



Matthew 23:13-24
Beware of Religious Hypocrisy

Summary: Jesus levels charges of hypocrisy against religious people and warns His followers how to avoid it.

We need to start this morning by dealing with a technical issue. We're going to begin in Matthew 23, verse 13. But some of your Bibles won't have verse 14. Take a look. The numbering goes from 13 to 15 if you have an NIV, ESV, or New Living Translation of the Bible. But, you should have a footnote at the end of vs 13 that says other Manuscripts insert the text of vs 14 here and it should tell you what that says.

And, if you have a King James, New King James, or New American Standard Bible you will see verse 14 with a note that says some manuscripts don't have this verse.

What's going on?

Well, this is one of those rare spots where if you go all the way back to the oldest copies we have of the book of Matthew, you have two different versions and we're not 100% certain which one is right, so your Bible tells you both.

Now this isn't that big of a deal. Jesus actually said what you read in vs 14, no one is putting words into His mouth. If you want to make a note, you can turn to Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47 where Jesus says what is recorded as vs 14. So, the question is not, "Did Jesus say it?" The question is just, "Did Matthew intend to include it here?"

And the answer is: we're not entirely sure – we have some really old copies of the Bible that say yes, and some really old copies of the Bible that say no. I could go deeper on this with you, but it would take all the time we have this morning. The thing I want you to see is – no one is hiding this from you. Until we find even more, and even better evidence, and we're able to sort things out, Bible publishers give you everything we know right there in your footnotes.

Nothing is hidden; there are no secrets or cover-ups. This is something Christians have known for a very, very, long time. There are few of these questions scattered across the Bible, but each time, they're clearly marked, and they have almost no impact on the core issues of the faith. As you'll see this morning, the point that is being made can be made with or without verse 14.

So, let's get into it and see what we can learn as Jesus offers His assessment of the religious people He has been engaging with during these last days of His life. It's not pretty, but it's

important stuff for us to hear if you want to understand what kind of religion and spirituality God receives and what kind He rejects.

Remember, Jesus spent time patiently trying to reach out to these people, but they kept resisting Him, so now He's speaking plainly, directly, and forcefully about their so-called faith:

Matthew 23:13 “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. 14 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.

15 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte (that is to convert someone to the faith), and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

There are two angles we can approach this from, so let's look at both – first, the influence we can have on others, and then, the fact that others can influence on us.

We usually like to have influence. We like to see people follow our example, adopt our style, agree with our opinion, or join our thing. We feel validated, affirmed. We feel like we were right.

But Jesus is pronouncing judgment on the scribes and Pharisees because of the direction they're leading others. They're converting people to their religious 'brand' without integrating them into relationship with God.

And notice, this is the basis for each woe: you're doing the wrong thing, AND you're having a negative impact on others. They're following your example, or in some cases, they're taking your advice, they're responding to your instigation, they're giving in to your pressure or pleading. Their life is being impacted by your example or your encouragement.

If you have been trusted with a position of influence, and that's all of us in some way, we all influence someone, look at the people you're affecting and ask: am I leading them toward God, toward healthy relationships, toward their own good, or am I leading them away? Are they growing in righteousness because of my influence? Am I making them a better human being? A better man or woman? Are they going to be more pleasing to their parents, their teachers, their boss, their coach, their God as a result of my influence in their life?

Or, am I encouraging people in things that break relationships and accrue guilt and shame? It's bad enough to be guilty of doing the wrong things yourself, but you heap additional guilt on yourself when you pull others with you. You never want to hear someone look at you and cry –

“You did this to me, it’s all your fault!” And you certainly don’t want to hear Jesus pronouncing a woe on you for what you’ve done to others.

Influence, leadership, is a privilege, and we should always use it for good. People should become better people by being in our presence. And the best thing we can do for them is to connect them directly with God. Did you know the number one way most people will show up at church is because someone who already attends has invited them? I’m thankful for all those of you who heard us on the radio, or found us on the web and showed up on your own, but there are all kinds of people in our lives who need us simply reach out in love and concern and invite them to church – to influence them towards righteousness, holiness, and peace. Jesus criticizes these people for getting in the way of others and God, but He could also commend you for bringing people closer.

Of course, influence is a two way street, so we also need to consider the impact others have on us.

How many of the choices you make are affected by the influence of someone else? Have you ever tried a restaurant or watched a show because someone else recommended it? The music you listen to, the clothes you wear, the car you drive or want to drive one day, and the way you drive it, the things you value and the things you despise are all affected by the influence of people around you. You’ve heard that saying that some things are caught, not taught – that’s another way to say, you’re influenced by what you see and hear.

So, the question we must ask is: what are we seeing and hearing? What direction are we being led? We want to have wisdom in our relationships because the people who speak to us, either in person or online, through the radio or a screen, are all leading us somewhere – they’re filling us with ideas, with values, they’re telling us what we should be thinking about, what we should be approving of and what we should dislike.

I’m not just talking about the media, but I’ll use them as an example – when you look at the issue of bias in the media, first of all, it exists. And how do you determine that? By looking at the issues they cover or choose not to cover, the angle they approach the issue from, how long and how often they cover the issue, and the words they use to describe it. They are sharing their view of things and if you keep taking it in, from the right or the left, they’re influencing you. And now you actually have social media influencers, that’s what they’re called – “influencers.”

So, do you know where they’re going? What are their values, what are their goals, what are their motives? Are they getting in the way of our relationship with God, obstructing it, discouraging it, or making corrupt disciples of us? It’s something we all need to consider, and re-consider often as we live in an economy that is based on getting, keeping, selling, and influencing your attention.

But it's not just the media, it's your friends, your co-workers, your teammates, the people you're around each day – they're influencing you, and hopefully you're influencing them – but toward what? Would Jesus pronounce a woe on them, or on you for the direction of your influence?

There's more that could be said, but let's move on, there's more to see in the next section:

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, he is obliged to perform it.’ 17 Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? 18 And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.’ 19 Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? 20 Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. 21 He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. 22 And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it.

Friends, think of how complicated our lives are because people won't simply say what they mean. Think of how complicated life is by loopholes and efforts to either exploit them or close them. Think of how long and complicated contracts are. Think of all the disclaimers you have to endure. Think of all the waivers you have to sign. All because people are trying to cover themselves from every angle and leave an opening if they need it.

These men seemed to always have a way out; they were intentionally evasive, always building an escape into their commitments. They lived by technicalities. And the question that has to be asked is: why?

Why can't you just be trustworthy? Jesus spoke about the issue back in Sermon on the Mount – He said, don't swear all these different kinds of oaths, just let your yes be yes, and your no, no. This is the kind of integrity God has always encouraged.

Keep a finger here in Matthew and turn with me to the middle of your Bible, I want you to see Psalm 15 which opens with a powerful question and then gives a clear, compelling answer.

Ps 15:1 LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle?
Who may dwell in Your holy hill?

That's the question – who can live close to God? Notice what it says here about our speech – the words we say, the things we promise or swear, and the way we live:

2 He who walks uprightly,
And works righteousness,

And speaks the truth in his heart;
3 He *who* does not backbite with his tongue,
Nor does evil to his neighbor,
Nor does he take up a reproach against his friend;
4 In whose eyes a vile person is despised,
But he honors those who fear the LORD;
He *who* swears to his own hurt and does not change;
5 He *who* does not put out his money at usury,
Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.

He who does these *things* shall never be moved.

Compare this with the men you see described back in Matthew 23. God wants us to be honorable, trustworthy, sincere, men and women of integrity who say what we mean and mean what we say.

So let me ask the question: why do we swear and promise and give our word, and then look for a way out when things go wrong?

Could it be because we don't really trust God? That we think it's up to us to protect ourselves, to minimize the damage? To reduce the risk?

If you know the God of the Temple, the God of the Altar, the God who sits on the throne of Heaven and His Son Jesus Christ, can you trust Him to watch over you in times of need, in times of crisis, in times when keeping your word is going to be hard? When it might even hurt?

Friends, if you know God, you can know courage and strength and you can take a stand on Him. You know you're not left to face whatever comes at you alone. First of all, you let God guide you in the promises you make, the oaths you swear – you let your commitments be few and firm, you seek God's guidance and blessing in making them, and then, once they're made, you keep them to your own hurt, because you know God is honored and that He will help in some way.

This is the classic case with divorce. We stand before God and our friends and family, and we make all these beautiful promises about loving each other no matter what, for better or worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, and then months or years go by and things get hard, and we start looking for a way out. What if we start looking for God and His strength to help us keep the vows we made?

My friends, are you someone people can trust? Are you dependable? If you say you're coming, do you come? If you say you'll do something or take care of something, do you follow through? Or do you have a second category of commitment – I know I swore, but I didn't swear by...?

God wants us to have a single heart, a single motive, a single voice, not a crafty plan for exploiting loopholes. And that brings us to our final critique this morning:

Matthew 23:23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.
24 Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

Tithing is the practice of giving a tenth of your income to the Lord. In the Old Testament, the Jews were required to give a tithe of everything they produced to support the work of the Levites and the priests who were the only people in Israel who weren't landowners. They were supposed to be dedicated to serving God and then God, through the gifts of the people, would take care of them. So, we read God's instruction for the people of Israel in:

Deu 14:22 “You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year.”

But the Pharisees were such strict rule followers, they didn't just tithe off **the grain the field produces**, their wheat and barley, they tithed off their herb garden too, to prove how serious they were about following and obeying God. But while they paid attention to the finest little details of obeying God in this one area, they missed the enormous need for ideals like justice, mercy, and faith.

They would pour their wine through cloth to make sure they filtered out any impurities. Insects like gnats weren't kosher, but neither was the camel – the largest land animal most of them had ever seen. So, you have two things they're not supposed to eat – a tiny insect and large mammal, and which one gets all the attention? The absurdity here is intentional. You're willing to go to extremes for the sake of keeping certain rules but then you make excuses for or completely ignore the core values of the faith.

Jesus says you ought to tithe, there's nothing wrong with that, but your giving to the Lord should come from a heart that also values these greater ideals. In fact, your giving should be evidence of what you really believe.

When we give to the Lord today it is a practical demonstration of the fact that we prioritize God. The government takes taxes from me, but I give freely to the Lord. It is a way of saying, “I recognize Your authority God.”

It's also a way of saying, I value God, I recognize everything that I have comes from Him, all the good in my life comes from Him. He gives me life, and breath, and health, He enables me to work and gave me the gifts and abilities that I use at work so I give back to Him.

And my giving propels the ministry of the church. One of the things I have become increasing aware of as I age is that the church is passed on from one generation to the next. We received it from the generations before us and we will pass it on to the generations to come.

Speaking in very specific terms, we have people in their 50's, 60's, 70's and 80's here today who actually helped build this church building that we all benefit from and enjoy. Those of us in our 40's, 30's, 20's and teens need to consider: are we just going to be consumers? Or are we going to be producers? Are we willing to give and build for the next generation, or do we show up and expect to be served?

When you give to the Lord, it forces you to evaluate and prioritize your spending which really forces you to evaluate and prioritize your life – what are you willing to spend on and what do you say no to? What are your needs and what are your wants? Some of you remember that back in Matthew 6, in the famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

So where is your money going, and what does that say about you? Are there things you value so much that it keeps you from giving to the Lord?

Now, I know talking about money and giving probably makes you uncomfortable, but listen to what Jesus says: [you pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.](#)

Money is nothing compared to justice, mercy, and faith. How are you doing on these concepts *if you're not doing well with giving?*

In strength training you have what are called accessory lifts – these are exercises you do, not for their own sake, but the sake of getting better at something else. For example, you might do back raises to strengthen your lower back so that you're more stable when it comes to doing squats and deadlifts.

Tithing without loving justice, mercy, and faith, is like doing back raises each time you go to the gym, but never grabbing a barbell and doing squats. You're doing something good, but you're forgetting the big picture, how it all fits together.

But think about this: let's say you just go in and focus on the big lifts, all you do is squat – you say I value justice, mercy, and faith, those are the important things – there's no need to give. Well, in strength training you're only going to be able to make progress on your squat for so long before you plateau and then, if you're going to keep growing, you need to start training some accessory lifts. Once again, they all go together to help create a strong, fit, healthy, you.

So here's the connection – you should tithe *because* you value justice, mercy, and faith and want to see them advance *through* the advance of the kingdom and the ministry. It all fits together to develop a spiritually strong, healthy, you.

As you reflect on the things we have read and discussed this morning I want to encourage you to take some time to consider – how am I doing in terms of the influence I have on others, and what are things that influence me? Consider, how am I doing in terms of my integrity, is my yes, yes, and my no, no. And consider how am I doing in terms of my giving and ideals?

And as you find areas that need some attention, I want you to remember this: the scribes and Pharisees were very religious people – but they were trying to live religious lives without depending on God, living by their own interpretations instead of His.

I have no doubt God has been speaking to you this morning, putting His finger on some things that need attention in your life, but He's also offering to help. He's not looking for more scribes and Pharisees, He's looking for sons and daughters who depend on the Heavenly Father for help. Turn to Him, ask Him, depend on Him for the changes you believe He wants to see.

Don't walk out of here determined to fix this or that about your life all by yourself – you don't need more religious rules, you need inner renewal. Ask God to operate on your heart and give you strength. Declare your dependence on Him and ask for a filling from Him.

God has given us His Holy Word to guide us, sent His Holy Son to forgive us, and His Holy Spirit to strengthen us. Depend on Him for everything you need.

Let's pray.