

Seven Woes

Scripture Text: Matthew 23:1-39

Lesson Synopsis: Students will be invited to explore Jesus' critique of the Pharisees and teachers of the law in Matthew 23. In doing so, they will be challenged to consider what they can glean for their own lives of faith from Jesus' words to these devoutly religious groups of his day.

Digging In

Background Information

Matthew 23:1-39 begins the fifth and final teaching discourse in Matthew's gospel. The other teaching sections have included the Sermon on the Mount (chs 5-7), Missionary Discourse (ch 10), Parables (ch 13), and Community Discourse (ch 18). The current teaching section will now stretch from chs 23-25 and has been labeled the Judgment Discourse due to strong themes of judgment throughout.ⁱ While chs 24-25 focus on signs and parables of end times judgment, ch 23 holds Jesus' pronouncement of judgment on two contemporary groups in leadership of the Jewish people: the Pharisees and teachers of the law or scribes.

Before moving on to examine Jesus' words, it will be helpful first to acquaint ourselves with the two groups whom he addresses. As R. T. France explains:

...scribes [teachers of the law] were professional students and teachers of halakhah, the elucidation and practical application of the law ... while 'Pharisee' was the title of a reformist movement or school within Judaism to which individuals voluntarily adhered, and which was devoted to the meticulous practice of the law, with special emphasis on such matters a ritual purity, tithing, and sabbath observance. The two terms thus represent distinct categories, but in practice the aims and lifestyle of the two would coincide closely, with many professional scribes also being members of the Pharisaic movement.ⁱⁱ

The teachers of the law, then, might be compared to modern day ministers who have been to seminary – they were a professional class of students and teachers – while the Pharisees might be described as a lay movement dedicated to holiness through careful observance of the law. Of course, professional teachers could also be dedicated to holiness, causing overlap between the two groups. Thus, Jesus in Matthew 23 is

speaking of both professional and lay people who have dedicated themselves to holiness and seek to teach and persuade others to do the same.

While the above description of the Pharisees and teachers of the law would seem praiseworthy (Who, after all, would critique a commitment to holiness?!), it should be noted that Jesus has already engaged in critiques of these groups, most notably in the Sermon on the Mount. There, in 5:20, Jesus states, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” In these words, Jesus notes the rigorous righteousness of these groups even as he states that it falls short of the demands of the kingdom. This, no doubt, was a challenging teaching. After, all the Pharisees and teachers of the law might have been described as *more righteous than everyone else* because of their care in following the law. Jesus’ point, however, is not to say that one must be better at following the rules than these groups. Instead, Jesus points beyond strict obedience to the rules to an internalization of the rules and a commitment to their intent. Thus, it is not enough to refrain from murder; one must also avoid anger (5:21-26). Likewise, lust is equated with adultery of the heart (5:27-30), and vengeance is substituted with service and love for one’s enemy (5:38-48). For Jesus, “Those who can do no more than simply keep the rules ... haven’t even started as far as the kingdom of heaven is concerned.”ⁱⁱⁱ In Matt 23, Jesus will reprise this theme, offering specific instances of where strict obedience to the law has failed both to prevent hypocrisy and to bring about internal transformation.

As with any group, it is dangerous to make blanket statements about all members. Surely there will be both good and bad apples, and the same was true of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. In modern times, Pharisees especially have received a poor reputation by readers of scripture. It is important to note, however, that while Matthew does present Jesus as critiquing the Pharisees, they are in other parts of the gospels and Acts presented in a more favorable light. Nicodemus, for instance, seeks Jesus out and later participates in Jesus’ burial (John 3; 19). In Acts 5, Gamaliel serves as a voice of reason on the Jewish ruling council whose words save the apostles from execution. That both of these men were Pharisees shows that general assumptions can be misleading. This insight should not, however, detract from Jesus’ critique in Matt 23, which holds real challenge to the thought and practice of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. To this challenge we now turn.

Jesus Critiques the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law

As Matthew 23 opens, Jesus has just silenced his detractors in the Jewish leadership. First, in 22:23-33, he outwitted a group called the Sadducees. Then, in 22:41-46, the Pharisees met the same fate. 22:46 ends with the statement, “No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more

questions.” His opponents silenced, Jesus now turn to the crowds (23:1) to critique the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

As he begins, Jesus acknowledges the authority enjoyed by the Pharisees and teachers – they “sit in Moses’ seat.” As Craig Blomberg explains, “‘Moses’ seat’ ... stood for the teaching authority of Moses’ successors as interpreters of the Torah ... The expression is roughly parallel to our reference to the pulpit as the symbol for preaching or scripture exposition.”^{iv} The Pharisees and teachers, then, are the teachers of the people. Moses’ seat, however, does not guarantee divine approval for those who sit in it, as Jesus’ words quickly show.

Because the Pharisees and teachers sit in Moses’ seat, their words should be taken seriously (23:2). Their example, however, does not match their words. As the NIV puts it, “they do not practice what they preach” (23:3). This failure is then explained in two ways. First, “They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them” (23:4). The “loads” Jesus refers to are the strict requirements of tradition that the Pharisees and teachers placed on the people, these going even beyond the law. While these traditions were originally meant to help people fulfill the law, they had become burdensome. Having called these traditions heavy and cumbersome, Jesus goes on to critique the pastoral spirit of the Pharisees and teachers. Instead of helping people to carry these heavy loads as good shepherds, the Pharisees and teachers have instead looked down on and ostracized those who did not live up to their high standard. (See, for instance, Matt 9:9-13, where the Pharisees wonder why Jesus would eat with tax collectors and sinners.) David Garland puts it well in saying, “They have multiplied ‘the number of ways in which a man may offend God’, but they have failed in helping him to please God.”^v

Second, “Everything they do is done for people to see” (23:5). In pursuit of being seen, the Pharisees and teachers have widened their phylacteries and lengthened their tassels. These practices look to Numbers 15:37-41, which instructs Israelites to attach tassels to the hems of their garments, and Deut 6:48, which says that Israelites should bind the words of Deut 6:4-5 on their hands and foreheads. By Jesus’ day, the tassels were worn on prayer shawls, and the verses from Deut 6 were worn in boxes called phylacteries during times of prayer.^{vi} In both cases, the Pharisees and teachers have made acts of devotion to God matters of personal glory. Their phylacteries are bigger and their tassels longer than those of the regular people so that everyone can see how holy they are. Beyond this, they also seek the seats of honor in public gatherings and preen over titles of respect (23:6-7). In all of this, the Pharisees and teachers seek their own glory rather than the glory of God or the good of others. As Jesus says of similar practices in the Sermon on the Mount, “They have already received their reward in full” (6:2, 5, 16).

With this rebuke still ringing, Jesus points his followers to the opposite path. They are not to seek titles of honor like “Rabbi, father, or instructor,” for God alone is Father, and Jesus alone is Rabbi and instructor. In saying this, Jesus levels the playing field among his disciples. It is true that some will act as teachers and others will serve as spiritual parents in the church,^{vii} but these positions are never to be used to one’s own glory. Instead, “The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (23:11-12). Importantly, the spirit of this teaching is more important than the specific titles used in church settings. Thus, those in authority, regardless of title, must be servants and work for the glory of God and the good of their congregations rather than for their own aggrandizement.

Seven Woes

Having critiqued the Pharisees and teachers of the law for their lack of care for the common people and their desire to be seen and applauded, Jesus begins to pronounce woes upon them. Whereas the former section used the example of the Pharisees and teachers to point Jesus’ disciples in a different direction, Jesus’ woes can be understood as pronouncements of divine disfavor upon these groups for various reasons. Each woe will be treated in turn below.

Shutting the Door of the Kingdom

The first woe mirrors the critique already given in 23:4. Whereas before the Pharisees and teachers were described as loading people with cumbersome loads, they are now described as shutting the door of the kingdom in people’s faces. Importantly, the Pharisees and teachers do not enter either, for their teachings have led them in the wrong direction. As mentioned in the “Background Information” section, their dedication to rules did not live up to kingdom standards. Thus, they themselves are outside of the kingdom, and they keep others out with their teachings.

Leading Converts Astray

The second woe follows the first. Because their teaching is not sufficient to lead people to the kingdom, the Pharisees’ and teachers’ dedication to winning converts is put into question. Indeed, even great dedication in this regard (traveling over land and sea) is seen as misguided, for “when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.”

Finding Wiggle Room

If the first and second woes make general statements about problems with the Pharisees’ and teachers’ teachings, the third and fourth woes point out specifics. The

third woe looks to the inappropriate teaching in regard to oaths. For the Pharisees and the teachers, oaths had to be made on things that could be collected by creditors, thereby making the oath practically binding. Oaths made on “the gold of the temple” or “the gift on the altar” were binding because these things could be confiscated from their owners should they break their oaths. Conversely, oaths made on “the temple” or “the altar” were meaningless because these things could not be collected by creditors. For Jesus, these distinctions were “casuistic hair-splitting, a devilish attempt to find loopholes in the Law.”^{viii} This in mind, he turns their logic on its head. While the Pharisees and teachers see gold and gifts as more binding for oaths because they can be confiscated from their owners, Jesus points out that the temple and the altar should be more binding because they give the gold and gifts their meaning (after all the gold of the temple is nothing without the temple itself, and the gift of the altar is nothing without the altar). Thus, the Pharisees have split hairs and made some oaths greater than others. Jesus, on the other hand, teaches that one’s yes should be yes and no should be no (5:33-37). Rather than resorting to oaths, one’s word should simply be binding. Because the Pharisees uphold some oaths over others, they find loopholes in truthfulness. Jesus calls them blind guides for teaching this practice to others.

Majoring on Minors^{ix}

In the fourth woe, Jesus critiques tithing. Here it is important to note that Jesus is not telling the Pharisees and teachers that they should not tithe. Indeed, Jesus tells them not to neglect tithing in 23:23. Instead, Jesus is calling their attention to weightier matters that they have neglected – justice, mercy, and faithfulness. To understand the thrust of Jesus’ words, it is helpful to see that the Pharisees have taken tithing to the greatest degree possible, giving ten percent of even their spices to ensure that they are law-observant. This represents a meticulous attention to detail in matters of personal holiness. While this attention to detail might be applauded, Jesus points out that this is a minor matter in the law. Of more importance are justice, mercy, and faithfulness, matters that point to right relationships with God and others. The Pharisees and teachers, it seems, have prided themselves in paying careful attention to personal holiness while neglecting weightier matters of relationship with God and others. In effect, they have majored on minor matters and forgotten about what is truly major. With tongue in cheek, Jesus likens them to “a person upset about a small bug in a soup or drink who nevertheless swallows a huge animal”^x (23:24; “You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!”). Once again Jesus calls the Pharisees and teachers blind guides because of their teachings. In focusing so closely on personal holiness, they have forgotten about the weighty matters of justice, mercy, and faithfulness and teach others to do the same.

Cleaning Only the Outside

The fifth woe draws a distinction between inner and outer purity. As noted in the “Background Information” section, the Pharisees and teachers paid special attention to matters of ritual purity. Such matters might include hand-washing before meals and avoiding contact with unclean people and objects. While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with ritual purity (much of it was prescribed in the law), Jesus knows that it does not lead to purity of the heart. Thus, he accuses the Pharisees and teachers of cleaning only “the outside of the cup and dish” (paying attention to their own ritual purity) and leaving the inside dirtied by “greed and self-indulgence.” As in the previous woe, Jesus is not so much calling the Pharisees and teachers to stop their attention to ritual purity as he is calling them to broaden their view. More attention should be given to inner purity than outer purity, and the latter will follow the former.

Whitewashed Tombs

The sixth woe closely resembles the fifth in its focus on inner and outer righteousness. Whereas the fifth woe used the image of washing dishes, the sixth uses the picture of tombs. While the outside of a tomb can be made beautiful, this does not change the fact that it houses “dead men’s bones and everything unclean.” Once again, the Pharisees and teachers are critiqued for focusing on outward holiness while neglecting inner holiness. In this case, the inner lives of the Pharisees and teachers are “full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”

Killing the Prophets

The seventh woe now turns to the Pharisees’ and teachers’ rejection of Jesus. Believing themselves to be receptive to God’s messengers, they “build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous.” Though these prophets and righteous persons were killed by former generations, the Pharisees and teachers believe themselves to be greater than their forebears and 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.” Now, however, they have taken offense at Jesus and are plotting his death (12:14)! Far from being better than their ancestors, the Pharisees and teachers are now repeating their sin. Thus, Jesus says, “So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!”

The Conclusion

After pronouncing these woes, Jesus goes on to predict that the Pharisees and teachers will continue to reject the prophets, probably referring now to his own disciples who will take up his ministry after his death, resurrection, and ascension.

Therefore, judgment will come upon them for this rejection. Jesus here is probably thinking of the destruction of the temple in AD 70.^{xi}

While Jesus' speech in this section has been harsh to say the least – he has repeatedly used the term “hypocrites” and has spoken of his opponents being “condemned to hell” – it is important to note now that Jesus is not only full of condemnation when it comes to the Pharisees and teachers. In 23:37-39, Jesus voices a lament for Jerusalem. He says, “how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.” Though he has spoken of judgment, this judgment comes after the possibility of repentance was rejected. Though Jesus was willing to lead his people in good directions, he has been turned down. Had there been a positive reception and acceptance of both Jesus himself and his teaching, Jesus' words would have been very different.

Application

While we might want to distance ourselves from the Pharisees and teachers of the law, it is important to note that these were devoutly religious people of their day. As people who also seek to be devout, we can learn from Jesus' words. After all, many of the dangers that had shipwrecked the Pharisees' and teachers' faith walks are still alive and active today.

Mercy and Humility

Right out of the gate in this passage, Jesus critiques the Pharisees and teachers for their leadership of the people, which is lacking in both mercy and humility. In regard to lacking mercy, the Pharisees and teachers make strict demands that people follow both the law and tradition but then fail to make these demands mercifully and helpfully. Rather than helping people live up to their teachings, the Pharisees and teachers look down on people who fail to do so. In regard to lacking humility the Pharisees and teachers have sought to enlarge their own reputations rather than look to God's glory or the good of the people. After naming these faults, Jesus points his disciples in the opposite direction.

This section of Jesus' words holds important insights for the type of leadership Jesus expects in his Church. Rather than exalting themselves, Church leaders should look to the building up of their congregations and to bringing glory to God. This requires both merciful care and humility.

Along with being a word to leaders, the call to mercy and humility is a call for all Christians as well. Paul hits on this theme in Philippians 2 in saying, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not

looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” As Christian leaders embody mercy and humility, they point their congregations to the same. When we take the command to mercy and humility seriously, we find that our shepherds are caring properly for their congregations and that congregants themselves are caring for one another in humble love.

Avoiding Hypocrisy

Over and over again in his polemic against the Pharisees and teachers, Jesus uses the term “hypocrites” to describe his opponents. In fact, the term is used in six of the seven woes, thus collecting pretty much everything that Jesus has to say under this heading. Importantly, hypocrisy “may mean either insincerity or inconsistency.”^{xii} While the first is deliberate, the second may be the product of misunderstandings of what is truly required. Thus, we can be hypocrites both when we intentionally put on a façade for others and when we unintentionally fail to be consistent in our lives of faith. As Jesus critiques the Pharisees and teachers, he confronts both kinds of hypocrisy.

The first kind of hypocrisy can be seen clearly in the widening of phylacteries and lengthening of tassels. In doing these things, the Pharisees and teachers are putting on airs before their peers and painting themselves as particularly holy. As noted above, this amounts to transforming acts of devotion to God into acts of devotion to self. The Pharisees and teachers are insincere in their devotion.

While insincerity can be found in the first part of Jesus’ speech, it might be argued that the second type of hypocrisy is what he confronts in each woe. In this sense, the Pharisees and teachers are not being insincere as they pay careful attention to tithing or seek to make oaths binding. Instead, they are inconsistent in their pursuit of holiness. Thus, they exalt personal piety above mercy and fail to look to purity of heart even as they carefully look to outward purity.

As we consider these two types of hypocrisy, it is no stretch to say that both are dangers for the Church. The remedy for the first is humility, while the remedy for the second is a continued commitment to bringing our lives into conformity with the life and teachings of Jesus. As we hear Jesus’ critique of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, we hear the call to sincerity and consistency in our own lives.

Inside *and* Outside

Closely linked to the theme of hypocritical inconsistency is Jesus’ insistence that inner purity is more important than outer purity. The Pharisees and teachers are not the only ones in danger of washing only the outside of the cups of their lives or whitewashing tombs. Importantly, looking to outer purity is not necessarily a bad thing. Rather, it only becomes bad when it is not teamed with similar commitment to inner purity. We must only look to our own experience to see this truth in action. After all, a faithful tither can still be the reason for dissension and factions in the church, and

a person who never curses can still be filled with rage. Outer purity does not lead to inner purity. Inner purity does, however, lead to outer purity. For instance, inner generosity leads to joyful giving, and inner peace leads to outer peace in speech. Even as we do not want to neglect outer purity, we want to make sure that we are allowing God to work on our characters, for when our characters are formed into the image of Jesus, our actions will follow suit.

Majoring on Majors Instead of Minors

Among the woes pronounced on the Pharisees and teachers is one that uncovers the problematic ways that people of faith can make minor things major while ignoring things that truly are major. For the Pharisees and teachers, this was exemplified in their careful tithing and neglect of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. The same danger is present in the life of faith today. For instance, it is possible for churches to get caught up in arguments over minor issues of preference (worship style, etc.) while forgetting the major call of Jesus to unity. Likewise, like the Pharisees and teachers, we can become caught up in minor issues of personal piety (in Baptist life these might include refusing to dance or play cards) while forgetting to pay at least as much attention to our relationships with God and others. While not neglecting the minors of the faith, we should be sure to identify and live out the majors.

Receiving Jesus

A last application point comes with the idea of receiving Jesus. This was the topic of Jesus' last woe, and it would have been the remedy to the hypocrisy of inconsistency that the Pharisees and teachers were committing. In rejecting Jesus, though, the Pharisees and teachers protected their own ways of thinking and doing. More than this, they rejected the salvation that Jesus offered. Discipleship can be understood as a lifelong reception of Jesus into our lives. We constantly allow him to challenge and correct us as he leads us ever further into his kingdom.

Teaching Helps

Icebreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following question, "Are you a mountain person or a beach person and why?" Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

Time for Sharing: Ask class members if there is anything from last week's readings in the gospel of Matthew that they would like to share with the class. Did they have any important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for

class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

Lesson Introduction: Let the class know that today's lesson will come from Tuesday's reading and will focus on Matthew 23:1-39, where Jesus and Peter walk on the water. Invite students to open their Bibles to that passage.

Background Information

- **Question:** Ask participants to tell what they know about the teachers of the law and Pharisees.
 - Be prepared to add insights from the "Background Information" section.
- **Question:** Ask participants if they remember what went on before this passage.
 - Be prepared to explain that Jesus has just been so effective in answering questions and arguing with his opponents that no one dares ask him any more questions. Now he begins to critique one set of opponents: the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

Christian Leadership and Attitudes

- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Matt 23:1-7.
 - **Question:** What is Jesus' problem with the Pharisees and teachers? Why does he critique them in this section?
 - **Explain:** Let participants know that Jesus uses this poor example from the Pharisees and teachers to point his followers in a different direction.
- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Matt 23:8-12.
 - **Question:** What is Jesus saying to his followers in this section?
 - **Question:** Should Christians do away with all titles of authority? Should we stop calling ministers reverend or pastor?
 - **Question:** Is the call to humility and service for leaders only?

The Seven Woes

- **Scripture Readings:** Have someone read:
 - 23:13-14
 - 23:15
 - 23:16-22
 - 23:23-24
 - 23:25-26
 - 23:27-28
 - 23:29-32
- **Questions:** After each reading, ask participants to name the problem that Jesus identifies. Write these on the board.

- **Questions:** After all of the problems have been identified, ask if there are ways that we as Christians might fall into the same errors as the Pharisees and teachers. Possible questions here include:
 - Are there any ways that we can shut the door of the kingdom on people?
 - Are there any ways that we can major on minors?
 - Are there ways that we can get caught up in outward appearances rather than inner transformation?
- **Question:** In six of the seven woes, Jesus uses a specific word. What word is it?
- **Question:** What does it mean to be a hypocrite?
 - Be ready to talk about hypocrisy as insincerity and inconsistency.
- **Question:** Which kind of hypocrisy are the Pharisees and teachers guilty of?
- **Question:** What is the cure for insincerity?
- **Question:** What is the cure for inconsistency?

ⁱ All section labels from: Eugene M. Boring and Leander E. Keck, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” vol. 8, *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Abingdon Press, 1995), 117–118, see especially the diagram on 117. Boring also makes the argument for including ch 23 with chs 24 and 25 on pp 428-429.

ⁱⁱ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 189.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 190.

^{iv} Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, *The New American Commentary* v. 22 (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman Press, 1992), 340; France argues against the idea of a specific chair in the synagogue: France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 859. In either case, though, the idea is the same. Moses’ seat refers to the authoritative status of a teacher of the scriptures.

^v David E. Garland, *The Intention of Matthew 23* (Brill Archive, 1979), 51.

^{vi} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999), 542.

^{vii} Blomberg, *Matthew*, 342–343: “People are properly called teachers in Acts 13:1; 1 Tim 2:7; and Heb 5:12. Paul will even refer to a spiritual gift that enables some people to be so identified (Eph 4:11; 1 Cor 12:28-29; cf. Jas 3:1). It remains appropriate to call a biological parent one’s father, and even one’s spiritual parent may be addressed with this term (1 Cor 4:15; cf. also 1 John 2:13; Acts 22:1).”

^{viii} Boring and Keck, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” 435.

^{ix} This wording from: *Ibid.*

^x Blomberg, *Matthew*, 346.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 348.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 343.