

Week 27: Matthew 23

Hook



Main Point: Jesus' heart breaks over those who don't believe.

What causes do you care about most? In 2018, American individuals, bequests, foundations and corporation contributed an estimated \$427.71 billion to U.S. charities. Teacher, challenge your class to rank the following categories of nonprofit organizations, beginning with those they believe receive the greatest amount of contributions. Human services, health organizations, environment/animal organizations, religion (congregations, denominations, missionary societies, and religious media), arts/culture/humanities.¹

Answer: 1) Religion \$124.52 billion 2) human services \$51.54 billion 3) health organizations \$40.78 billion 4) arts/culture/humanities \$19.49 billion 5) environment/animal organizations \$12.7 billion

Q: Did the charitable giving ranking surprise you? Why or why not?

Q: What causes are you most passionate about? Why?

Transition: In today's passage, we will see Jesus moved by a cause that He cares about greatly, the lost.

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Book

Main Point: Jesus' heart breaks over those who don't believe.

Matthew 23:1–12 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Hypocrites don't practice what they preach.

Q: According to Jesus, what did the scribes and Pharisees really care about?

Q: What does it say to the culture when religious leaders don't practice what they preach?

Matthew is structured in five large blocks of teaching interspersed with narrative, and this chapter begins Jesus' fifth and final one (chapters 23–25). These are His final words (recorded in this Gospel) to His disciples before His Crucifixion, death and Resurrection. First, He warned them about the hypocrisy of some of their religious leaders – the scribes and Pharisees – who claimed to speak for God (chapter 23). Then He described the signs of the end of the age and His second coming (chapters 24–25).

Even though Jesus was pronouncing woe to the scribes and Pharisees, the audience was “the crowds and the disciples” (v. 1). There could have been some scribes and Pharisees in the crowd, of course, but He didn't go up to them to pronounce woe on them. It wasn't about cursing them; He was warning His followers to beware of them. Jesus' concern was His flock, who were being led astray and abused by these hypocritical leaders who put heavy burdens on them that were impossible for anyone to bear (v. 4).

In contrast, the yoke of Jesus is “easy and light” (Matthew 11:28–30). Though He calls His disciples to pick up their crosses and follow Him, Jesus takes their burdens on Himself out of love and care for them (1 Peter 5:7). This imagery comes from what happens when a smaller ox is being trained by a larger, more experienced one. Though the yoke is on both of them, it is the older, more experienced ox that carries the weight of the load.ⁱⁱ Though the path of discipleship is not an easy path to walk, our yoke is light because Jesus bears the weight of the load for us. Christ's demand of righteousness is actually even higher than the Pharisees (Matthew 5:20), but He bears that yoke for us. We are not judged on our own righteousness; we put on the righteousness of Christ to stand justified before God (2 Corinthians 5:21). The scribes and Pharisees dump this massive burden on the people, to live up to a standard of righteousness no one can keep (Romans 3:10), and then do nothing to help the people bear that burden (v. 4).

These leaders “sit in Moses' seat,” the seat in the synagogue reserved for the preacher/teacher (v. 2).ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, Jesus said, they didn't practice what they preach (v. 3). So Jesus says, “Observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do,” or in the NIV, “Be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do” (v. 3). These leaders were hypocrites – they taught one thing and did another. The Greek word for *hypocrite* literally means “actor,” so figuratively it meant someone who was playing a part – acting like something they weren't. In ancient

Greek theater, actors wore masks so they could play several different characters and so men could play women since only men were actors. So hypocrisy is connected to “wearing a mask,” hiding your true self, saying one thing but doing another. The problem with the Pharisees was not their teaching, but their behavior. All of the religious things they did weren’t for God at all, but “to be seen by others,” for their own honor, the very system Jesus condemned in all of His actions and teaching.

Jesus emptied Himself of honor by even becoming human at all, much less a carpenter’s son from a small village in Galilee (Philippians 2:1–8). Jesus chose ordinary fishermen and even despised sinners (Matthew the tax collector) to be His disciples. Jesus ate meals with tax collectors and sinners, let lepers and other sinful people touch Him, spoke with Samaritan and Canaanite women, let women sit at His feet to learn as if they were disciples. In these and a hundred other ways, Jesus showed He was “calling off the honor game.”^{iv} He even explicitly told those in power to give up their honor in order to welcome the poor, the vulnerable, and the outcast (Luke 14:12–14). Yet this was exactly what the Pharisees were all about – gaining honor in the eyes of men. Every example Jesus gave was about their efforts to gain honor:

Phylacteries are boxes with Scripture inside that Jewish men wear on their foreheads and hands during specific times of prayer. They wore them to literally fulfill the command from the *Shema* (the prayer the Jews said every morning and every night and at every holiday) which commanded the Jews to teach the words of the law to their children, talk about them all the time, and “bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be as frontlet between your eyes” (Deuteronomy 6:8). The boxes themselves weren’t wrong, but these Pharisees made the straps longer than they needed to be (see image^v to the right) to call attention to them or wore them more often than they needed to (for morning and evening prayers) in order to be seen as super-pious by others.^{vi}



Fringes referred to the tassels attached to the four corners of the outer cloak or prayer shawls of Jewish men. There were 613 tassels on the prayer shawl, one for each of the 613 commandments of the Law. Jesus Himself wore these fringes (Matthew 9:20; 14:36), so it wasn’t the garment that was problem but the fact that they made theirs longer than they needed to be.^{vii}



Seating was arranged by honor at meals – the most honorable was to the right of the host and it descended from there. The Sanhedrin sat ranked by honor. In the synagogues, the wisest rabbis were given seats of honor, young men were expected to give elders their seats, and many of the synagogues seated congregants by honor rank, just as they did at meals. In Luke, Jesus told the dinner guests of one of the rulers of the Pharisees not to seek out the place of honor at a meal, but instead to take the lowest place and let the host move them up to a better place if he willed. That way instead of exalting yourself, you let others exalt you (Proverbs 27:2).^{viii}

Greetings were also given according to honor; social superiors were greeted first. Greeting rabbis or leaders in the proper way was essential. They even used different greetings for more important rabbis with more disciples, one of which was “my Father.”^{ix} But Jesus tells His disciples they were not to be called rabbi, because even though they would one day make more disciples, the disciples they made would belong to Jesus, not them (v. 8).^x Jesus was their only rabbi or instructor (v. 10). God is their only father (v. 9). They were to be servants, to humble themselves and let God be the one to exalt who He wills.^{xi}

Q: Without naming names, have you ever known a church leader who was only in it for the honor or glory he received from men? What was the impact of his leadership?

Q: Describe anyone you know who truly lives a life of humility. What kind of impact do they have on the people around them?

Q: Describe people you know who strive to please God rather than man. What are their lives like? What kinds of priorities do they have? What kinds of decisions do they make?

Matthew 23:13–34 [Read] (Note: There is no v. 14 in the ESV, but you can find it in the NASB, HCSB or NKJV.)

Talking Point 2: Hypocritical leaders can lead whole flocks of people astray.

Q: Which of these images or examples is the most powerful to you and why?

This section is a long list of woes against the scribes and the Pharisees, as Jesus described their hypocrisy over and over. Yet His audience was still “the crowd and His disciples.” There may have been some of them in the audience, but He wasn’t speaking directly *to* them. He was warning the people *about* them. The pronouncement of woe against someone was certainly a pronouncement of judgment, but it was more of a sense of lamentation rather than a threat.^{xii} Jesus wasn’t threatening the Pharisees, He was lamenting their negative impact on the people He so dearly loved.

Jesus wasn’t addressing the scribes and Pharisees directly, but speaking to the crowds; however, because this was public, it was still an honor challenge to them, which invited their retaliation at some point. This was one of the many reasons they sought to kill Him just a few days later. Jesus had taught about humility and hypocrisy before, but this was a direct, public, verbal assault against the Pharisees.^{xiii} We miss some of the impact of these statements on their original audience because in the modern world, we are so used to thinking of Pharisees as hypocrites. Even the secular world sometimes uses that terminology. But it was absolutely scandalous for Jesus to call them out in this way. Everyone thought of the Pharisees as the most devoted practitioners of religion and the scribes as the experts in the Scriptures.^{xiv}

If we include v. 14, there are eight woes, a parallel to the eight beatitudes. We need to remember that in all of them Jesus wasn't criticizing their beliefs or teaching but their behavior, that they didn't *practice* what they preached.

- **vv. 13–15: Those who follow them won't enter the kingdom.**

There weren't Jewish missionaries in this time period who actually traveled to proselytize, but people did seek to convert Gentiles in their day-to-day life. Jesus' talking about them traveling "over land and sea" might sound normal to us – we're used to missionaries traveling to other countries – but it was actually a great hyperbole.^{xv} Followers of the Pharisees wouldn't enter the kingdom because the Pharisees themselves wouldn't enter it. They would bring their followers down with them. This is how they shut the door in their faces.

- **vv. 16–24: They are "blind guides" leading their people nowhere.**

Jews in Jesus' day were afraid that if they broke an oath they had taken in God's name, they would bring His wrath upon them (because it would be taking His name in vain, the third commandment). So instead, they swore by other things related to God, things they thought might still have His power – the temple, the altar, the gold in the temple, the offerings. The Pharisees were heavily involved in deciding which of these oaths warranted more punishment by God if broken. Here, Jesus proclaimed that all their nitpicking about this was nonsense. Swearing by anything related to God was still swearing by God (vv. 16–22). Jesus taught there was no need to swear by anything; just keep your word (Matthew 5:33–37). They completely missed the purpose of making a promise/oath at all, which is to *keep* it! They were also nitpicky about making sure to tithe exactly, even measuring out a tenth of their spices, yet they missed the heart of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. Jesus was using a play on words – they *weighed* their spices, but miss the *weightier* matters of the law.^{xvi}

The gnat versus the camel refers to one of the Pharisaic rules about straining out a fly that fell in your drink. Any bug smaller than a lentil (like a gnat) did not need to be strained out.^{xvii} Again this is major hyperbole! They worked hard to strain out a gnat that didn't legally have to be strained out, while a camel fell right in. This makes the same point – they spent all their time nitpicking about rules that don't even matter while completely missing the major principles of the law! This is why they wouldn't enter the kingdom – because they followed the letter of the law, but not the spirit. They thought they were being super-pious, but really they were missing the whole point.

- **vv. 25–28: They look great on the outside but are evil inside.**

The image of the cup refers to the cleanliness laws they had added to God's Word, found in the Mishnah, a collection of Jewish rabbinic teachings about the law from around the same time as Christ, but not published until about 200 years later.^{xviii} The whitewashed tombs refer to above-ground graves in the cemetery on the hillside of the Mount of Olives, which Jesus' audience could see from where He was teaching at the temple. They were

whitewashed each spring before Passover.^{xix} Both of the images are as clear for us today as they were then.



- **vv. 29–34: They persecute the true prophets.**

The Pharisees claimed that if they had lived in the times of the prophets, they would not have persecuted them or rejected their message. But they persecuted and rejected Jesus as He stood before them, and He was not just a prophet; He was God’s own Son! They claimed to speak for God and know His Word better than anyone else, but they didn’t even recognize God when they saw Him in the flesh. They would also persecute many of Jesus’ followers after Him.

It was as though Jesus was ripping off their masks and exposing them for the “actors” they really were. The religious leaders the people thought were so pious were really prideful hypocrites, just in it for their own honor and glory. They really had no idea who God is or what His kingdom is all about. Jesus was warning the people – if you follow them, you will not get to the kingdom. They will lead you down a different path to a different destination.

Q: In what ways have we seen this kind of hypocrisy in *some* church leaders in modern times? If Jesus were proclaiming woes to them today, what would He say?

Q: How can we recognize false teachers who are leading people astray?

Q: How can we keep *ourselves* from walking down the path of hypocrisy and pride?

Matthew 23:35–39 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Though Jesus pronounced woe and was angry with the leaders who led His people astray, He was more heartbroken than anything else.

Q: What was the significance of Jerusalem? Why would Jerusalem be punished?

Q: Describe Jesus’ heart in this passage. What does this tell us about Jesus?

Jesus now pronounced judgment on Jerusalem. Not every individual person, but the collective community. He used the language of the corporate personality. This generation would bear the punishment for all of the righteous blood that had been shed through every generation – from Abel to Zechariah, the first martyr of the Old Testament Scriptures to the last. This Zechariah is not the one who wrote the prophetic book, but a different Zechariah, who confronted the religious leaders of his day for forsaking the covenant. They stoned him to death in the court of the temple (2 Chronicles 24:20–22). In the Hebrew Bible, Chronicles is the last book, so he is the last martyr of the Old Testament.^{xxi} Before Jesus, this would have been the most heinous act imaginable – killing God’s prophet in His sacred temple! They killed John the Baptist, then they killed Jesus, the ultimate martyrdom of the only *perfectly* righteous man. This is the parable of the vineyard from Matthew 21:33–44. Judgment would come on this generation (v. 36). Their house, the temple, would be left desolate (v. 38) in AD 70, only 40 years after Jesus’ death.^{xxii} And it would never be rebuilt again, even to this day. Jerusalem would finally pay for generations of the shedding of innocent blood, culminating in the most innocent blood of Jesus.

Yet Jesus did not blast Jerusalem with lightning bolts of anger. He poured out lament for her.^{xxiii} He showed compassion on her people. In the same way He had compassion for the crowds earlier in Matthew, “because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:35–37). That “moved with compassion” (KJV) is a very intense term that means moved to the deepest part of yourself. Though He pronounced judgment on Jerusalem, He felt deep compassion for her people. The blame was on the leaders who had led them astray. Instead of punishing the people, Jesus longed to gather them together and be their Good Shepherd forever (John 10). Jesus’ talking about gathering them under His wings employs the same imagery God used to describe redeeming His people in the exodus (Exodus 19:4) and being their shelter in the Psalms (Psalm 17:8; 36:7; 63:7; 91:4). Again, He was equating Himself with God.

Jesus longed to rescue them and be their shepherd, but they were not willing (v. 37). Jesus longs to rescue all of us. God is not sitting up in the clouds just waiting to rain down fire and brimstone on you. He is waiting on high to have compassion on you. He longs to be gracious to you (Isaiah 30:18, NASB). The question is only whether you are willing. Jerusalem was not willing, so they would be judged. But a new Israel would rise up, a new kingdom, a new temple – the kingdom of heaven and the temples of the Holy Spirit in the very bodies of those who believe. Not those who could claim their own great honor through pedigree, piety or biblical knowledge (vv. 1–12), but those who honor Jesus by confessing, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” (v. 39). Pursuing our own honor and religious piety gets us nothing but destruction. But following Jesus opens the doors to the kingdom.

Q: Why is it so tempting for people to seek their own honor through religious piety? How is following Christ an act of humility and selflessness?

Q: How does it make you feel to know that Jesus is grieved over those who choose not to follow Him? What does that say about Him?

Q: How can we have the heart of Jesus for those who don't know Him? If we do feel the same kind of compassion and grief for the lost, how will it change the way we interact with them?

Week 27: Matthew 23

Took

Main Point: Jesus' heart breaks over those who don't believe.

Open floor plans first appeared in the 1950s and boomed beginning in the 1970s. Perhaps you've parented young children before and have experienced the utility of being able to keep eyes on your children while cooking dinner or relaxing in the living room. The open floor plan puts to death the idea of compartmentalizing your space. Take a few moments to prayerfully ask the Lord to reveal any aspects of your life that you have compartmentalized. Pray that He would expose and root out facets of your life in which your faith is not reflected. Commit to becoming a believer that invites Jesus into every area of your life.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Are you really practicing what you preach? Does your life reflect what you say you believe? If other people were to describe what you believed and valued just by looking at how you live (how you spend your time and money, what you talk about, how you treat other people, etc.), what would they say?

PRAY: For the American Church and the Church around the world. Pray that our leaders would be committed to Jesus, not be "in it" for their own glory. That they would not lead people astray but lead them to really follow Jesus. That we would all practice what we preach and be a light to the world.

ACT: Write a letter of encouragement to your church leaders. Tell them how much you appreciate and value them for really following Jesus and keeping your church committed to the truth of the Gospel. Tell them how much you appreciate them as role models for yourself and your children, that their lives truly reflect what they preach. Thank them for being leaders who lead people to Jesus and His kingdom.

ⁱ <https://givingusa.org/giving-usa-2019-americans-gave-427-71-billion-to-charity-in-2018-amid-complex-year-for-charitable-giving/>

ⁱⁱ David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993).

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Harold Dodd, *New Testament Studies* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1967).

^{iv} Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

^v Royalty-Free Image of the [Phylactery](#): Yoav Lemmer, Creative Commons

^{vi} T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979).

^{vii} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1999).

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^{viii} Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

^{ix} Martin Goodman, *State and Society in Roman Galilee, AD 132–212, Oxford Centre for Post-Graduate Hebrew Studies* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allenhead Publishers, 1983).

^x Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1999).

^{xi} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1999).

^{xii} A. W. Argyle, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

^{xiii} Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1992).

^{xiv} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1999).

^{xv} Kirsopp Lake, "Proselytes and God-Fearers" *The Beginnings of Christianity*, ed. By F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1979).

^{xvi} Robert Morris Johnston, "The Least of the Commandments: Deuteronomy 22:6–7 in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity" *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 20 (1982).

^{xvii} E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (London, UK; SCM Press, 1990).

^{xviii} Martin McNamara, *Palestinian Judaism and the New Testament, Good News Studies, 4* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983).

^{xix} A. W. Argyle, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

^{xx} Royalty-Free Image of the [Jewish Cemetery](#) on the Mount of Olives: Diego Delso, Creative Commons

^{xxi} John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1977).

^{xxii} John P. Meier, *Matthew, New Testament Message, 3* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1980).

^{xxiii} Gregory Baum, *The Jews and the Gospel: A Re-Examination of the New Testament* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing Co, 1961).