

Matthew 23:1-36

“The Kingdom and Religion”

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Intro. The problem of hypocrisy and empty ritual in the Church, through the ages, has tended to be an obstacle that can push people away from organized religion. The unintended consequences: people that are often stunted spiritually, and churches are hamstrung. So, what’s the answer?

Subject: Jesus’ Warning about the Scribes and Pharisees

Object: Come to Jesus and yield to Him.

Context: Four days before the Passover (and the Cross). Jesus asserted authority as Messiah at the temple resulting in a series of heightened conflicts with the religious leaders.

A. The problem of heavy burdens of religious performance [1-4]

This is the last public sermon or message of Jesus. It warns of the problems of the religious leaders, but is addressed to the multitudes and disciples [1]. The scribes were teachers of the Law of Moses. Many of the scribes were Pharisees (those who sought to separate from sin), but the majority of Pharisees were not scribes. The scribes’ commentary and oral traditions were often regarded as binding like the Scriptures, and thus created heavy burdens [4] of religious performance beyond the Scriptures (legalism). No one is capable of carrying that load, and the scribes and Pharisees could not practice what they preached [3].

1. Jesus’ burden is light and provides rest for the soul [Mt.11:28-30] We are called to come to Christ and yield our will to His. We are to learn from Jesus and follow Him. In a gospel-centered identity, your worth, value and peace flow from Christ’s work, not your religious performance. A gospel-centered identity doesn’t mean that you neglect or ignore Christ’s commands, but performance is not the basis of being right with God. Thus, we discover rest for our souls.

B. The problem of self-glory [5-12]

The religious leaders were motivated by approval and accolades from men rather than God [5]. The phylacteries [Ex. 13:9, Dt. 6:8], and blue thread on the hem of garments [Num. 15:38] reminded Jews of the Mosaic law and their covenant relationship with God. The religious leaders enlarged them to appear more spiritual. The religious leaders exalted themselves, and loved to be placed on the pedestal and receive accolades and titles: Rabbi (master) [8], father [9], and teacher [10]. All believers are equal before God [8-10]. Those who seek self-glory will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be lifted up [12].

1. Jesus glorified God by humble obedient service [Jn.17:4, Mt. 11:29, Mk. 10:44-45] Jesus is motivated to glorify the Father, and provides the example of humble obedient service as the means to glorify God.

C. The problems of hypocrisy [13-36] In v.13-36 Jesus called the religious leaders hypocrites seven times. It is a strong rebuke of their hypocrisy. Jesus declared his displeasure and distress by saying “woe” eight times. The hypocrisy and displeasure include the following:

1. Obscures the way to God’s kingdom [13]

Man-made traditions and rules keep those who desire a relationship with God at a distance, because they tend to make our relationship with God performance rather than gospel-based.

a. Jesus is the way and the door [Jn.14:6, 10:9] Jesus opens the way to God’s kingdom, because the gospel focuses on what He has done, and that we are made right with God through faith in Christ.

2. Fleeces the flock [14] They used the pretense of spirituality to take advantage of the vulnerable for personal gain, but God will avenge.

a. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who gave His life to give life to His flock [Jn. 10:10-11]

Jesus came and gave His life so that we can experience abundant life with God. Spiritual leaders should sacrificially serve not fleece the flock.

3. Draws people to their sect rather than to God [15]

They were zealous to draw people to their group and indoctrinate them on their man-made traditions and rules. Cults such as the Mormon Church and Jehovah’s Witnesses do the same.

a. Jesus sets us free to worship God in Spirit and truth [Jn. 8:31-32]

“Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. ³² And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

Jesus came to set-us free to worship God, not bind or unite us to a sect.

4. Unreliable (oaths) [16-22] Jews would not use God’s name to make an oath [Ex.20:7]. So, the more sacred the object sworn upon in taking an oath the perceived greater the responsibility to perform [16-19]. They created a system so they could make an apparent oath, and then excuse performance because the formula wasn’t binding. Jesus made clear that our oaths are to be performed because we represent God [20-22]

a. Jesus declared “Let your “yes” be “yes” and your “no” be “no” [Matt. 5:34-37]

We are to be reliable in our promises, oaths, and generally, because God is reliable, and we represent Him.

5. Major on the minor while neglecting the more important [23-24]

They would make a point of giving a tenth of the herbs from their garden or strain a gnat because it is unclean to honor God. But neglected the important matters of justice, mercy, and faith. In effect, they were removing the unclean insect, but swallowing the giant unclean camel. It is like a person who is offended by a Bible on the ground, but the person who is offended doesn’t bother reading the Bible and doesn’t learn or do what God says about the critical matters of social justice, love and faith.

a. Jesus is full of grace and truth [Jn. 1:14] Jesus displays the balance of compassion without compromise. Don't neglect God's commands nor people created in His image.

6. Outward self-righteousness and inward unrighteousness [25-28] The religious leaders debated about the proper way to clean a cup, or wash hands, so they would not be ceremonially defiled by any unclean substance. But their hearts were not right with God. They were self-indulgent and took advantage of others [25]. The religious leaders would paint tombs with limestone whitewash so that they would not accidentally touch a tomb and be ceremonially defiled by the corpse within. But they were like the tombs, because their outside behavior covered-up the hypocrisy and lawlessness that was in their hearts.

a. Jesus' righteousness is given to all who yield to Him [Rom. 4] Our righteousness flows from what Jesus did, and our faith to yield to Him. Those who receive God's grace will seek to stop sinning to please God (not to impress people or foster religious pride).

7. Outward honor of the prophets but inward rejection of their message [29-36]

The scribes and Pharisees honored the deceased prophets who had been killed by earlier leaders in Israel. They argued that they would not have killed the prophets [30]. Yet they failed to yield to God's recent messenger John the Baptist, and The Prophet [Dt. 18:15] – Jesus who stood before them, and His disciples [31-34]. Abel was the first prophet slain [Gen. 4], and Zechariah is the last prophet slain in the Scriptures [2Ch. 24:20-21] (2nd Chronicles is the last book of the Old Testament in the order of the Hebrew Bible).

a. Jesus is the one we must hear and yield to [Heb. 1:1-2, Mt.3:17]

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, ² has in these last days spoken to us by His Son [Heb. 1:1-2]

Communion [Matt. 11:28-30]

“Come to Me, all *you* 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” [Matt. 11:28-30]

Study Guide Qs

Q1. How are you learning to balance a gospel-centered identity (based on what Jesus did rather than your performance), and not neglect God's commands?

Q2. How are you learning to avoid self-glory and not neglect humble obedient service to God?

Q3. How does a performance based identity tend to produce hypocrisy?

Q4. How have you learned that coming to Jesus, yielding to Him, and adopting a gospel-centered identity has helped you to honor God with your life and rest in Him?