

LIFE BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: MATTHEW 23:1-39

To see the way Jesus addressed the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and to see God's heart for His people.

Don't Do As I Say or Do

You've probably heard the saying before, "do as I say, not as I do." Growing up, the father of my best friend would regularly say that to us. He smoked and drank, but regularly warned us of the dangers of such practices. "Do as I say, not as I do." It's really one of the more ineffective statements a grown up can make to



a child. In order to lead someone well one must not only say the right things but actually model them.

In Matthew 23, Jesus warns the disciples of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and He explicitly tells them in verse 3, "therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them." In other words, "Do as they say, not as they do." The Pharisees' actions were inconsistent with Scripture, and so Jesus called them out. He directs the people to instead follow what God has revealed in the Scriptures, an action the Pharisees should have been modeling.

Whoa! (x7)

The bulk of chapter 23 is comprised of the so-called, "woes" that Jesus speaks to the Pharisees. The central theme of these woes is their rejection of Him as the Messiah. The woes amplify in harshness with the seventh and final woe being the most condemning. Below is a short breakdown of each of the sayings. Some of the sayings can be a little hard to understand, but historical context shows they are actually pretty simple.

THE IRONY OF HYPOCRISY (VS.13-[14])

The first woe is significant for at least two reasons. For one, there is irony in what Jesus is saying. The Pharisees, as the religious leaders and Scriptural experts, were expected to not only be holy men but to lead others into holiness as well. And yet, Jesus reveals that not only do they not enter the kingdom, but they prevent others from entering as well. This kingdom is the same kingdom Jesus had been proclaiming for the entirety of His ministry, which leads to the second reason this is significant. The very reason they were not able to enter the kingdom is because of their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God.

Verse 14 is likely in brackets in many of your translations, and for good reason. Many of the earliest textual witnesses that we possess do not include verse 14, and there is good reason to think it was added later. This of course is not as big of a problem as it seems, because it wasn't new information being added to the Scripture. These details were already included in Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47, and were likely added to harmonize with them.

MAKING CONVERTS (V.15)

The Pharisee tradition was renowned for proselytizing, and so for the second woe, Jesus attacks not the tradition itself but the result. He says, "you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves." The statement is shocking but true; anyone who follows anything other than the One True God is doomed. The basic premise of this statement is simple. The Pharisees were already in error, and so anyone they disciplined would also be as bad if not worse.

OATHS (VS.16-22)

Oaths were a big part of the ancient world. As we already learned in Matthew 5:33-37, oath-taking had been badly abused. Oaths were usually a solemn promise with God as the guarantor of that promise. However, the ancients devised a way to make oaths by lesser objects that would not hold them accountable. Rather than swearing by God, they would swear by the earth or the heavens (Matt. 5:34) or the Temple or altar (Matt. 23:16-18). None of those things could actually guarantee the oath would be held up. They were engaging in what is called, "casuistry." Casuistry is the use of clever but unsound reasoning, usually to resolve a moral dilemma. This type of reasoning sounded good but was deeply flawed because God is the source of all things. Therefore, to take an oath by some object is to still take an oath before God. As Jesus said in Matthew 5:37, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No.'"

THE WEIGHTIER THINGS (VS.23-24)

The fourth woe aimed to uncover the wrong emphasis on things tithed. Grant Osborne has a helpful and yet quick breakdown of the tithe in the *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*: "Tithing first appears in Genesis 14:17-20 (Abraham to Melchizedek) and 28:18-22 (Jacob at Bethel). The legislation occurs in Deuteronomy 12:11-18; 14:22-29; Numbers 18:21-29, where God's people are to tithe grain, wine, oil, fruit, and the first harvests of herds and flocks (Deut. 14:23), every tenth animal (Lev. 27:30-33), with each family consuming the tithe in a sacred meal shared with the Levites (Deut. 12:15-19). Moreover, tithes were to go to the Levites as their "inheritance" (Num. 18:21), and they in turn would return to the Lord a tenth of that for the priests (Num. 18:27-28). Every third year the tithes were stored up not only for the Levites but also for the orphans and widows" (850). The Scriptures interestingly never indicate to tithe mint, dill, or cumin. These would have been considered, "above and beyond," something the Pharisees often strove for.

It should be noted, Jesus doesn't reprimand them for tithing such unauthorized things. Instead, it's the lack of the, "weightier things," that Jesus addresses. None of the, "above and beyond," items hold any weight apart from justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

THE CUP AND THE DISH (VS.25-26)

The fifth and sixth woes are similar and begin to really reveal the picture of hypocrisy that Jesus is accusing the Pharisees of. The fifth woe is regarding the practice of washing the outside of a cup and dish, while neglecting the filth on the inside of each. The idea here in this woe is that the Pharisees often ate and drank a plentiful amount of rather expensive foods and drinks, and they afforded these things off the backs of the people they took advantage of. In other words, the food and drink was contaminated with the evil practices that allowed them to obtain those things to begin with. No amount of ritualistic cleansing of the outside of these dishes could scrub away the injustice.

THE WHITE-WASHED TOMBS (VS.27-28)

The sixth woe pulls its imagery from a cemetery. The white-washed tombs were beautiful grave markers, but their beauty only existed on the outside; inside they had dead people in them! There was no greater level of uncleanness than to touch a dead body (Num 19:11–22). Like the uncleanness of death housed inside a tomb, the Pharisees embodied hypocrisy and lawlessness.

MURDERER OF PROPHETS (VS.29-36)

The seventh and final woe is brutal. Jesus points out the ironic practice of building monuments and decorating the tombs of former prophets. The irony is two-fold. For one, they admit being descendants of the men who rejected and murdered these prophets (Matt. 23:30), and thus they are guilty by association. Secondly and more importantly, they have rejected both John the Baptist and Jesus, two prophets. They cannot say they would not have partnered with their ancestors in the murdering of prophets, because they themselves are guilty of exactly that.

Verses 34 through 36 move from the past to the present and the future. Jesus speaks of, “prophets, wise men, and scribes,” that they will kill and crucify. This indicates that we are no longer talking about the Father who has sent the Son, but the Son who is going to send other witnesses. This is congruent with Jesus words in Acts 1:8: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” This kind of persecution of Jesus’ followers continued for a time. Even Paul recognized it in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16. Truly, the words of Jesus came to pass: “‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20).

The Heart of God for His People

The last three verses of chapter 23 capture a beautiful reality: God the Father and God the Son love their chosen people. In all of Jesus’ ministry, He has attempted to gather the people of God together as their Messiah, and because of the blind religious teachers, they have not understood His true identity. The result of their rejection of God’s Anointed One will be desolation and judgment. This, of course, came to pass in A.D. 70 when the Temple was laid to ruins. There is hope, however. There will come a time when the people of Israel will truly repent and receive their long-awaited Messiah King (Rom. 11:25-32).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Matthew 23:1-12. What two groups was Jesus speaking to? In your own words, summarize the passage and make note of any sayings or phrases that you don’t understand.
2. Read Matthew 23:13-14. What does this first woe address? Does your translation have verse 14 or is it in brackets? Why? (Hint: See above)

Day Two

1. Read Matthew 23:15. What does Jesus address in this second woe? Why were the converts to Pharisaism, “twice the sons of hell?”
2. Read Matthew 23:16-22. What is the central issue being addressed in the third woe? Read Matthew 5:33-37 again. What does Jesus conclude regarding any oath made (Hint: verse 22)?

Day Three

1. Read Matthew 23:23-24. What things were the Pharisees tithing that Jesus addressed? Are they commanded or are they, “above and beyond?” Does Jesus condemn them for what they were tithing or what they were *not* tithing? What were they missing?
2. Read Matthew 23:25-28. What is the main idea of these two woes? What illustrations does Jesus use? What sins was Jesus attacking?

Day Four

1. Read Matthew 23:29-36. In your own words, summarize this passage. What is the significance of this passage and how is it relevant to Jesus’ imminent death?
2. Read Matthew 23:37-39. What does this reveal about the heart of God the Father and God the Son?

Week 27 Discussion: Hypocriticalpotamus

Matthew 23 is one of the most in-depth treatments of Jesus’ disdain for hypocrisy, and in particular, the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Hypocrisy is devastating to the witness of Christians, and yet, an inescapable reality in a sin-filled world. Discuss as a group the danger of hypocrisy, and ways to overcome it.

1. Icebreaker: What’s the most hypocritical thing you’ve ever done?
2. In your opinion, what are the most common hypocritical behaviors of Christians?
3. Imagine you have done something that is visibly hypocritical (in other words, other people are aware of your hypocrisy). How should you handle it? What actions should be taken? What actions should not be taken?
4. Imagine another believer has done something hypocritical. Should you address that person regarding their behavior? If so, what would you say? What actions should be taken, if any?
5. Imagine another non-believer has done something hypocritical. Should you address that person regarding their behavior? If so, what would you say? What actions should be taken, if any?
6. How has hypocrisy negatively affected you and your faith?

Takeaways:

1. Jesus is repulsed by the hypocritical actions of the religious leaders of Israel.
2. Jesus loves the people of God in an intimate and nurturing way.

PRAYER REQUESTS: