus called His listeners a brood of vipers and snakes, condemned to hell. That proves that Jesus believed in a real hell and that people will actually go there. I'm sure that you have heard some say that this life on earth is the real hell. I hate to mess up their theology but this isn't hell. There is a place of eternal punishment for God's enemies and the Pharisees were heading there unless they repented! That is a sobering thought.

v. 34 – Here we see Matthew writing what Luke reported. God's plan to expose these Pharisees was to send them His prophets whom the leaders would flog and kill. **Isn't it interesting that God could choose to send some of His servants into situations where He knew they would be mistreated?** He did this and gave those He sent no say in the matter. God did not apologize for sending them into a bad situation in which they would be mistreated. I find that fascinating. God can send His servant anywhere He chooses to have them treated however He wishes and never have to apologize. Some may even lose their lives and have to wait for vindication.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Revelation 6:9-10).

When you say to God that you will do His will, are you serious? Can He send you to a bad situation? Can you be mistreated and see that is God's will for you? Can you rejoice in that?

v. 35 – God can use you to reveal the hearts of other people, even if it reveals their wickedness. **So can you pray the prayer that Isaiah prayed?**

With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" He said, "Go and tell this people: " 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving" (Isaiah 6:7-9).

v. 36 – There it is again. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth!" The Pharisees and the people could never have imagined that what Jesus was saying would come true. They thought they were on good terms with God, but Jesus was telling them otherwise. And their

condition was going to lead to the downfall of life as they knew it in Jerusalem and Israel. This was unimaginable, I'm sure, so Jesus had to affirm that He was indeed telling the truth.

Day Seven

37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. 38 Look, your house is left to you desolate. 39 For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

v. 37 – Jesus spoke with tenderness and compassion about Jerusalem, but recognized that the Jews were not open to His loving overtures. What was about to transpire was a promise made a millennium prior when the Lord spelled out what would happen to Israel if they broke the covenant with God.

The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you will not understand, a fierce-looking nation without respect for the old or pity for the young. They will devour the young of your livestock and the crops of your land until you are destroyed. They will leave you no grain, new wine or oil, nor any calves of your herds or lambs of your flocks until you are ruined. They will lay siege to all the cities throughout your land until the high fortified walls in which you trust fall down. They will besiege all the cities throughout the land the Lord your God is giving you (Deuteronomy 28:49-52).

v. 38 – This is a scary statement, for Jesus was saying that the lights were out and it was past the point of no return. God had left the house of Israel, something that Jews throughout their history had refused to recognize when it happened. They were so confident in their Judaism that the thought of God departing was an unthinkable thought. Many Christians have the same mentality, believing that God will be with them no matter what they do.

v. 39 – The events of the next few days were about to unfold and Jesus would be put to death. Then no Jew would be able to see the Lord unless he or she repented and *wanted* to see Him. Jesus would no longer traverse and minister among them as He had for the previous three plus years. Unless a Jew acknowledged Jesus and said that He was the Holy One of Israel, they would not receive the ministry from that point that Jesus has to offer.

What is your attitude toward Jesus? Is He a good luck charm of sorts, always with you to make your life bearable, so that no bad thing will happen to you? Or is He your Lord and King, ruling in every area of your life as best you understand that today? If He isn't the latter, I urge you to make Him such, for God is a serious matter and a relationship with Him is not to be entered into lightly.