

Notes for Matthew -Chapter 23 (Page 1 of 8)

Introduction - "If they won't listen to Jesus, give them Moses!"

1. "Give them Moses" is to tell people about the law, God's requirements for perfection and how people can't those requirements based on their efforts.
 - a. If people don't want to hear the good news of the Gospel, then tell them the bad news about eternal damnation.
2. Chapter 23 is Jesus' final public speech. I call this speech the "anti-Sermon on the Mount"!
 - a. The Sermon on the Mount is all about changing your life on the inside, and that in turn, will change your behavior on the outside.
 - b. This speech in Chapter 23 is all about what happens to you when you fail to change your behavior on the inside.
 - c. It is a lot like trying to kill a weed. If you just mow-over the surface area, the weed will grow back. You have to kill the root. That is the idea behind the Sermon on the Mount. It is about "killing the evil roots" inside of you. Jesus focuses this speech on those "mowing over the weeds" as opposed to dealing with our internal nature.
3. The most common word used in this chapter is the word "woe".
 - a. "Woe" in the original Greek language, has both a condemnation and sorrowful tone.
 - b. This speech has "righteous anger" in that Jesus is a like a judge who pronounces a guilty verdict on those who deserve a guilty verdict.
 - c. At the same time, Jesus understands the eternity of hell. Therefore, it is also given as a sorrowful warning of what they have done.
4. This speech is not just, "You Pharisees fail to recognize me Jesus as the Messiah and now you are in big trouble". The fact the speech goes on for a whole chapter indicates there are details and life lessons designed for believers as well as non-believers.

Chapter 23 Verse 1: "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:"

1. Notice who Jesus is speaking to in this chapter: "The crowds and his disciples".
2. Remember in Chapter 22, Jesus played "question and answer" with the audience.
 - a. Jesus silenced his critics with his answers. That same audience is still right here.

Verse 2: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat."

- a. The term "Moses' seat" refers to the head rabbi's.
 - b. Their job was to properly interpret the Old Testament to the crowd.
 - c. Remember that people didn't own bibles. They learned their Hebrew Scriptures by attending synagogues and listening to the rabbi's preach.
2. Remember that the "teachers of the law" and the Pharisees are distinct groups.
 - a. The "teachers" are those who went to the equivalent of "Hebrew seminary".
 - i. By this time, the Jews had thousands of pages of official commentary on their bible, collectively called the Talmud and the Mishna. It was written over the centuries on how to interpret the Old Testament. The "teachers" studied this.
 - b. The Pharisees were a religious sect within Judaism. They were not necessarily rabbi's.
 - c. Pharisee-Judaism is a "way of life". It was to take the Old Testament, and estimate the strictest interpretation even at the point of being ridiculous.
 - d. Even the Talmud (official Jewish commentary) has some condemnation against some of the Pharisees groups for being external-only in their practice and being hypocritical.

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Verse 3: So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

1. The first sentence gets me: "So you must obey them and do everything they tell you"
 - a. What did Jesus mean by that? Are we to obey all aspects of the law?
 - b. Remember that the Old Testament is still binding upon us.
 - c. The difference is Jesus fulfilled all the requirements of the law so we don't have to. Out of gratitude for what Jesus did, we then let God work through us to "obey the law".
 - d. The sacrificial aspects of the law are all taken care of in Jesus. The practical aspects of the law are things God expects of us and are things we can do if and only if we let God rule in our hearts so He can work through us.
2. Jesus is saying in effect, "Look, just because the preacher is a hypocrite and doesn't practice what he preaches does not mean the bible is a bad book. The speaker may be bad, but truth is truth."
3. The other concept being taught is "whoever is in authority must be obeyed."
 - a. It does not mean to obey them to a point of denying Jesus.
 - b. It is about respecting those of authority, whether we like it or not.
 - c. "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established." (Romans 13:1, NIV)

Verse 4: "They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them."

1. For a large part of this chapter, we are going to read how the religious leaders were hypocrites. The word "hypocrites" is where we get our word "actor". It is one who is acting differently in one setting than he or she is in real life.

Verse 5: "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶ they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷ they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'"

1. The first sentence of Verse 5 summarizes much of the chapter:
 - a. "Everything they do is done for men to see:"
 - b. Compare that statement with one Jesus said from the Sermon on the Mount: "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. (Matthew 6:5, NIV)
2. The point is this is not a condemnation of religious acts, it is a condemnation of motivation. It is a good idea every now and then, especially in church to check and ask, "why am I doing this? Is it to be seen by people, or am I doing this because I am grateful for what Jesus did for me?"
3. Phylacteries are leather boxes containing 4 scriptures.
 - a. Three times in the Scriptures (Exodus 13:18, Deuteronomy 6:8, 11:18) God says about his law that you shall keep them "as frontlets between your eyes" (NKJV). The idea is to keep your eyes focused upon God.
 - b. Well, the Pharisees took this literal. They wore leather boxes containing a handful of scriptures dangling from their foreheads. (A picture of a phylactery is on the last page.)
 - c. Notice Jesus' condemnation is not against having phylacteries. Jesus condemns "making them wide" in Verse 6.
4. The tassels are a similar concept.
 - a. In Numbers 15:38, God commands the Israelites to make blue tassels to hang from their garments. The "blue" is a word-picture for a blue sky. It is a reminder to keep our lives heavenly-focused. The condemnation was about making their tassels long.

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Verses 8-10: "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. ⁹ And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ."

1. There is a classical debate within Christianity on how literal to take these verses:
 - a. Are we never to call anyone "Teacher" (which is Rabbi in Hebrew) or Father?
 - b. Some churches argue that way and never use the term "Father"/Teacher for any member.
 - c. The not-so-literal argument is that Jesus is teaching on stature and not titles.
 - d. This argument is that Jesus is arguing against "not letting a title go to your head".
2. Bible ministers and teachers are simply ones who are given the spiritual gift to teach God's word. They are no more, nor any less important than any other Christian.
3. Next, notice Jesus' statement, "You have one Teacher, the Christ."
 - a. Notice Jesus doesn't add "and that's me". Jesus wants us to come to that conclusion on our own without him having to say so. Jesus is not only our Lord, but also our teacher.

Verses 11-12: "The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

1. Heavenly rewards require humble attitudes. The word "minister" literally means servant.
2. Humility is to put others needs above your own. That is what biblical "love" is all about. Jesus is teaching this in contrast to those who do religious acts for the purpose of building their own ego.

Verse 13: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to."

1. Here comes the woe's. ☺ From Verse 13-32 are eight "woe's".
2. So what did Jesus mean by "shutting the kingdom in men's faces?"
 - a. These leaders not only denied Jesus, but did so publicly.
 - b. We know of at least one account where a believer was ex-communicated from the synagogue because he choose to follow Jesus. (See John 9:34).
3. Jesus point in this verse is that not only were these specific teachers and Pharisees not going to heaven, but they were working to prevent others to do the same.

Verse 14: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Therefore you will be punished more severely."

1. This verse is controversial because many early manuscripts do not have this verse.
2. I personally happen to believe Verse 14 is part of the original text. This text is too historical, too "unique" to be added, say by a writer centuries later.
3. Let me explain "devouring widow's houses": It is about taking away money from a poor widow while "acting religious" in the process.
4. The last part of this verse is about "lengthy prayers". This goes back to Matthew 6:5 when Jesus said, "They love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men".

Verse 15: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are."

1. At that time, there was some effort to convert outsiders to Judaism.
2. The point is that these non-believers in Jesus go through incredible lengths and trouble in order to win over a convert, and that person also denies Jesus. I believe the term "twice as much the son of hell" is because this new convert now is zealous in their anti-Jesus attitudes.

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Verse 16-22: "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.'¹⁷ You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred?¹⁸ You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.'¹⁹ You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred?²⁰ Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.²¹ And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it.²² And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it."

1. I can summarize this paragraph with this comment: "There are no loopholes with God".
2. Religious Jews of that day had a whole elaborate system of taking oaths.
 - a. It is based on part of the 10 commandments that says in effect, "you shall not take God's name in vain". (Exodus 20:7)
 - b. Their commentaries on how to take oaths had all sorts of do's and don'ts.
 - c. For example, their commentary says that, "Swearing by heaven and earth was not binding, nor was swearing by Jerusalem, though swearing toward Jerusalem was." (Expositor's Bible Encyclopedia on Matthew 5:33)
 - d. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also commented on the topic of taking oaths. Jesus summarized that section by saying in effect, "if you want to give your word on a commitment, just say "yes" or "no" and don't add anything to that (Ref. Matthew 5:37).
3. Jesus point in the Sermon on the Mount was a little different than his point here.
 - a. The religious Jews of that day believed that making an oath by the altar (i.e., "I swear by the altar of God") is not as binding as gold-as the-building-material or a monetary gift given to God. They viewed the material thing as more tangible, and therefore, more binding.
 - b. The "woe" of this paragraph is simply the fact that these religious leaders were putting more emphasis on material things than spiritual things.
4. The last thing to point out from this paragraph is oaths are binding.
 - a. Jesus wants us to have a trustworthy reputation. If people can't trust what we say, how can they trust what we say about God? Therefore, when we take an oath, we should keep it.

Verse 23: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

1. First notice the phrase (in the second line) where Jesus says, "You have neglected the more important matters of the law."
 - a. Jesus is saying that some aspects of the Old Testament law have more importance than others. They don't all have equal-weight in God's eye.
2. The Pharisees were practiced "tithing", which is giving 10% of what they had to God.
 - a. They were so picky about this, they went to their spice gardens, picked out the leaves and counted "one for God and nine for me... one for God and nine for me."
 - b. Jesus is saying they were hypocritical in that they obeyed some parts of the law ("tithing") but ignored the more important parts of the law.
 - c. Jesus might be paraphrasing Micah 6:8: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8, NIV)
 - d. Let me paraphrase Jesus here, "Yes, yes I know you give 10% of your spice garden. It's a nice gesture, but I'm not very impressed. I would be more impressed if you focused on the ideas of practicing justice, mercy and being faithful to God."

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Verse 23(cont.): A discussion of how these Pharisees not practicing justice, mercy and faithfulness:

3. When Jesus said, "they were devouring widow's homes for the sake of money", that could be an example of not practicing justice or having mercy.
4. One can also read this concept in regards to not seeing Jesus as the Messiah:
 - a. Justice is similar to the Christian concept of "justified". It sort of means "just-as-if-I-never sinned". We are sinless before God because of our trust in Jesus. To think you are "just" before God based on your religious deeds is the failing of the "Pharisees in all of us."
 - b. Think of "mercy" as asking God for mercy in our lives as opposed to trying to justify ourselves before God based on our good deeds.
 - c. "Faithfulness" is the trust that the Messiah is coming. They failed to see the purpose of Jesus first coming.

Verse 24: "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel."

1. In Leviticus Chapter 11, there is a whole list of animals that are forbidden to be eaten.
 - a. The largest of these forbidden animals was the camel. The smallest was the gnat.
 - b. For Jesus to say, "You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" is to say in effect, "You pay attention to the smallest details of the law, but miss the big-items of the law".
2. These forbidden animals are not binding upon Christians. In Acts Chapter 15, it was decided which Jewish customs were to be binding upon Gentile believers. We can eat what we want.
3. To use a modern cliché, Jesus is saying, "You miss the forest from the trees".
 - a. They were so busy studying the details that they missed the fact that throughout the Old Testament speaks of every aspect of Jesus life, purpose and ministry.
 - b. "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life." (John 5:39-40, NIV)

Verses 25-26: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.²⁶ Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean."

1. Remember the general-theme of the Sermon on the Mount was about keeping God on the throne of our heart. Christianity is all about God changing us from the inside out.
2. The mistake of Judaism is that it focuses on external behavior.
 - a. Remember Peter's words in Acts 15: "Now then, why do you (religious Jews) try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." (Acts 15:10-11, NIV)
 - b. Jesus uses the illustration of a cup that is pretty on the outside and dirty on the inside. It is a focus on our "religious acts".

Verses 27-28: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.²⁸ In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."

1. The same concept of "clean outside/dirty inside" continues with this next "woe".
2. In the Old Testament it is forbidden to touch a dead person
 - a. There is a whole set of rituals about who can touch a dead person and how that person becomes "ceremonial unclean" for a time being. (Translation: If you touch a dead body, you can't go to synagogue for a short period of time".)

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Verses 27-28 (cont.)

- b. The principal behind that concept is that God takes life seriously and God wants us to respect life. When we deal with death, we are not spiritually clean
- c. Given the "no-touchy-a-dead-person" rule, the Jews would clean and whitewash gravesites as to avoid accidentally touching that grave. Before big Jewish holidays, when many people would come to town, they would whitewash graves to make them obvious so people can avoid them.
- d. Jesus is saying these Pharisees are like those graves: pretty on the outside, full of rotting corpses on the inside.

Verses 29-30: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous.³⁰ And you 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.'"

1. In the same way we may lay flowers at the graves of our family members, these religious leaders built gravesites and put flowers at markers for the Old Testament prophets.
2. If you read through the Bible, and study some history behind the events, you will learn that most, if not all of the Old Testament prophets died violent deaths. When those prophets lived, the Jewish people of those days rejected their message as well.
3. The Pharisees were saying in effect, "If we were around in those days, we would not have rejected their message. We are better than the heathen Jews of that day."

Verses 31-32: "So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets.³² Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers!"

1. Jesus is saying in effect, "You are no better than the people who murdered the Old Testament Prophets because you want to/about to murder me."

Verses 33: "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

1. A "brood of vipers" is a bunch of snakes. Snakes are a word-picture for sin based on the devil's punishment from the Adam and Eve "fruit incident".

Verses 34: "Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town."

1. Notice Jesus says, "I am sending you prophets, wise men and teachers".
 - a. This is future tense. Who is Jesus referring to?
 - b. It is referring to Christians themselves. Each of us as Christians are given special gifts to be used by God. Some as prophets (a special ability to either predict the future and/or to expound upon God's word), some as wise men (the gift of knowledge) and some as teachers. There are other spiritual gifts as well.
 - c. In the Book of Acts, we read of Paul preaching in synagogues. In fact, that describes Paul's adventures at different stages of his life. He suffered from all three of these.
2. Notice in Verse 34, it is Jesus who sends "prophets, wise men and teachers".

Verses 35: "And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar."

1. In the English language, it sounds like Jesus is saying, "You have killed the prophets from "A to Z" as in (A)bel to (Z)echariah." That is just a coincidence.
2. What is true is that Jesus is listing these two people chronologically.
 - a. Abel is the first recorded human murder in the bible. (See Genesis Chapter 4).
 - b. Zechariah is one of the last prophets. He may have been the last one to be murdered.

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Verse 35 (cont.)

3. This verse is full of controversy among bible scholars:
 - a. The Zechariah of the Book of Zechariah was not recorded as the "Son of Berekiah".
 - b. Jesus may have been referring to another Zechariah. There was a Zechariah who was the son of Berekiah listed near the end of 2nd Chronicles. In a Jewish bible, Chronicles was the last book and Genesis was the first book. Jesus could be saying in effect, "The guy murdered near the start of the bible and the guy murdered near the end of the bible".
 - c. There are other possibilities too. Without a lot of details, this does not negate the bible.

Verse 36: "I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation."

1. Jesus is now getting "corporate". From here, to the end of the chapter, Jesus is focusing on the Israel nation, and not just the Pharisees that Jesus was specifically addressing.
2. Corporately, within 40 years, Israel no longer existed as a country. The Roman Empire got tired of Israel rebelling against Rome. They destroyed Israel, destroyed the temple, and killed millions of Jews. Jews were then scattered all over the world. Israel was not a country again until 1948.
3. It is important to note the word "this" in Verse 36. It is only about this generation.
 - a. Jesus does not say the "woe's" will come upon every Jewish generation from hereon in.
4. This generation was given the privilege of seeing Jesus. Because they rejected that information, they were punished corporately.

Verse 37: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."

1. Reading through the entire Old Testament, you can see how often God desired a generation of people who whole-heartedly turned and worshipped Him.
2. Occasionally people would repent, usually because they were facing some hardship and were desperate for God again. As soon as things were peaceful, they would turn away from God again. That pattern is repeated over and over again in the bible.
3. One of the great tragedies of all human history is this phrase, "You were not willing".
4. The good news is there is hope for the future Israel, as we will read in Verse 29.

Verse 38: "Look, your house is left to you desolate."

1. For 2,000 years, there was no Israel. Jesus prediction came true.
2. The "house" refers to the nation of Israel existing.
3. Or it could refer to the Temple itself. It was destroyed in 70AD and has not been rebuilt.

Verse 39: "For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

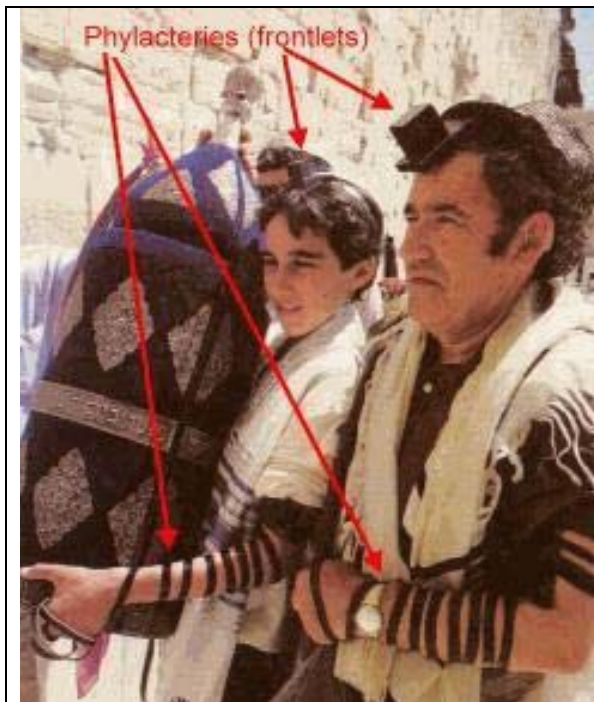
1. The great word in Verse 39 is "until". Jesus says you won't see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."
2. This verse can refer to any individual Jew who accepts Jesus today
3. The other view is that it refers to the nation of Israel corporately saying Jesus is the Lord.
4. Based on this verse, I do believe that one of the pre-requisites for Jesus second coming is the nation of Israel "corporately" praying for Jesus return.
 - a. During the 7-year tribulation, when the Antichrist is wrecking havoc on Israel, there will be two prominent prophets (See Revelation 11) speaking about Jesus. I believe many Jews of that day will pray for Jesus return. That event is what I believe Jesus is talking about when he says the word "until" in Verse 29.

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Verse 39: (cont.)

- b. There is a "hint" of this event in by the Prophet Hosea: " Then I (Jesus?) will go back to my place (heaven?) until They (Jewish nation?) admit their guilt. And they (Jewish nation?) will seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me." (Hosea 5:15, NIV)
- c. I added the phrases in the parenthesis as to consider the possibility that this prediction by Hosea is speaking of this future event.

Photos for Verse 5:



(From The New Manners & Customs of Bible Times by Ralph Gower, Moody Press, pg 371)

Right A Jewish tassel which hangs from the waste.

