

MATTHEW 23

The Seven Woes Against the Pharisees

Spiritual Pride

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,

2 The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, 3 so do and observe whatever they tell you but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, 6 and they love the place of honor at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, 7 greetings in the marketplaces, and being called rabbi by others. 8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. 10 Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

The Seven Woes

13 But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.

15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

16 Woe to you, blind guides, who say, If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing. But if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath. 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? 18 And you say, If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath. 19 You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. 22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

23 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. 24 You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

25 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

27 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. 28 So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

29 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous 30 saying, If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets. 31 Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.¹

33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? 34 Therefore I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, 35 so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Jesus' Judgment on Jerusalem

37 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, but you were not willing! 38 See, 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 [Yahweh].

¹ **Ezekiel 2:3-7** 3 [Yahweh] said to me [Ezekiel], Son of man, I am sending you to the sons of Israel, to a rebellious people who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. 4 I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children, and you shall say to them, Thus says Yahweh God. 5 As for them, whether they listen or not—for they are a rebellious house—they will know that a prophet has been among them. 6 And you, son of man, neither fear them nor fear their words, though thistles and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions. Neither fear their words nor be dismayed at their presence, for they are a rebellious house. 7 But you shall speak my words to them whether they listen or not, for they are rebellious.

Biblical Worldview

1. Mt 23 is Jesus' final verdict upon the scribes and Pharisees, two days before his death.
 - a. It follows Mt 22, where Jesus publicly outwits the Jewish leaders in debate.
 - b. It precedes Mt 24-25, where Jesus readies his disciples for the near and far future.
 - c. Mt 23 takes place on Wednesday, two days before Jesus dies on the cross.
 - d. Mt 23:1-12 is a prologue to the seven woes. Mt 23:33-38 is an epilogue.

2. Jesus wants the crowds to understand why and how the scribes and Pharisees have failed.
 - a. **Matthew 23:1** 1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples....
 - b. The woes are about the Jewish leaders, but Jesus is talking to everyday Jews.
 - c. It is a teaching moment. The crowds and disciples must think and act differently from the Jewish leaders.

3. The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, a position of legitimate teaching authority.
 - a. **Matthew 23:2** 2 The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, 3 so do and observe whatever they tell you....
 - b. Israel needed authoritative teaching, just as the Church does today.
 - c. Like the scribes and Pharisees, elders and pastors today sit in a position of legitimate teaching authority.

4. The scribes and Pharisees preached humility but didn't practice it.
 - a. **Matthew 23:3** 3 ...But not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.
 - b. Although the Pharisees sat on Moses' seat, they lacked the inward humility of Moses.
 - (1) **Numbers 12:3** 3 The man Moses was very humble, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.
 - (2) "Moses' seat" is a seat of inward humility, not one of inward pride.
 - c. Those who exercise spiritual authority and leadership must be truly humble.
 - (1) Humility is easy to preach but hard to practice.

5. Motivated by spiritual pride, the scribes and Pharisees:
 - a. Burdened people with silly rules.
 - (1) **Matthew 23:4** 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.
 - (2) Legalism is not the Christian life. It is not the way to conquer the flesh.
 - (a) **Colossians 2:20-23** 20 If with Messiah you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— 21 Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch 22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion, asceticism, and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.
 - (3) God intends to free us, not to enslave us under burdensome rules.
 - (a) **Matthew 11:28-30** 28 Come to me [Jesus], all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I

- am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.
- (b) **Galatians 5:1** 1 For freedom Messiah has set us free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.
- b. Sought public recognition for their spiritual superiority.
- (1) **Matthew 23:5** 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others.
- (2) Through clothing and external appearance.
- (a) **Matthew 23:5** 5 They make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.
- (b) Phylacteries were small leather pouches containing strips of parchment with Old Testament verses, tied to one's left arm and forehead.²
- 1) **Deuteronomy 11:18** 18 You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.
- (c) Fringes refers to the tassels of one's prayer shawl.³
- 1) **Numbers 15:38** 38 Tell [the people of Israel] to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner.
- (3) Through who their friends were and who they hung out with.
- (a) **Matthew 23:6-7** 6 They love the place of honor at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, 7 greetings in the marketplaces....
- (4) Through good grades and academic degrees.
- (a) **Matthew 23:7** 7 ...Being called rabbi by others.
- (b) We must use our public position and academic degrees only to advance the gospel.
6. Pride destroyed the scribes and Pharisees. It blinded them from recognizing Jesus.
- a. Pride destroys people today.
- (1) It prevents unbelievers from trusting in Jesus and going to heaven.
- (2) It prevents believers from abiding in Jesus and producing abundant fruit.
- b. As believers, we constantly wrestle with pride.
- (1) "I want to be famous. I want to have a name. I ought to be great. And I need that sense of accomplishment, the feeling of pride that comes from making a name for myself. I'll do it my way."⁴
- c. Pride is especially dangerous for church leaders.
- (1) "When a person rises in position, as happens to leaders in the church, the tendency to pride also increases. If not checked, the attitude will disqualify the person from further advancement in the kingdom of God, for 'the Lord detests all the proud of heart' (Proverbs 16:5). These are strong and searching words! Nothing aggravates God more than conceit, the sin that aims at setting the self upon a throne, making of God a secondary figure. That very sin changed the anointed cherub into the foul

² Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "[Matthew](#)," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 2:73.

³ Louis A. Barbieri, Jr., "[Matthew](#)," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 2:73.

⁴ Charles Swindoll, *Grace Awakening*, 18.

fiend of hell. Pride takes many forms, but spiritual pride is the most grievous. To become proud of spiritual gifts or leadership position is to forget that all we have is from God, and that any position we occupy is by God's appointment. The victim of pride is often least aware of the sin. Three tests help us identify the problem: The test of precedence. How do we react when another is selected for the position we wanted to fill? When another is promoted in our place? When another's gifts seem greater than our own? The test of sincerity. In our moments of honest self-reflection, we often admit to problems and weaknesses. How do we feel when others identify the same problems in us? The test of criticism. Does criticism lead to immediate resentment and self-justification? Do we rush to criticize the critic?"⁵

7. Humility is the antidote to pride and must characterize the Church and church leaders.
 - a. Within the Church, we should not use official titles of honor.
 - (1) "Rabbi."
 - (a) **Matthew 23:8** 8 But you are not to be called rabbi....
 - (2) "Father."
 - (a) **Matthew 23:9** 9 And call no man your father on earth....
 - (3) "Instructor."
 - (a) **Matthew 23:10** 10 Neither be called instructors....
 - (4) The use of honorific titles is common in high church settings and less common in low church settings.
 - (a) Calling one "Pastor Bob" or "Reverend Taylor" could be a danger.
 - b. We need a Rabbi, a Father, and an Instructor, but we already have them.
 - (1) Jesus is our Rabbi and Instructor.
 - (a) **Matthew 23:8** 8 You have one Teacher, and you are all brothers.
 - (b) **Matthew 23:10** 10 You have one Instructor, the Messiah.
 - (2) God the Father is our Father.
 - (a) **Matthew 23:9** 9 You have one Father, who is in heaven.
 - c. Don't become legalistic about avoiding the terms "teacher," "father," or "instructor."
 - (1) It's okay for someone to be your teacher, father, or instructor in the faith. What's not okay is for someone besides God to be your ultimate Teacher, Father, or Instructor.
 - (2) This was the danger in Corinth.
 - (a) **1 Corinthians 3:4-6** 4 When one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not being merely human? 5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.
 - (3) The Pharisees had become divided between followers of Rabbi Hillel and followers of Rabbi Shammai.
 - (a) The Church must not divide in a similar fashion.
 - (b) Unfortunately, in many cases, it has (i.e., Lutherans, Calvinists, Arminians, Wesleyans, Thiemeites, MacArthurites).

⁵ Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*.

8. The outcome of true humility is obedient service that glorifies God and not self.
 - a. **Matthew 23:11** 11 The greatest among you shall be your servant.
 - b. **Philippians 2:8** 8 Being found in human form, [Jesus] humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

9. The reward of such service is recognition and exaltation from God himself.
 - a. **Matthew 23:12** 12 Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.
 - b. **Philippians 2:9** 9 Therefore God has highly exalted [Jesus] and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.

10. We must pay very close attention to the perspective of Paul, the Pharisee of Pharisees.
 - a. **Philippians 3:4-9** 4 If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Messiah. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Messiah Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Messiah 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Messiah, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

11. A final challenge.
 - a. For younger Christians.
 - (1) We can't respect the authority of God while at the same time disrespecting the authority of our parents.
 - (2) If we are not humble toward our parents, we cannot be humble toward God.
 - b. For older Christians.
 - (1) "A leader's humility should grow with the passing of years.... Notice Paul's advance in the grace of humility. Early in his ministry, he acknowledged: 'I am the least of the apostles and do not deserve to be called an apostle' (1 Co 15:9). Later he volunteered: 'I am less than the least of all God's people' (Eph 3:8). Toward the end of his life, he spoke of the mercies of Christ and his own sense of place: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst' (1 Ti 1:15)."⁶

12. If you are an unbeliever, your job is to humble your pride so as to believe in God's Son.

⁶ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*.

Notes