

MATTHEW 23

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I. Introduction

A. The scribes and Pharisees are "front and center" in Matthew 23, so it might be helpful to remind you who they were.

1. Historically, "[a] scribe was a member of a trained class of professionals who filled a variety of functions related to reading and writing within the government and religious administrations of ANE societies."¹

a. In Palestinian Judaism of the first century, the label "scribe" often carried the connotation of an expert in the Mosaic law who was involved in the interpretation and teaching of Scripture. Indeed, Luke seems to refer to scribes as "teachers of the law" and "lawyers" (Lk. 5:17, 21, 11:52-53). It is in this capacity that we see scribes opposing Jesus (e.g., Mat. 9:3, 27:41; Mk. 3:22) and questioning his actions and authority (e.g., Mk. 2:16, 11:27-28). NET note on Mat. 2:4 states:

The traditional rendering of γραμματεὺς (*grammateus*) as "scribe" does not communicate much to the modern English reader, for whom the term might mean "professional copyist," if it means anything at all. The people referred to here were recognized experts in the law of Moses and in traditional laws and regulations. Thus "expert in the law" comes closer to the meaning for the modern reader.

b. Jesus says of scribes in Mk. 12:38-40 (and of scribes and Pharisees together in Mat. 23:6) that they like to walk around in long robes, like greetings in the marketplaces, and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts. This suggests that at that time they had a high status within Jewish society, as does their position within the Sanhedrin (e.g., Acts 4:5-6).

c. Scribes often are paired with Pharisees in the Gospels, but the reference to "scribes of the Pharisees" in Mk. 2:16 and Acts 23:9 suggests they also could be associated with Jewish groups other than the Pharisees. But scribes probably identified predominantly with the Pharisees and supported their theology.

2. The Pharisees were a religious and political group of devout Jews that probably arose in the middle of the second century B.C. in response to the attempt by Antiochus IV Epiphanes to force Greek culture on the Jewish people.

¹ Jeremy D. Smoak, "Scribe" in Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible S-Z* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 5:136.

a. John Meier writes:

In the face of a perceived threat to the continued existence of Jews as a distinct ethnic, cultural, and religious entity in the ancient Near East, the Pharisees emphasized the zealous and detailed study and practice of the Mosaic Law, the careful observance of legal obligations in concrete areas of life such as tithing, purity laws (especially concerning food, sexual activity, and the proper treatment of the dead), the keeping of the Sabbath, marriage and divorce, and temple ritual.²

b. Paul, a former Pharisee, described the group (Acts 26:5) as the strictest sect of the Jewish religion. Klyne Snodgrass remarks, "The Pharisees had a concern for purity at meals that we can hardly appreciate."³ This insistence on their distinctive view of ritual purity regarding food restricted the circle of those with whom they were willing to eat. The name Pharisee is commonly understood to reflect the notion of "separateness," which may be traceable to this separation in terms of table fellowship.

c. Some of the Pharisees' regulations functioned as a kind of "fence around the law" so that by keeping those rules people would be in less danger of disobeying the commandments God. The Pharisees strengthened their interpretations and applications of the law with the claim that they represented an oral body of traditions given by God and passed down from Moses through the fathers (the tradition of the elders). They therefore regarded them as something that was (or should be) binding on all Jews, an authoritative interpretation of the written law.

d. "According to Josephus, the Pharisees were the most observant of all the identifiable Jewish groups, and they were held in high regard among the masses of the people."⁴ They were seen as the epitome of piety. They also were quite influential in first-century Jewish society. But a significant portion of them had allowed their devotion to and exaltation of the Mosaic Law to blind them to its role in God's overall plan, and their focus on the Law's ritualistic aspects had warped their understanding of God and his will. This will become clearer as we work our way through the chapter.

e. The spiritual corruption of a significant segment of the Pharisees is evident throughout the Gospels.

(1) John the Baptist referred to the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him for baptism as a "brood of vipers" (Mat. 3:7).

² John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew, Volume Three: Companions and Competitors* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 330.

³ Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 86.

⁴ Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 121.

(2) Jesus warned the disciples that unless their righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and Pharisees they would never enter the kingdom of heaven (Mat. 5:20).

(3) The Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by the prince of demons (Mat 9:34, 12:24) and conspired to kill him (Mat. 12:14).

(4) When the scribes and Pharisees asked to see a sign from him, he told them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Mat 12:38-39).

(5) Jesus asked them why they break the command of God for the sake of their tradition (Mat. 15:1-3), and he warned his disciples to beware of their (and the Sadducees') teaching (Mat. 16:6-12).

(6) The Pharisees tested Jesus on various occasions (Mat. 16:1, 19:3) and plotted how to trap him in his words (Mat. 12:12-14, 22:15).

(7) Luke notes in Lk. 16:14 that the Pharisees were "lovers of money."

f. But it would be a mistake to think there were no goodhearted Pharisees.

(1) Some Pharisees came to Jesus to warn him that Herod wanted to kill him (Luk 13:31).

(2) The Pharisee Nicodemus came to Jesus at night and told him "Rabbi, *we* know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him" (Jn. 3:1-2). And he later stood up for Jesus' legal rights before the Pharisees telling them, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" (Jn. 7:51). And, of course, he also assisted in the Lord's burial (Jn. 19:39-42).

(3) When the Sanhedrin wanted to kill the apostles, the Pharisee Gamaliel warned them saying "keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" (Act 5:38-39).

(4) And, of course, the apostle Paul was a Pharisee (Acts 26:5; Phil. 3:5).

B. Jesus has been opposed by scribes and Pharisees throughout Matthew. In chapter 22 he has just sparred with Pharisees and Sadducees over various theological points they had raised in the hope of destroying his credibility as a teacher. In chapter 23 Jesus exposes their failure before God.

C. Matthew 23 is a scathing rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees. The first 12 verses are warnings about the scribes and Pharisees directed to the crowds and to Jesus' disciples. Verses 13-36 are denunciations given as seven "woes" that are addressed directly to the scribes and Pharisees. Verses 37-39 are a lament over Jerusalem's coming judgment.

II. Mat. 23:1-12 – ¹ Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples ² saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit [lit. sat] on the seat of Moses, ³ so do and keep all things whatsoever they say to you. But do not do according to their works, for they say and do not do. ⁴ They tie up heavy loads [hard to bear] and put [them] on men's shoulders, but they are not willing to move them with their finger. ⁵ And all their works they do in order to be seen by men; for they enlarge their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels. ⁶ And they love the place of honor at the banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues ⁷ and the greetings in the marketplaces and to be called rabbi by men. ⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for one is your teacher and you all are brothers. ⁹ And do not call [anyone] on earth your father, for one is your Father, he who is in heaven. ¹⁰ Neither be called instructors, for one is your instructor, the Christ. ¹¹ The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

A. We are faced with an interpretive difficulty right off the bat. On the surface, Jesus seems to be commanding the crowd and his disciples in vv. 2-3a to obey literally everything the scribes and Pharisees say, which would include everything they taught. Matthew assumes from what he has written before that his readers will know that this is not what Jesus means. Jesus has already rejected the Pharisees' teaching about ritual hand washing and the Sabbath (Mat. 12:1-14) and has rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for making void the word of God for the sake of their tradition (Mat. 15:1-9). In 15:14 he called the Pharisees "blind guides" who would lead those who followed them into a pit, and in 16:6-12 he warned his disciples to beware of the Pharisees' (and Sadducees') teaching.

B. So Jesus clearly is not commanding them to obey everything the scribes and Pharisees taught, but what is he saying? One possible solution is that the phrase "sit on the seat of Moses" restricts the kind of speaking that Jesus had in mind. That phrase appears only here in the New Testament. The next earliest usage of which we are aware is in the fourth or fifth century, and those instances may be dependent on Mat. 23:2. So we really are not sure what the phrase means.

1. There is evidence that later synagogues had an actual stone seat at the front, but it is uncertain whether such a seat existed in first-century synagogues or was then called the "seat of Moses." Whether there was a literal seat or not, the point seems to be that the scribes and Pharisees either functioned or presumed to function in first-century Jewish society in a way somehow analogous to the way Moses functioned in ancient Israel. They were in some sense his successor; they assumed his seat in that regard. What is unclear is the way in which their roles were analogous.

2. Maybe, as Mark Powell has argued,⁵ the "seat of Moses" means that the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day functioned similarly to Moses by being the transmitters of the word of God. They were the people who maintained copies of the Scriptures and passed on the content of those writings, the biblical text, by reading and quoting those sacred words to people at the synagogue and elsewhere. Remember that many people at this time were illiterate and copies of the Bible books were not plentiful. As the dominant religious leaders of the day, they were, generally speaking, the "audio Bible" for that society. They knew the content, the text, of the Scriptures and conveyed those words to the people.

3. If in acknowledging that they "sit on the seat of Moses" Jesus was acknowledging their function as the "audio Bible," the transmitters of the text of Scripture, then his statement to do and keep everything they say would be limited to everything they said *in that capacity*. It would not include their teaching, their understanding of the meaning of the text, which often was shallow, distorted, or inadequate. They knew what the Scriptures said, the words of the text, but their understanding often was out of step with God's true intent.

4. If that's the case, then Jesus' command in v. 3a to them to "do and keep all things whatsoever they say to you" refers to the obligation to obey every aspect of the word of God. That echoes the repeated command from the Old Testament to "do and keep" all the commands, statutes, and rules of the Lord. Joshua commanded the people (Josh. 23:6), "Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left."

5. And you recall that Jesus said in Mat. 5:18 that not even the smallest part of a letter of the law would pass away until all is accomplished, meaning that no aspect of it would pass away prematurely, short of finding its fulfillment in him.

C. Another somewhat similar possibility is that Jesus in v. 2-3a was quoting the "party line" that was pushed by the scribes and Pharisees – that they sit in Moses' seat and must therefore be obeyed in all they say – which he then exposes as false by showing that their understanding of Scripture, as expressed in their practices, was erroneous (and therefore not something to be followed).

1. How they acted did not match what they said, not in the sense they ignored their own teaching (did not "practice what they preached," as some translations of v. 3b have it) but in the sense that the *teaching they followed* was inconsistent with the *word of God they spoke* (they say [the word of God] but do not do [the word of God]).

a. In other words, the problem is not that the religious leaders did not follow their own interpretations, the things they taught. The problem was that their interpretations in certain particulars were wrong, inconsistent with the written word.

⁵ Mark Allan Powell, "Do and Keep What Moses Says (Matthew 23:2-7)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (No. 3, 1995), 419-435.

Indeed, Jesus declared explicitly (Mat. 15:6) that some of their practices, which reflect their interpretations, were at odds with the word of God. Their actions proved that, contrary to the party line, they should not be followed as teachers because what they taught by how they lived, the understanding that they modeled, was contrary to the will of God.

b. Mark Powell states:

When Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees "speak" (λέγω) but do not "do" (ποιέω), the implication is that they "speak Torah but do not do Torah." To "speak Torah" means to cite accurately what the Scriptures say. To "do Torah" means to demonstrate understanding of Torah through word and deed (5:19). In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus claims that the scribes and Pharisees do cite the Torah accurately but he maintains that their words and their deeds reveal them to be "blind guides" who do not understand the Torah they cite (15:14; 23:16, 17, 19, 24, 26).⁶

2. The lesson of their lives, the errors that their conduct "preached," as classified in vv. 4-7, was that (1) God cares more about safeguarding the law through the imposition of human traditions than he does about the people who are burdened and crushed by those traditions, and (2) being driven by desire for the praise of men is a proper religious motivation.

D. In saying that *they* tie up heavy loads [hard to bear] and put [them] on men's shoulders, meaning the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus indicates that the burdens he has in mind are not from God. As Charles Quarles notes, "The rabbis had piled these enormous mountains of Halakah [extrapolated rules] on the backs of the people, and the load was more than they could bear."⁷ By indicating these burdens are not from God, Jesus rejects implicitly the claim that the tradition of the elders which the scribes and Pharisees bound on people was an oral law given by God (as he had Mat. 15:1-9).

E. The lack of concern for the burden that their rules put on people seems to be the real point of v. 4. D. A. Carson remarks, "Verse 4 speaks of the leaders' putting 'heavy loads' on men's shoulders – laying down irksome rules – and then refusing to 'lift a finger' to help. This does not mean they were unwilling to obey burdensome rules themselves . . . but that they refused to help those who collapsed under their rules."⁸ Quarles says, "The rabbis themselves were not willing to lift even a finger to ease the people's burden or to assist them in bearing the load."⁹

1. They had this large set of extrapolated obligations that were more burdensome than Scripture, but they would not make any effort to ease people's difficulty

⁶ Powell, 432.

⁷ Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew*, EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2022), 574.

⁸ D. A. Carson, "Matthew" in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 532.

⁹ Quarles, 574.

by reassessing any of those rules because they were invested in the claim that those interpretations were from God.¹⁰ So there was no room to revisit any of them; it was an all-or-none situation.

2. Their desire for the praise of men, as indicated in the following verses, may have contributed to their unwillingness to help those who were struggling under their load. Quarles comments, "Verse 5 may reveal the reason that the Pharisees refuse to assist others in fulfilling the massive amounts of legislation. The Pharisees wanted to flaunt their own piety, and the more others failed, the more the superiority of the Pharisees was apparent."¹¹

3. This is quite a contrast to the Lord's words in Mat. 11:28-30: "Come to me, 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." John writes in 1 Jn. 5:3, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. *And his commandments are not burdensome.*"

4. Interestingly, the Essene community at Qumran may well have criticized the Pharisees as "the seekers (or expounders) of smooth things," meaning they made the law too easy and were too accommodating to change. (There is some uncertainty whether this charge was directed at the Pharisees.) But you must remember that Qumran was a monastic community that would be quick to charge its theological opponents with compromise if they saw them as less rigorous in any particulars. Paul and Josephus acknowledge that the Pharisees were zealous for the law, and clearly from the Lord's words here the rules they lived under constituted a burden.

5. Jesus' point is that the scribes and Pharisees demonstrate their unsuitability as teachers by acting in a way that shows they do not really understand the law they purport to teach. By piling human regulations on the people and not caring enough to lift a finger to help those who collapsed under their rules, they showed a deep misunderstanding of God's priorities and concerns.

a. This raises the question of whether we ever follow the scribes and Pharisees down this path. Are there congregations of churches of Christ and groups outside churches of Christ that bind manmade rules on believers that weigh them down and sometimes crush them?

b. That certainly was true in the Crossroads/Boston/International Church of Christ that arose out of the mainline church of Christ decades ago. There were rules about whom to date, how to date, and when to date; there were rules about giving and about the frequency and length of one's personal Bible study and prayer; there were rules about attending the Bible class and two worship services on Sunday, an evangelistic Bible study one day during the week, the Wednesday night Bible study, the Friday night

¹⁰ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 746.

¹¹ Quarles, 574.

devotional, and meeting with one's prayer partner one day during the week. When those rules burdened people that was of no concern; one either stuck with the program "for the glory of God" or faced endless rebuke and harassment. Similar things have happened in other groups.

c. Within mainline churches of Christ (and other groups) one sometimes sees less severe impositions of human regulations. The line between human regulations and the will of God is not always clear, but the principle of not binding what God has not bound is important. Not only do we have no right to do so, but it also burdens souls that are precious to our Lord and can even crush them spiritually.

F. Verses 5-7 present the familiar theme of the Jewish leaders being fixated on the praise of men. They were the targets of Jesus' warnings in Mat. 6:1-18 against practicing one's righteousness before people in order to be seen by them. Jesus says here that the scribes and Pharisees do all their deeds to be seen by others.

1. They enlarge their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels.

- a. Phylacteries were small leather or parchment boxes containing a piece of vellum (calfskin) that was inscribed with texts of Scripture (usually Ex. 13:1-16 and Deut. 6:4-9 and 11:13-21). During morning and evening prayers, those boxes were strapped to one's arm or forehead based on a literal reading of Ex. 13:9, 16 and Deut. 6:8 and 11:18. The scribes and Pharisees Jesus is talking about would make their phylacteries extra-large to show how pious they were. A smaller phylactery may suffice for spiritually lesser men, but their large phylacteries proclaimed that they were super spiritual.

- b. Tassels were blue and white cords worn by Jewish men at the four corners of the hem of the outer robe in obedience to Num. 15:37-41 and Deut. 22:12. Matthew 9:20 and 14:36 probably refer to tassels worn by Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees about whom Jesus is speaking made their tassels extra long to emphasize for the people how devout they were. It was another way of saying "Look how spiritual I am."

2. They loved the place of honor at the banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues. They so much wanted to be honored by men, and in that world the order of seating had important social implications. The nearer one was seated to the host of a banquet the greater one's status, and the nearer one was seated in the synagogue to the speaker and the law scrolls the greater one's status. Being honored by men is what "rocked their world," but it is a pernicious desire, one that easily leads to pleasing men rather than God, which is spiritually disastrous. Recall Paul's words in Gal. 1:10: "For am I now satisfying men or God? Or am I seeking to please men? If I were still pleasing men, I would not be a slave of Christ."

3. They loved the greetings in the marketplaces and to have people call them rabbi.

a. The "greetings" mentioned are not common social greetings but greetings that honored the scribes and Pharisees as being superior because of their presumed piety. Quarles states, "The greeting for an ordinary man was simply, 'Peace be unto you.' But the greeting for a rabbi was 'Peace be unto you, my Master and Teacher' (m. B. Qam. 73b)."¹² The marketplace was where the people gathered together, the public place in any town or village, so honorary greetings given there were especially desired because there was an audience to appreciate it.

b. The term "rabbi" was initially a respectful form of address, meaning "master" or "sir," but it evolved into an honorary title for outstanding teachers of the law. It became a term of superiority and exaltation. The fact the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day coveted the title suggests the transition had already begun. Jesus was called "rabbi" (e.g., Mat. 26:25, 49; Mk. 9:5, 10:51), but he did not pursue the title, though he certainly is worthy of that title and more.

G. The disciples are told in vv. 8-10 that they are not to be called "rabbi," are not to call anyone on earth their "father," and are not to be called "instructor."

1. In contrast to the scribes and Pharisees who love being called rabbi, Jesus tells his disciples in v. 8 that they are *not* to be called rabbi. The reason he gives for their not being called rabbi shifts the focus. Instead of saying they are not to be called rabbi because that will remove any temptation to pursue that title as the scribes and Pharisees did, he says they are not to be called rabbi because ("for") they have only one teacher, which v. 10 makes clear is the Lord Jesus.

a. He means they are not to assume a position in relation to other disciples – whether that position be called rabbi, father, or instructor – that is inconsistent with the truth that the disciples have only one Lord, one ultimate authority over them. Christians are only and always disciples of Jesus; they never cede to another human being the authority that belongs to Christ alone. However spiritually mature a Christian may be, he connects others to the Lord and does not usurp the Lord's role as master. He is a fellow disciple who is trying to help others follow the Lord more closely. Jesus is always the authority, the last word.

b. As he says in v. 8b, Christians are all brothers. For a disciple to assume in relation to other disciples a role that intrudes upon the Lord's complete and ultimate authority would be inconsistent with the equal status implicit in the notion of brotherhood.

c. This does not mean it is wrong to have teachers and to call them such. The Spirit provides the gift of teaching to various Christians (Rom. 12:6-7; 1 Cor. 12:28-29; Eph. 4:11-12), Christians are expected to mature to the point that they can serve as teachers (Heb. 5:12), Paul told Timothy to devote himself to preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 4:13), and elders must be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2). Acts 13:1 notes there were prophets and teachers in the church in Antioch. The key is that teachers in this

¹² Quarles, 576.

permissible sense are fellow Christians who labor to help their brothers and sisters in their discipleship *to the Lord*. They are not masters themselves; they help others hear the one master. That is why Titus, for example, is commanded to "teach what accords with sound doctrine" (Tit. 2:1), meaning the truth revealed from God.

d. Jesus' teaching here is not inconsistent with the fact the Apostles exercised authority over fellow disciples because they were inspired messengers of the Lord. Christ exercised *his* authority *through* them; they did not exercise their own authority. In living out their faith, as opposed to speaking by the Spirit on God's behalf, even the apostles would say, as Paul did in 1 Cor. 11:1, "Be imitators of me, *as* I also [am] of Christ."

e. It also is not inconsistent with the fact we as Christians are called to submit to elders in a local congregation. They serve under the "great shepherd of the sheep" (Heb. 13:20), the "Chief Shepherd" (1 Pet. 5:4), which conditions our submission. If elders should call disciples to act contrary to the Lord's will, the only appropriate response is that we must obey God rather than man.

f. The point, as I see it, is that we cannot transfer our responsibility as disciples of Christ to some third party or assume the role of that third party.

(1) We cannot abdicate our responsibility to follow the Lord by blindly following what another person or group of persons tell us that means. And we cannot take up that role in another disciple's life. To do that is to call them or be called rabbi, father, and instructor in the sense Jesus prohibits. It is good and right to respect, value, and be open to the message and leading of particular teachers and religious leaders, but we must never put them in the place of the Lord, grant them an authority that belongs only to him. His word remains the standard, the ultimate authority.

(2) There are more subtle ways in which one can fall prey to this, but one striking example is Jim Jones, the cult leader who led some 900 people to kill themselves in Guyana several decades ago. He was their rabbi, their guru, to the point that they followed him in place of Christ.

2. In v. 9 the disciples are told to call no one on earth their father because they have only one Father, who is in heaven.

a. In keeping with the context, this is not referring to calling one's male parent "father." Indeed, Jesus referred to biological fathers and insisted on honoring them in Mat. 15:1-9 (see also Mat. 19:19). Neither is he referring to "father" in the later metaphorical sense of one who led someone else to become Christ's disciple. In 1 Cor. 4:15 Paul tells the Corinthians by the Spirit of God, "I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

b. Jesus is repeating the point he just made but from a different angle. They are not to call any mere human "father" in the sense of being an ultimately

authoritative religious voice. The use of "father" to refer to such teachers, whether applied to current teachers or restricted to the renowned masters of Jewish history, gives to those voices an authority that rightly belongs only to God the Father. (The shift from the Christ to God the Father was prompted by father being another term for some kind of authoritative teacher.)

3. The general point is repeated again in v. 10, this time identifying Jesus as the "one instructor," which parallels the "one teacher" of v. 8. There is a suggestion of Christ's divinity here with the reference to the one heavenly Father being sandwiched between the two references to Christ as the one teacher and instructor.

H. Jesus ends the remarks directed to his disciples by repeating in essence what he told them in Mat. 20:25-28. He says in vv. 11-12 that greatness among his disciples is not judged as greatness in the world is judged.

1. It is the one who humbles himself so as to serve others who is esteemed in the eyes of the Lord, not the one who puts himself above his brothers. So the Christian who exalts himself, who seeks rank and adulation within the community, will be humbled by God, whether as discipline in this life or as regret in the next, when his failure in that regard is laid before the Lord. On the other hand, the Christian who humbles himself will be exalted by the Lord. Even if that exaltation by God is not visible in this life, the humble servant surely will hear from the one who matters, "Well done my good and faithful servant."

2. As Paul famously wrote (Phil. 2:5-11): ⁵Think this [way] among you, which also [was] in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, being in the form of God, did not consider being equal with God as something to be used for his own advantage, ⁷but emptied himself by taking [the] form of a slave, by being born in [the] likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, ⁸he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross! ⁹Therefore also God highly exalted him and graciously gave to him the name that is above every name ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, [that] of [the] heavenly ones and [the] earthly ones and [the] ones under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ [is] Lord to [the] glory of God the Father.

III. Mat. 23:13-36 – Seven woes to the scribes and Pharisees

A. Mat. 23:13 – *But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. For you do not enter nor do you allow those who are trying to enter [conative present] to enter.*

1. The word translated "woe" (ὀύαι) can be an expression of compassion ("alas") as it is in Mat. 24:19, it can carry a strong sense of condemnation as it does in Mat. 11:21, or it can carry both senses as it seems to in Mat. 18:7. Here the sense of condemnation certainly predominates.

2. "Hypocrite" in the New Testament is a broader term than we often realize. It includes a wide range of inconsistency between appearance and reality. For example, in Mat. 15:1-9 the scribes and Pharisees are called hypocrites for teaching a traditional interpretation that contradicted the truth revealed in Scripture about honoring one's parents. To appear as a religious leader, a trustworthy spiritual guide, and then to act inconsistently with that appearance by misleading people with false teaching constitutes hypocrisy in the New Testament sense.

3. So here the scribes and Pharisees are decried as hypocrites for shutting the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. They claim to teach God's way, but not only do they not enter the kingdom, they magnify their error by preventing those who are trying to enter from entering.

a. The scribes and Pharisees do not enter the kingdom because they refuse to recognize who Jesus is.

(1) The scribes and Pharisees have been resisting Jesus throughout Matthew. As I mentioned earlier, Matthew reports that the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by the prince of demons (Mat 9:34, 12:24) and conspired to kill him (Mat. 12:14). Jesus warned his disciples to beware of the Pharisees' (and the Sadducees') teaching (Mat. 16:6-12), the Pharisees tested Jesus on various occasions (Mat. 16:1, 19:3), and they plotted how to trap him in his words (Mat. 12:12-14, 22:15).

(2) John 5:16 reports that the "Jews" were persecuting Jesus for healing on the Sabbath, which no doubt included scribes and Pharisees (e.g., Lk. 6:7). Jesus tells them in Jn. 5:39-40, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life."

b. Those who were trying to enter the kingdom (taking the present participle as a conative present) are those who were openly pursuing the idea that Jesus is the Christ, the one who brings the kingdom and the one through whom people enter the kingdom. The scribes and Pharisees would not allow them to enter the kingdom in the sense they used all their religious influence and authority to get people to reject the conclusion that Jesus is the Christ.

(1) They literally were the "devil's advocate," working to arrest the development of people's faith.

(1) In Mat. 9:33 the crowds were marveling over the dramatic exorcism Jesus had just performed, declaring, "Never was anything like this seen in Israel." In Mat. 9:34 the Pharisees try to detract from the Lord's miraculous work by charging the "he casts out demons by the prince of demons."

(2) After the exorcism in Mat. 12:22 the people were amazed and were asking specifically (v. 23) "Could this be the Son of David?" And

again, the Pharisees were quick to throw cold water on that idea, saying (v. 24) "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons."

(3) The scribes and Pharisees presumably were among those who, as noted in Mat. 11:19, accused the Lord of being a glutton and a drunkard. The goal of this slander was to convince people that Jesus could not possibly be the Messiah.

(4) After Jesus healed the blind and the lame in the temple in Mat. 21:14, which miracles the chief priests and scribes witnessed, and the children began crying out "Hosanna to the Son of David," the priests and scribes were indignant. They found it intolerable that people would think such a thing about Jesus and, in essence, urged him to rebuke them for it. Of course, Jesus responded (v. 16), "Yes; have you never read, "'Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise'?"

(2) As a theological aside, this suggests that being taught wrong does not free one from responsibility to learn the truth. Those in Jesus' day who followed the religious leaders in their denial that Jesus is the Christ were not excused for their lack of faith by the fact their leaders had misled them. They had access to truth beyond the teaching of the leaders, not only in the Scripture they knew but also in the ministry and teaching of the Lord Jesus and were expected to pursue that truth. And, of course, people in our world today, a world flooded with lies and false religion, have access to truth in the word of God and in teachers who present that truth faithfully.

4. Notice that the woe is directed against the leaders, the scribes and Pharisees. They are the targets because as teachers they have a tremendous responsibility and thus a greater culpability. James 3:1 says, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we will receive a stricter judgment." Jesus said in Mat. 18:6, "but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."

5. The standard Greek text and most modern translations omit v. 14 because it almost certainly was not part of the original text of Matthew. It seems it was added to a later manuscript based on Mk. 12:40 or Lk. 20:47. So it is a saying of Jesus but just not one that was part of Matthew's Gospel. It is absent in the best and earliest manuscripts of Matthew, and the manuscripts that do include it divide in putting it before or after v. 13.

B Mat. 23:15 - Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel about the sea and the land to make one proselyte, and when he becomes [one] you make him a son of hell twice [that] of you.

1. There is some question about the extent to which first-century Jews evangelized Gentiles outside of Palestine. Some think their missionary activity focused

almost exclusively on traveling to distant synagogues and convincing God-fearers, Gentiles who worshiped as Jews but were unwilling to undergo circumcision, to become proselytes, full Jews. But whether they were converting "raw" pagans or sympathizers to Judaism, the point is that they were doing them terrible harm.

2. By converting Gentiles to Pharisaism they doomed them, made them sons of hell, because their conversion marked their acceptance of the Pharisees' theology which included the rejection of Jesus as the Christ. Converting to the Pharisees' brand of Judaism was to embrace the door to the kingdom of heaven being shut in their faces.

3. The converts were *twice* the sons of hell as the Pharisees who converted them in the sense that as adult converts they often were zealous and blindly loyal to Pharisaism. It was a new, exciting, huge, and costly change for them, and as a result they often "out-Phariseed" the Pharisees. They would be rabid in defending Pharisaical positions, including the denial of Jesus as the Messiah.

a. The word translated "hell" (here and in v. 33 and in many other places in the NT) is *Gehenna*. The word *geenna* is the Greek form of the Aramaic word *gehinnam*, which in turn goes back to the Hebrew *ge hinnom* ("Valley of Hinnom"), a valley adjacent to Jerusalem.

b. At one time, human sacrifices were offered in the Valley of Hinnom to the god Molech (2 Ki. 23:10; Jer. 7:31). Virgil Cruz states:

Near where this valley joined the Kidron Valley, on the south and east, was Topheth, early site of Baal worship and the abominable practice of sacrifice of children to Molech (cf. 2 Kings 16:3 and 21:6 for involvement respectively of Ahaz and Manasseh; and 2 Kings 23:10 for condemnation of Josiah, the reformer king). In Jeremiah 7:32 and 19:6 is the prophecy that this place of shame will become the place of punishment by God.

Because of such associations, by the first century B.C., *gehenna* came to be used metaphorically for the hell of fire, the place of everlasting punishment for the wicked.¹³

c. Though it is often said that in Jesus' day the valley served as a fiery garbage dump for the city, there is no literary or archaeological evidence supporting that claim. That idea appears to have been started by Rabbi David Kimhi in the 13th century when commenting on Psalm 27.¹⁴

4. This rebuke would apply today to any group that converts people to a faith that locks them out of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. There are

¹³ Virgil Cruz, "Gehenna" in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 2001), 480.

¹⁴ David A. Croteau, *Urban Legends of the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2015), 49-53. See also, Todd Bolen, [The Myth of the Burning Garbage Dump of Gehenna](#) (accessed on 3/11/24).

countless false religions, some that make no pretense of accepting Jesus as the Messiah and some that do.

C. Mat. 23:16-22 – ¹⁶ *Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated."* ¹⁷ *Fools and blind men! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has sanctified the gold?* ¹⁸ *And [who say], "Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing, but whoever swears by the gift upon it is obligated."* ¹⁹ *Blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift?* ²⁰ *So the one who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it;* ²¹ *and the one who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it;* ²² *and the one who swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.*

1. Oath taking was a prevalent practice that was much abused in Jesus' day. Voluntary oaths whereby a person would swear that he would or would not do something were common in everyday life. But people were afraid of invoking God's name in an oath because violating such an oath was considered profaning the name of God, which they feared he would severely punish (Ex. 20:7; 1 Ki. 8:31-32). So rather than swear by God's name they swore by all kinds of other things that had varying degrees of connection with God. It is evident from Mat. 5:34-36 that some would swear by heaven, by earth, by Jerusalem, and by their own heads. We see from the text we just read that some also swore by the temple, the altar, the gold of the temple, and the gift on the altar.

2. The Pharisees purported to have the answer, the correct understanding of God's will, as to which oaths were valid and binding and which were not. But their so-called answer revealed their lack of understanding of God. In less than four verses Jesus calls them "blind guides," "fools and blind men," and "blind men." That is a clue that they really have missed the boat.

3. To make the validity of an oath hinge on a technicality in wording when the whole point of giving the oath was to bolster one's credibility by an albeit indirect appeal to God is to think that God puts form over substance. It is like thinking God would not hold to an oath one who had his fingers crossed when uttering it. It is a mechanical, small minded, and in fact outrageous, concept of God.

4. Jesus exposes the error of trying to force God into their mechanical, legalistic mold by showing the utter foolishness of their oath distinctions. It makes no sense to claim that swearing by the lesser (the gold *of the temple* and the gift *on the altar*) is binding but not swearing by the greater (the temple and the altar that make the gold and the gift sacred). And to think that one who swears by the temple, the altar, or by heaven has not sworn by the living God is nonsense. Since the distinctions they put forth as determinative of the validity of oaths in God's eyes are patently illogical, they clearly do not understand God and need to rethink the view of him that drove them to such absurdities.

5. It is instructive to compare Jesus' handling of the "oath question" in Mat. 5:33-37. He rejects voluntary oath taking altogether. The Old Testament requirement of keeping one's oath (not swearing falsely) points to the fundamental importance of truthfulness, and that requirement finds its fulfillment in a truthfulness that is so consistent that there is no place for an oath. Since every word of a disciple was to be honest and binding, there was no place for them to offer sworn speech as distinctively trustworthy. To do so was an indictment against one's own integrity.

a. This prohibition probably is limited to voluntary oaths. In an official oath, one that responsible authorities require, the one swearing is not offering the testimony as more reliable. He simply is complying with someone else's requirement for trustworthiness.

b. If Paul's "witness formula" (e.g., 2 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 1:20) qualifies as swearing, it may be that love requires that voluntary oaths be given when skepticism makes them necessary to benefit others (see also God swearing in Heb. 6:17). There's a difference in my swearing to you that my elixir is an antidote to a snake bite so you will buy my product and my swearing that it is an antidote so you will take it before you die.

6. The anger Jesus expresses in calling them "Fools and blind men" (see also Mk. 3:1-5) is different from what he condemns in Mat. 5:21-22. It is a righteous indignation directed toward sin, toward a gross misrepresentation and caricature of God that damages the spiritual life of those sucked in by it. Holiness cannot be indifferent toward *sin*. It is not noble to yawn at moral outrages. The reference in 5:21-22 is to personal anger (which probably explains the clarifying addition "without cause" in v. 22 of some manuscripts). Robertson McQuilken and Paul Copan write:

Righteous and unrighteous anger can be distinguished by the *cause* of anger. One should be angry over sin that offends God, harms others, or harms the person sinning. The difficulty with being righteously indignant is that our motives are often mixed. Am I distressed over a sin that offends God and harms people, or am I angry over the way I am affected? In the latter case, the safe thing may be to eschew anger altogether, as when my child does wrong but the wrong embarrasses me. Better to wait till the anger subsides to be sure the resulting action does not come from a mixture of righteous and unrighteous indignation. Anger is sinful when it is for the wrong reason or results in the wrong action.¹⁵

D. Mat. 23:23-24 – ²³ *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin yet have neglected the weightier things of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These things it was necessary to do, and those not to neglect.*
²⁴ *Blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!*

¹⁵ Robertson McQuilken and Paul Copan. *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 354-355.

1. Various passages in the Old Testament address the Jewish obligation of tithing (e.g., Lev. 27:30-33; Num. 18:21-24; Deut. 12:15-19, 14:22-29, 26:10-14). Clearly the people were required to give a tenth of certain of their assets for the benefit of the Levites (Num. 18:21), who in turn were to give a tenth of that tenth in support of the priests (Num. 18:25-28), but there is some uncertainty about the full picture of tithing, about how the various texts were integrated and practiced in the first century.

2. There evidently was a debate about precisely what assets came within the tithing obligation related to farming. "[O]ne area of piety for which Pharisees were particularly known was their scrupulousness in tithing,"¹⁶ and they were among those who insisted that the law required even garden herbs, not simply field produce, to be included in the tithe.

3. Jesus does not rebuke them for being concerned over the details of tithing and being careful to give a tenth of even garden herbs. Rather, he says it was necessary for them to do that, either because that was the correct understanding of the law or because that is what they sincerely believed God required and thus was an obligation of their own consciences.

4. He rebukes them for neglecting the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness – while caring so much about the less important matter of the precise extent of the tithing obligation. They are hypocrites in this because their focus on the minutia of tithing made them appear to be obsessed with the things of God, but the reality was otherwise as demonstrated by their lack of concern for the more important things of God.

5. They are blind guides because they purport to be spiritual leaders but do not see the true way of God. Their focus on the details of tithing, while neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness, is like a person who is very careful to strain his wine so as not to mistakenly ingest a ritually unclean gnat (Deut. 14:19) but who swallows a camel, the largest unclean animal in Palestine (Deut. 14:7). In Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, the words for gnat and camel are very similar: *qalmā'* (gnat) and *galmā'* (camel).

6. God's concern for justice, mercy, and faithfulness is a central note of the Old Testament as well as the New. He has always insisted that we treat others fairly, that we be kind and merciful toward them, and that we be faithful in our walk with him, giving him the supreme loyalty he deserves. Jesus may well have in mind here Mic. 6:8: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness / mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" To be more concerned with the lesser matter of tithing details is inexcusable. It again reflects a warped concept of God.

7. Notice that Jesus refers to "weightier things," more important things, in the will of God.

¹⁶ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 550.

a. He earlier spoke of lesser commandments (Mat. 5:19) and the greatest commandment (Mat. 22:36-38; Mk. 12:28-31). The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is called "very grave" in Gen. 18:20, Israel's sin with the golden calf is called a "great sin" in Ex. 32:21, 30, the sin of Eli's sons is called "very great" in 1 Sam. 2:17, and the sin of the northern kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam is called "great sin" in 2 Ki. 17:21. God speaks to Ezekiel of "great" and "greater" abominations in Ezek. 8:5-15. And the Apostle Paul leaves no doubt in 1 Cor. 5:1-2 that incest in the form of a man having his father's wife was a particularly great offense.

b. No aspect of God's will is trivial, but some things are more central, more important. The fact all unforgiven sin will exclude one from eternal life with God does not mean that all sins are equally offensive to God in all respects, that they are all equally bad. That is a myth. Looking at a woman with lust is sinful, but it is a less serious sin than raping her. Being angry with a brother is sinful, but it is a less serious sin than chopping him into pieces. Michael Kruger states:

First, to say all sins are the same is to confuse the *effect* of sin with the *heinousness* of sin. While all sins are equal in their effect (they separate us from God), they are not all equally heinous.

Second, the Bible differentiates between sins. Some sins are more severe in terms of impact (1 Cor 6:18), in terms of culpability (Rom 1:21-32), and in terms of the judgment warranted (2 Pet 2:17; Mark 9:42; James 3:1). . . .

Third, although all people are sinners, the Bible makes it clear that some are more holy than others. The Bible has the category of the "righteous" person who is singled out by God as notably different.

In the end, all sins are the same in their effect, but some sins are different in terms of their heinousness.¹⁷

c. Homosexual activists sometimes attempt to put the church on the defensive and to weaken its resistance to their sin by claiming the church is wrong to distinguish homosexual conduct from any other sin. Well, not only is it distinguishable from other sins by the fact there is an organized attempt to redefine homosexual conduct as *not* being sinful, as being something to celebrate and be proud of, but as Robert Gagnon points out, "[t]he Bible gives many indications that homosexual practice is regarded as a particularly severe sexual offense."¹⁸ That is another story for another time, but I thought it deserved at least a footnote here.

¹⁷ Michael J. Kruger, [Taking Back Christianese #6: "All Sins Are Equal in God's Sight"](#) (posted on 12/5/16; accessed on 3/11/24). See also, Michael Wittmer, *Urban Legends of Theology: 40 Common Misconceptions* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2023), 107-111.

¹⁸ Robert A. J. Gagnon, [It's Silly to Compare Homosexual Practice to Gluttony](#) (posted on 7/19/12; accessed on 3/11/24).

8. We must always be on guard against allowing a focus on the lesser to blind us to a failure regarding the greater. No zeal for the particulars of worship or church government, for example, however important they may be, can be allowed to narrow our focus to only those things. We must never lose sight of our fundamental obligation to love people, to serve people, to be gracious, charitable, and forgiving toward people, and to walk humbly with God in every aspect of our lives. Let us keep the former without neglecting the latter, without becoming content with only keeping the former.

E. Mat. 23:25-26 – ²⁵ *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full from greed and self-indulgence.* ²⁶ *Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup that the outside of it also may be clean.*

1. The Pharisees' concern with ritual cleansing of items related to eating was well known. For example, Mk. 7:3-4 states (ESV): ³ (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, ⁴ and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.)

2. When Jesus said earlier in his ministry, in Lk. 11:39-41, "you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish," he was using "cup and dish" as metaphors for, representations of, the Pharisees themselves. He was not talking about their literally washing cups and dishes as part of ritual purification. That is clear from the immediately following clause, "but the inside *of you* is full of greed and wickedness." In other words, in saying they "clean the outside of the cup and dish" he was referring to how they made themselves appear outwardly, how they appeared pious in the eyes of men, while being corrupt in their hearts.

3. Here Jesus ultimately makes that same point, but I think he gets there in a slightly different way. As in Luke, he tells the Pharisees "you clean the outside of the cup and dish" (different word for dish), but instead of saying "but the inside *of you* is full of greed and wickedness," thus making clear that the cup and dish represent the Pharisees, he says "but *they* are full *from* greed and self-indulgence," meaning the cup and dish are full from the proceeds of greed and self-indulgence. (Note that γέμουσιν ἐξ can mean "they are full *of*," but the normal meaning of ἐκ is "from, out of.")¹⁹

a. So it seems the cup and dish in Mat. 23:25 start off as a literal cup and dish not as metaphors for the Pharisees. The complaint is that the food and drink the Pharisees enjoy in the vessels they have been so careful to cleanse ritually, insisting

¹⁹ It is so translated here in ASV and ERV. NEB says, "which you have filled inside by robbery and self-indulgence!" GNT says, "the inside is full of what you have gotten by violence and selfishness." See also, David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 313; Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew, A Commentary, Volume 2* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), 826-827; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 584; Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 270.

that even the outside must be cleaned to qualify the container as ritually pure (a minority at this time apparently argued that cleansing the inside was sufficient), were gained through immoral behavior, through the mistreatment and exploitation of others. That certainly fits with Jesus' charge in Mk. 12:40 and Lk. 20:47 that the scribes "devour widows' houses" and Luke's comment in Lk. 16:14 that the Pharisees were "lovers of money." This was an example of their lack of justice, mercy, and faithfulness criticized in v. 23.

b. They are hypocrites because their visible concern for ritual purity suggests they are all about God, but their lack of concern over taking advantage of others shows they are not. They are blind in the sense they ignore this glaring inconsistency.

4. Having "called out" the Pharisees for acquiring the contents of their ritually clean cups and dishes through immoral behavior, he then uses the cup as a metaphor for them (as in Lk. 11:39) to address their need to cleanse their hearts.

a. Their immoral, exploitative conduct flowed from their corrupt hearts. Jesus said in Mat. 15:19, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." He said in Lk. 6:45, "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."

b. Accordingly, Jesus tells them first to clean the inside of the cup, meaning the inside of themselves, their hearts. It is a call to repent, to purify their hearts, which would include accepting Jesus as the Messiah. Good and right behavior will flow from that clean heart, and so they will in that sense be clean on the outside as a result. You recall Zacchaeus's response to his encounter with the Lord in Lk. 19:8: And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold."

F. Mat. 23:27-28 – ²⁷ *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside appear beautiful but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.* ²⁸ *So you also on the outside appear righteous to men but inside are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*

1. Based on Deut. 16:1-8, Jewish pilgrims in the first century flocked to Jerusalem each year to celebrate the Passover. According to Num. 19:11-22, contacting a grave would make a person ritually unclean for seven days, which uncleanness would prevent the person from participating in Passover. Since there were many graves in Palestine that would not be readily identifiable as such, it became customary for people in the weeks prior to the Passover to mark graves with a white chalk or lime as a warning to pilgrims to steer clear.

2. The word translated "tomb" (*taphos*) refers here to a structure that was built to house a corpse or mark a grave. As is clear in v. 29, it was something that was

constructed. Because it would not always be clear to visitors whether a particular structure actually housed a corpse or was built over a grave, as opposed to being a mere memorial for the dead, in those ambiguous cases, the safe thing to do was to mark them.

3. Some of these tombs were elaborately built and carved. The chalk or lime ("whitewash") that was used to mark them could be used to mask defects (Acts 23:3), but it was not decorative and would not beautify the tomb. The tombs in question did not appear beautiful because they had been whitewashed. Rather, they were *structurally beautiful* and were whitewashed to indicate they were housed a corpse or were built over a grave and thus were potentially defiling.²⁰

4. So when an ornate, beautiful tomb was marked with whitewash, it was an indication that the beautiful outer structure, the monument, was just a flashy exterior that housed dead people's bones and all kind of uncleanness. It looked good on the outside, but it was in fact defiling.

5. In the same way, the scribes and Pharisees look good on the outside. They appear righteous in the eyes of men because of their outward show of piety, but inside they are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness; they are inwardly corrupt. Perhaps implicit in this was the implication that they are to be avoided as one would avoid a whitewashed tomb. Coming into contact with them in terms of coming under their influence will have negative spiritual consequences.

G. Mat. 23:29-36 – ²⁹ *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous,* ³⁰ *and you say "If we lived in the days of our fathers we would not have been partners with them in the blood of the prophets."* ³¹ *So you testify against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.* ³² *Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.* ³³ *Snakes! Brood of vipers! How can you escape from the judgment of hell?* ³⁴ *For this reason – behold – I am sending to you prophets and wise men and scribes; [some] of them you will kill and crucify, and [some] of them you will whip in your synagogues and persecute from city to city.* ³⁵ *So upon you may come all [the] righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.* ³⁶ *Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.*

1. The scribes and Pharisees outwardly aligned themselves with the prophets of old. They built tombs in their honor and decorated monuments that were dedicated to the righteous. They also declared that if they had been alive in the days of the prophets, they would not have joined their fathers in mistreating them. By this they appear to be completely allied with God, but in reality, they are more hardened to God's message than any in the past. Thus, Jesus calls them hypocrites. They were at that moment looking for a way to kill Jesus, the very Son of God! See Mat. 21:33-39, 45-46; Mk. 11:18; Lk. 19:47-48.

²⁰ See David E. Garland, *The Intention of Matthew 23* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979), 150-157.

2. Jesus plays on an ambiguity in the word "father" to turn what they intended to be an exculpatory declaration – they would not have been partners with their fathers in mistreating the prophets – into an indictment. Being the "son of" someone can refer to a literal physical descent, as the scribes and Pharisees obviously intended, but it can also be a metaphor for a shared character (e.g., sons of the evil one [Mat. 13:38], sons of thunder [Mk. 3:17]; see also, Jn. 8:39-41a). Jesus says that in admitting they were sons of those who murdered the prophets (by calling them fathers) they were uttering the truth, whether or not they recognized it, that they share the character of those who murdered the prophets. They were sons of those fathers in the character sense, chips off the old block.

3. Jesus characterizes the spirit and course of their lives as a continuation of their fathers' persecution of the righteous by saying, "Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers." The sense is, "Go ahead and fill up the measure of sin that your fathers began filling by murdering the righteous; do to me, God's only Son, what you have decided in your hearts to do." Implicit in the notion of "filling up the measure of sin" is the idea that God's wrath will come as a result. And we see this, of course, in the destruction of Jerusalem, the representation of Israel, that Jesus laments in vv. 37-39. This was a consequence of Israel's rejection of God's Messiah.

4. Some would put vv. 33-36 as a closing comment on all the woes, but the continuing theme of persecution of the righteous makes me think it is more closely related to the final woe. Jesus calls the scribes and Pharisees snakes and the offspring (brood) of vipers, which probably is a reference to the poison they spread by the things they say, most notably their adamant denial that Jesus is the Christ. In Matthew 12 the Pharisees tried to discourage those who had witnessed Jesus perform a great exorcism from concluding that he was the Messiah, the "Son of David," by claiming he performed such miracles through the power of Satan. Jesus said to the Pharisees in Mat. 12:34, "You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."

5. Their character has sealed their judgment. As those bent on following their fathers by rejecting and killing God's ultimate spokesman, his only Son, they have rejected their only hope for escaping the judgment of hell.

6. Because they share their fathers' character, their hostility to the messengers of God ("For this reason"), Jesus announces that he is going to send further messengers, meaning after his departure – Christian prophets and wise men and scribes – and the Jews of their stripe predictably will kill and mistreat them. This persecution is, of course, recorded in the Book of Acts and indicated elsewhere in the New Testament.

7. The effect of this Jewish persecution of the church will be the filling of the measure of their fathers' sin, which will result in the outpouring of God's wrath on Israel and on Jerusalem in particular.

a. They will be the generation of Jews on which the hammer falls, the persecutors who are on the scene when God will no longer withhold punishment of

Israel for shedding the blood of his righteous servants. As God's terrible wrath had fallen on Judah and Jerusalem in the late 7th and early 6th-centuries B.C. through the Babylonians, so it would fall again, this time through the Romans.

b. In terms of punishment within history, their generation will represent, stand in for, the murderers of the righteous throughout history. That is a way of indicating that the punishment brought by Rome will be horrific.

8. Jesus represents the blood of all the righteous who were killed with the phrase "from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar."

a. This is probably because Abel and Zechariah are the first and last righteous murder victims in the Old Testament according to the Hebrew arrangement of the books. Abel's murder by Cain is in Gen. 4:8, the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures, and Zechariah's murder is in 2 Chron. 24:20-22, which is the last book of the Hebrew Scriptures. That Jesus is referring to Zechariah from 2 Chron. 24:20-22 is supported by his description of Zechariah's murder as having occurred between the temple and the altar. 2 Chronicles 24:21 specifies that the priest Zechariah was stoned in the temple court.

b. A problem with this identification is that the Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24 is called the "son of Jehoiada" (24:20), whereas Jesus identifies the Zechariah he has in mind as the "son of Barachiah." Carson suggests that the identification of Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24 as the "*son of Jehoiada*" means *descendant* of Jehoiada, a grandson, rather than a literal son and that his father's name was known from tradition to be Barachiah.²¹ This is not as strained as it may seem. There is no specific word in Hebrew for grandson,²² and the prophet Zechariah is called the "son of Iddo" in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14 even though Iddo was his grandfather rather than his father (Zech. 1:1). So there is precedent for this usage.

c. It also is possible that Jesus is referring to the *prophet* Zechariah, who is identified in Zech. 1:1 as "the son of Barachiah, the son of Iddo." There is no biblical account of that prophet being killed, let alone being killed in the temple court, but a "Palestinian Targum"²³ on Lam. 2:20 says that Zechariah the son of Iddo (see Zech. 1:1) was killed in the sanctuary,²⁴ referring to the temple that was rebuilt during the time of Zechariah's post-exilic ministry.

9. The punishment did indeed come on their generation.

a. The first Jewish-Roman War began in A.D. 66 when the Roman procurator Gessius Florus sparked a revolt by taking money from the Temple treasury to

²¹ Carson, 545.

²² John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 86.

²³ An Aramaic paraphrase and explanation necessitated by diminishing familiarity with Hebrew.

²⁴ Quarles, 593.

cover a shortfall in tax revenue. Thousands of Jerusalemites were killed in the response to the revolt. Things got worse from there, and in A.D. 70, after a four-month siege, the city of Jerusalem fell and the Temple was destroyed. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, it was indeed horrible. He writes:

In every house where there was the least morsel of food, relatives fought over it. Gaping with hunger, the outlaws prowled around like mad dogs, gnawing at anything: belts, shoes, and even the leather from their shields. Others devoured wisps of hay, and then there was the incredible horror of Mary of Bethzuba [who roasted and ate her own child].

After entering the city, the Roman soldiers:

[M]assacred everyone they found, burning them in houses with all who had taken shelter in them. So great was the slaughter that in many places the flames were put out by streams of blood. Towards evening the butchery ceased, but all night the fires spread, and when dawn broke, all Jerusalem was in flames.

b. The war ended in A.D. 73 with the fall of the Jewish stronghold of Masada in the Judean desert. According to Josephus, when the Romans finally broke through the walls of this fortress in 73, they discovered that 960 of the 967 defenders had committed suicide.

c. Interestingly, the Christians had been warned by Jesus in Mat. 24:15-16 to flee the city when they saw the Roman troops gathering. The church historian Eusebius reports that, pursuant to an oracle given by revelation, they fled to a town in Perea called Pella before the war began.²⁵

10. As a historical footnote, there were two subsequent Jewish revolts that also were put down by the Romans.

a. In A.D. 115 Jews in Cyprus, Libya, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Judea, and Syria rebelled against the Romans killing thousands of Roman citizens. This revolt was crushed by A.D. 117.

b. In A.D. 132 the Jews in Judea again revolted, this time under the leadership of Simon bar Kosiba (called bar Kokhba, "son of the star," by his supporters). Simon's followers killed and persecuted Christians because they refused to go along with the claim that Simon was the Messiah. After Emperor Hadrian crushed this revolt in A.D. 135, he banned Jews from Jerusalem, renamed the city Aelia Capitolina, and set out to make it a pagan city.

IV. Mat. 23:37-39 – ³⁷ *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the [city] that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her. How often I wanted to gather your children, as a hen gathers*

²⁵ See Eusebius, *History of the Church* 3.5.3.

her chicks under the wings, yet you were not willing. ³⁸ *Behold, your house is left to you desolate.* ³⁹ *For I say to you, you will by no means see me from now until you say blessed [is] the one who comes in [the] name of [the] Lord.*

A. Jesus is sorrowful that the great city of Jerusalem, and the nation it represents, has set itself in such opposition to God that it kills the prophets and stones those sent to her. This has been her history, as Stephen so pointedly reminds them in Acts 7:51-53, and that hardheartedness will soon reach another level in the murder of God's only Son. One cannot help but think of Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants in Mat. 21:33-44, where the tenants kill the son after having killed other servants sent to them and it is recognized that the owner of the vineyard will punish the tenants as a result.

B. Jesus longed for the Jewish people to come to him en masse, to embrace him as the Savior he is (note the imagery of a hen gathering her chicks), but the religious leaders rejected him and turned the great majority of Jews away from him. It is tragic in the extreme.

C. As a result of their rejection of God, as most shamefully expressed in their rejection and murder of the Lord Jesus, their "house," meaning Jerusalem and the nation it represents, is left to them desolate.

1. God will abandon them (left to you) and allow the Roman army to make the nation, and especially Jerusalem, a wasteland (desolate). This echoes God's words in Jer. 12:7 regarding the Babylonian destruction in the sixth century B.C.: "I have forsaken my house; I have abandoned my heritage; I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies." And likewise in Jer. 22:5: "But if you will not obey these words, I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation."

2. In just a few verses (Mat. 24:3), Jesus says of the buildings that made up the temple complex that not one stone would be left upon another. The Romans literally tore down the temple complex, leaving only the western wall of the platform on which the complex was built.

D. In v. 39 Jesus reinforces the link between their rejection of him and their coming disaster. He says, in essence, to recalcitrant Israel, "Your house is left to you desolate *because* (For) you are about to kill me, remove me from your sight, and I am in fact the Messiah, as you will acknowledge the next time you see me, which will be when I return in glory."

1. He says that when they next see him, meaning after they murder him, they will say "blessed in the one who comes in the name of the Lord." That is a quote from Ps. 118:26, and it means that when they next see him they will acknowledge that he is the Messiah. And it is because they are killing the Messiah, the Son in the parable of the tenants, that wrath is unleashed on them. Grant Osborne states, "His 'you will never see me again' is a prophetic pronouncement of Jesus' impending departure via death and

resurrection and states the fact that they will not encounter him again until his parousia."²⁶

a. To say of Jesus "blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" is to say he is the Messiah. These were the same words the crowds were shouting in Mat. 21:9 when he entered Jerusalem, which they combined with "Hosanna to the Son of David!" These phrases so clearly meant that Jesus is the Messiah that in Mat. 21:16 the chief priests and scribes were indignant over the children crying out "Hosanna to the Son of David" and appealed to Jesus to put a stop to it.

b. The equation is explicit in Jn. 12:13. In that verse, the crowd was crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!"

2. When Jesus returns in glory, every knee will bend and every tongue will confess the truth of who he is (Phil. 2:9-11). At that time, neither the Jews nor anyone else will continue in denial of the fact Jesus is Lord. For some it will be a confession of joy and anticipation; for others it will be the forced homage of defeated enemies. The point is that they are about to kill the Messiah, and wrath will be unleashed upon them as a consequence.

²⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 863.