



This Week in the Word

Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Ps 119:89.



Jesus Criticizes Unjust Leaders

Study Scripture: Matthew 23:1-4, 23-26

Lesson 6, July 7th, 2018.

Key Verse

The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.

Matthew 23:2-3

INTRODUCTION

Our Lesson Study shows our Savior dealing with the sad condition in which all men find themselves. This sad condition where hypocrisy and pretensions dominate human behavior shows itself at its worst in 'religious' leaders who know better because of their education, their training, and the critically important position to which they have been elevated.

Jesus had the harshest of words and seven terrible "woes" for the vast majority of the religious leaders of His day and we can imagine that His powerful condemnation of them must have been mixed with pity, anger, and some sadness, for these were His people, the promised descendants of Abraham to whom as the Apostle Paul described he stated

"What advantage then hath the Jew? Or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because unto them were committed the oracles of God.

For what if some of them did not believe? Shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? God forbid".

As we go through the Text let us not feel too proud of ourselves, for we today exhibit all the falsehoods of those religious leaders, and it pains to hear of the multitude of sins committed by our Christian leader and their leading astray those who come to them for leadership. One scholar pours some cold water on our pretensions as follows:

"No one can be more distasteful to a man of God than a hypocrite, and it is evident in our Lord's words.

Now we know in the Christian church today we have things backward. We talk about the fleshly sins as being the evil sins, but the sins of envy, why that's practiced in the Christian church and no one does anything about it or thinks anything about it.

Or gossiping. Gossiping has been canonized. You're not really a good saint unless you gossip a little bit, and you get on the telephone. I have a friend who calls it Alexander Graham Bell-itis, and you can get on the telephone and you rip the saints up and down and then you have the nerve afterwards to say to one of your friends you were just having a little fellowship with another Christian, calling gossiping Christian fellowship. And the sins of the mind, the mental sins, we have raised to the power of virtue, and the sins which are fleshly, the sins that most of us would not commit, why those are the Christian sin or are sins.

Now when we turn to the bible, we find the strange fact that while the fleshly sins are still sins, the mental sins are just as much sin as the fleshly sins, and envy and gossiping and pride and arrogance—those are the things that the apostles and our Lord mention in the same breath that they mention adultery and fornication”.

In fact, when we look at the behavior of those religious leaders and look at ourselves we wonder whether we do believe in God and therefore whether we should be described as true atheists. For if a man says he believes in the all-powerful God, the God who administers justice and wrath as well as love and mercy, and he keeps on behaving as if that God does not exist or does not care what he does, we can rightfully say with Jesus that person does not belong in the kingdom of God. Neither should we conclude from this Lesson Study that all the Pharisees and scribes were wicked men. We are told of Simon the Pharisee who was friendly, courteous and brave enough to invite Jesus into his home to learn from Him. Then we read of the lawyer or scribe that questioned Jesus and Jesus complimented him by saying he was not far from the kingdom of God. Then we also know that there was Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who came to faith. In the Book of Acts we are told many Pharisees and scribes came to faith and even some from the extremely wicked king Herod's household came and joined the brethren. Nevertheless the sad fact is that only a minority of leaders accepted Christ as their Savior and lived as their new state required. False teachers and pretenders to spiritual knowledge and insights and who are often energized by Satan and or human pride and lust, have been the bane of God's people from the time of Adam and Eve.

Invariably false teachers betray their true colors in their hypocritical behaviors and can safely be labelled hypocrites, a word that will feature prominently in our Study. The term comes to us from Greek theatre where it was used of actors who wore masks in their plays and thus spoke 'from under' the mask. What one saw in the theatre was not the real person and was not what they stood for.

This dictionary definition is also how the word was understood in first century Palestine: **“a person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs, principles, etc., that he or she does not actually possess, especially a person whose actions belie stated beliefs”.**

The Scriptures unequivocally condemn hypocrites and particularly in the practice of exacting, external religion without a true love and relationship for and with God; an outward profession

without an inward reality; actions that do not match words and to quote Jesus; “...*they say and do not do...*”.

(See Ezek. 13:3; Matt. 13:1-5; Acts 20:29-30; 2 Pet. 2:1-3; Jer. 4:14; Ezek. 13:9; Jude 3-4).

The hypocrites of Jesus’ day and those that drew His sharpest censure were the Scribes and Pharisees. While these groups have long departed the scene, their successors can easily be found today in pulpits and pews throughout Christendom. The severity of Jesus’ rebuke should give all Christians pause and introspection to ensure we are not hypocrites in our relationships with God. Jesus will cite some specifics of hypocritical behavior which provide clear markers for Christians to avoid such or similar behavior.

The pretense among the religious leaders had reached the extent where they had usurped the place of Moses and were revered in the eyes of the people; they even sought to usurp the place of the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Interestingly, the Lord affirmed that these hypocrites do indeed receive a reward but the issue is that the reward comes from men and not from God. What many people, both inside and outside the church neglect to remember, is that God does not focus on the externals of religion but always searches the hearts and mind of people. The externals flow from what is inside! God searches every human being, from the inside out.

Today’s lesson covers an incident that happened during what turned out to be the final week of Jesus’ earthly life and ministry. The week began with Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-11) and climaxed with His crucifixion and resurrection.

Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem caused quite a stir and His immediate ‘cleansing’ of the Temple further raised the ire of the religious authorities and stoked their simmering hostility towards Him. Jesus spent the last few days before His arrest teaching and healing in the Temple. Matthew 21:23-24:51 (part of which is today’s text) covers the period and includes Jesus’ authority being questioned by the chief priests and elders of the Jews, a series of parables, and various questions directed toward Jesus.

The various leadership groups attacked Jesus in waves on this day trying to publicly embarrass or discredit Him in the eyes of the people or to get Him to say something to move the Roman overlords to arrest Him. Jesus summarily rebuffed them and after a vehement denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees Matthew 22 concludes with a question *from* Jesus to the Pharisees, a question to which they gave no answer. Having silenced His opponents, Jesus then had some preliminary things to say to His audience before launching a series of condemnations at the scribes and Pharisees. These men were already seeking to arrest Him (21:46); no doubt His words of condemnation in Matthew 23 intensified these efforts.

This will be Jesus’ last, voluntary public discourse and the three groups with which He interacted throughout His ministry are all present, His disciples, religious leaders and the crowds. It is instructive that Jesus used this last opportunity to warn His disciples and the crowds about the

teaching and behavior of the Scribes and Pharisees and denounced that group for their hypocrisy. Clearly hypocrisy is a serious sin and Christians are hereby warned!

THE TEXT

Verse 1. *Then ...* tells us what follows is a continuation of the scene from the end of chapter twenty-two (22:44-45); where Jesus' question about David's son put His inquisitors to silence.

... the multitude, and to his disciples... Jesus attracted *multitudes* of people throughout His ministry (Matthew 4:25; 8:1, 18; 9:8, 36; 12:15; 13:2; 15:30; 19:1, 2). Since this was the week during which Passover will be celebrated, the crowds gathered in Jerusalem were much larger than usual. Some estimate that Jerusalem's population, which generally numbers a few hundred thousand, swelled to around two and a half million during Passover week. Jesus also addressed more specifically his disciples.

Jesus criticized the Pharisees and scribes to their face about one year earlier (15:7). Later He warned His disciples to beware of the teachings of the Pharisees and the Sadducees (16:5-12). Now He denounced these enemies publicly. He did so because the decision the masses and His disciples now faced was whether to follow Jesus or Israel's established religious leaders. They could not do both.

Although Jesus' words did not describe every member of the Pharisees, they do characterize the prevalent attitude of the group.

Verse 2.... *Pharisees...* the term comes from a Hebrew word meaning "to separate." The Pharisees could be described as "separatists" or "separated ones." They came to be during the period between Old and New Testaments; many believe their origin may be traced to the time of the Maccabean revolt in the second century before Christ. They fought successfully to keep the Jews as distinct people and prevented assimilation by Greek and other Gentile cultures.

They interpreted the Law of Moses rigidly in an attempt to protect it from being violated; their added traditions and regulations became of equal importance with the Word of God, sometimes even serving to negate the intent of Scripture. These added traditions and observances which they insisted had to be followed were extremely burdensome and restrictive on daily life.

They looked down upon the common people who did not have the slightest chance of fulfilling the complex requirements of the Law as they interpreted it. However, the common people admired the Pharisees as representing the ideal followers of Judaism.

We may note that not all Pharisees were bad. Many of them actually tried to promote true spirituality and piety. Some of the well-known men of the New Testament were Pharisees such as, Nicodemus (John 3), Gamaliel (Acts 5:34), and Paul himself (Philippians 3:5). Some of them became members in the early church (Acts 6:7). Paul used the title of Pharisee with great respect and as a title of honor (Philippians 3:5).

Jesus condemned their hypocrisy, as evidenced by their pride in their outward observance of the law but inward spiritual void, and their arrogant belief that they were more religious than the rest. They in turn accused Jesus of blasphemy ([Luke 5:21](#)), in league with the devil ([Matthew 9:34](#)), and of breaking the law ([Matthew 12:2](#)) which prompted them to seek His death ([Matthew 12:14](#)).

... *scribes and the Pharisees* were considered the scholars in Jesus' day. In the Old Testament, the scribes were at first primarily officials who kept records of various kinds in a king's administration ([2 Samuel 8:15-17](#); [1 Kings 4:1-3](#); [2 Kings 12:9, 10](#)). The office appears to take a more religious turn with Ezra, who is described as "*a ready scribe in the law of Moses*" ([Ezra 7:6](#)) and who was also adept at teaching the law ([7:10](#)).

Scribes were experts in the Written Law (OT) and the Oral Law (Talmud) of Israel and were available to make local practical applications. In effect they replaced the traditional Old Testament functions of the local Levites.

Moses' seat ... they viewed themselves as Moses' legal successors, possessing his authority. **"Jewish synagogues typically had a stone seat at the front where the authoritative teacher sat. Likewise most rabbis sat when they taught. to "sit" in Moses' seat was to have the highest authority to instruct people in the law...There was a legitimate sense in which the priests and Levites had authority to decide matters of the law (Deut. 17:9), but the scribes and Pharisees had gone beyond any legitimate authority and were adding human tradition to the word of God"**.

The Pharisees may be considered a religious "party," while the scribes hold an office. However, the majority of scribes were Pharisees. Both saw Jesus as a threat to their teachings and their authority.

Verse 3. *All therefore whatsoever...* Jesus encouraged His hearers to respect the scribes and the Pharisees' positions and their interpretation of the Law of Moses. Jesus did not come to overthrow these authorities, any more than He had come to start an uprising against Rome.

Jesus' statement here seem to contradicts what He said earlier about how the other Jews should respond to the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees (15:7; 16:5-12). Assuming the consistency of Jesus' teaching we should understand His words here as ironic. Another view sees Jesus affirming the authority of the Pharisees in principle, since they did teach the Torah, but not endorsing all their teachings (halakhah, legal interpretations of Scripture).

Jesus was saying that if they could show you truth in the Law, then you should act on it. The Word of God is true no matter who proclaims it!

...*But do not ye after their works...* even so, Jesus goes on to expose the inconsistency between what the scribes and Pharisees *say* and the example that they actually set (their works). They did not practice what they preached, (vs. 23, [25](#)). The reality is that their lifestyles and attitudes

revealed their true character. In a sense they were the false teachers described in Matt. 7:15-23. They did not act on God's truth (Matt. 7:24-27), but on human tradition (Isa. 6:9-10; 29:13).

The fact is that at its core, the law hinged on two basic principles, which involved the love of God, and the love of people. The Pharisees loved the praises of men, more than anything else. They also loved the privileges they enjoyed in the culture and society.

It is worth noting that Jesus encouraged His listeners not to allow the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees to diminish their respect for the authority of the law. The law is still from Moses (and ultimately from God) in spite of how the scribes and Pharisees failed to live it out.

Verse 4. ... *bind heavy burdens...* (picture of overloading a beast of burden) are the many traditions that the scribes and Pharisees instituted to guarantee faithfulness (as they saw it) to the Law of Moses. But as Jesus noted during a confrontation with them, in certain cases they “*transgress the commandment of God by their tradition*” (Matt. 15:3).

... *they themselves will not move them...* At the same time, the scribes and Pharisees offered no compassion to those who struggled to keep the traditions, only contempt for those who could not measure up to their standards. Even worse, these leaders created clever (but in reality reprehensible) means by which they themselves avoided keeping those same standards. In Matthew 15:1-9 Jesus gave an example of how this worked. As a consequence, they had “*made the commandment of God of none effect*” (15:6). Although these leaders “*sit in Moses’ seat*” (23:2), they certainly did not demonstrate Moses’ spirit of humility, which was a distinctive part of his character (Numbers 12:3).

When one considers the onerous burdens created by these leaders, we can appreciate even more Jesus’ invitation, recorded in Matthew 11:28-30, that ends with His words, “*For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*” The one through whom grace and truth come (John 1:14) offers a freedom that is impossible to experience within the rigid, twisted system of the Jewish leaders.

Verses 5 – 12. Jesus began this section noting some traits of pharisaic behavior and against which Christians are warned. Their religion was external and ostentatious and meant to give the impression of piety and garner the admiration of men which it did. Jesus however was not taken in by their hypocrisy and warned His listeners.

He closed the section with the radical thought and diametrically opposed to pharisaic teaching: “*But the greatest among you shall be your servant*”, (vs.11).

Verses 13 – 22. This section begins a series of woes pronounced by Jesus on the scribes and Pharisees. A characteristic of these woes was Jesus’ description of the religious leaders as hypocrites. In only one of the woes did Jesus not use that word, describing them instead as “*blind*” three times (23:16-22).

One writer comments:

“Jesus now directed His attention toward the scribes and the Pharisees in the temple courtyard (cf. v. 1). He proceeded to announce a scathing indictment of them in seven parts. Compare the six woes of Isaiah 5:8-23 and the five woes of Habakkuk 2:6-20. He introduced each indictment with the word "woe." Jesus spoke *of* the scribes and Pharisees, but He spoke *to* the crowds and His disciples.

"No passage in the Bible is more biting, more pointed, and more severe than this pronouncement of Christ upon the Pharisees. It is significant that He singled them out, as opposed to the Sadducees, who were more liberal, and the Herodians, who were the politicians. The Pharisees, while attempting to honor the Word of God and manifesting an extreme form of religious observance, were actually the farthest from God."

Essentially Jesus was criticizing them for their hypocrisy. As the theme of the Sermon on the Mount was righteousness, the theme of these woes is hypocrisy. There is a common strong emphasis in both addresses on the leaders' failure to understand and submit to the Scriptures. Jesus gave both addresses to contrast the true meaning of Scripture with the Pharisees' interpretation and application of it. The Pharisees professed to teach the Scriptures accurately but did not do so. They were therefore hypocrites."

Verse 23. ... *hypocrites*... describes a stage actor, therefore someone who is pretending to be something he or she is not. The term is quite fitting for the *scribes and Pharisees*, whom Jesus will later describe as "*whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness*" (Matthew 23:27).

...Mint and anise and cumin... are garden herbs used either for cooking or medicinal purposes. Tithing items such as these is not commanded in the Law of Moses, but for the religious leaders such an act gave the impression of how scrupulously they followed the law. One thinks of the Pharisee in a parable who proudly claimed, "*I give tithes of all that I possess*" (Luke 18:12).

Note that the Mosaic Law required the Israelites to tithe grain, wine and oil (Deut. 14:22-29). Tithing was based on what a person earned. How far they had to take this was a matter of debate. Jesus did not discourage scrupulous observance of this law. He directed His condemnation to the leaders' failure to observe more important "weightier" commands in the Law while dicker over which specific plants, spices, and seeds to tithe. He alluded to Micah 6:8 for the three primary duties that God requires.

... weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith... It is noteworthy that Jesus does not criticize the tithing per se of the religious leaders. In fact, He says *these ought ye to have done*. The problem is that paying such close attention to the details of tithing garden herbs caused these leaders to miss the *weightier* (more important) requirements of the Law of Moses.

Specifically, those are *judgment, mercy, and faith*. These more crucial *matters of the law* must be given first priority, then tithing as the leaders desire to do can be done as private matters of devotion to God.

Judgment here most likely refers to carrying out justice on behalf of others, not to judging right from wrong or to a formal act of judgment on another's actions. This closely relates to *mercy*, or compassion, toward those in need.

Faith as used here most likely describes active faith supported by works, the opposite of which is dead (James 2:26).

Verse 24. Jesus further illustrated the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees.

...strain at a gnat means "strain out a gnat." The conscientious religious leader carefully filtered his drinking water through a cloth to make sure he did not swallow a gnat.

The gnat is not specifically mentioned in the list of clean and unclean creatures found in Leviticus 11. The *camel*, however, is found in Leviticus 11:4, where it is the first "unclean" creature cited. Jesus' reference to swallowing a camel is His way of pointing out how the scribes and Pharisees major in minors as they give painstaking attention to relatively less important details while they ignore the law's "weightier matters."

Verse 25. *... Woe unto you...* yet another woe!. This condemnation is similar to Jesus' earlier description of the religious leaders' zeal to impress others with external displays of piety (Matthew 23:5-7) while being *full of extortion and excess* internally. They were very concerned with ceremonial cleanliness, but their attitudes and motives were far from God, (Isa. 29:13).

The word *extortion* highlights the attitude of selfishness that characterized these religious leaders' approach to spiritual matters.

Excess describes a certain lack of self-control (Luke 11:39). Jesus, who "*knew what was in man*" (John 2:25), sees the inside, and He is disgusted.

Verse 26. *... cleanse first that which is within ...* the Pharisees taught the importance of being ritually clean by observing the dietary and cleansing ordinances of the Law. Nevertheless they neglected internal purity. They erred in their emphases. They put too much importance on minor matters, especially ritual and external matters, and not enough on major matters, especially those involving spiritual reality.

...Thou blind Pharisee... We do not know why Jesus at this point calls out only the Pharisees. Perhaps it is because they are the ones who are especially fastidious in their passion for the outward show of purity and piety (Mark 7:3, 4). What Jesus says here, however, describes not only the Pharisees but the human condition in general. Jesus pointed this out to His disciples following the confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 15:18: "But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man." Real change must happen from the inside out.

CONCLUSION

A very great inconsistency between what is professed and what the Word of God calls for is a very common sin indeed. It has existed in all ages. What one writer calls hypocritical externalism, hypocritical ceremonialism, and hypocritical veneration will lead to complete and final spiritual death.

Always keep in mind that the true saint *lives by dealing justly with men, showing mercy in their dealings, and always demonstrating love for one another and faithfulness to God.

Every believer must resist that carnal tendency to want to be seen by others in a favorable light. We must remember that pride is a relentless animal, that is always in pursuit of the people of God. We must resist this temptation, by giving God all of our praise and devotion. The Pharisees did not address this imperative, but instead developed a lust for the praise and adoration of people. Church leaders must take these examples to heart, as they are uniquely positioned in such a way that they are most vulnerable to its lure.

There is a practical cure for externalism given in verse 26. Everyone afflicted with the disease of these blind scribes and Pharisees can take this cure. God will help anyone who has even a little faith and asks God for His help. Jesus said:

“Thou blind Pharisees, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also”.

No matter how hopeless your situation may seem to be, and no matter how great and gigantic the inconsistency exists between your profession and your actual way of living, there is always help waiting for you. It came to the thief on the Cross and it can come to you.

There are two guiding principles that may keep the believer away from this temptation, and it is to love God with the entire heart, mind and soul, and to love our fellow man as we love ourselves. Jesus said that the entire law hinges on these two greatest commandments.

The spiritual condition of the religious leaders, as exposed by Jesus in our Text was sadly nothing out of the ordinary. God’s people in both Old and New Testaments were always subject to the temptation to focus more on external acts of worship or devotion to God, while neglecting the condition of the heart. This can be an especially serious pitfall for leaders of God’s people. They can become so enamored with their authority and the title they hold that they forget to give proper attention to their own spiritual condition as a model for others to emulate.

Wise King Solomon advised, *“Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life”* (Proverbs 4:23). Yet Solomon failed to follow his own advice and allowed his heart to turn from the Lord through the influence of his pagan wives (1 Kings 11:1-4). We too must be cautious of how we care for our hearts. We cannot just point our fingers at the Pharisees and highlight their faults, lest we too fall prey to the pride that acted like a cancer on their hearts.