

CCUA SS Initiative
February 8, 2026

Pharisees, “Hypocrites,” (Matthew) Matthew 23

Introduction:

Today’s lesson begins a 3-week series from the fifth of Matthew’s “Five discourses of Jesus.” This one is called the “Olivet Discourse.” We’ll talk more about that title next week.

This first part of the discourse, Chapter 23, is known as the “seven woes” pronounced on the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders of the day. It is one of the most scathing messages from the mouth of Jesus in all four of the gospels. In order for us to understand what’s going on here, we need to take a look at the last four episodes (‘pericopes’) of Matthew 22, which form a unique piece of biblical literature in their own right.

Matthew 22:15-46 give us the clearest depiction of what some scholars call “the honor-shame game,” which all men of the same social level engaged in. This was serious competition designed to gain or take away honor from someone else. (Honor was more valuable than money.) The ‘game’ was engaged in the broader public arenas of life, because it was the public which determined how much honor was shifted from one competitor to the other. For most readers of the Bible, and for hundreds of years, these four episodes have been read as semi-independent teaching moments of Jesus with significant teachings in each: Matthew 22: 21 “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s”; v. 32, (about the resurrection), “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living”; vv. 37-38 (the greatest and second commandments of loving God and neighbor); v. 45, “If the David calls [the Messiah] ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” They are very important messages from the mouth of Jesus and need to be taken seriously. However, each episode begins with the narrative which relates the public challenge Jewish leaders make against Jesus, whom they think has been gaining more honor than he deserves at their expense. And three of the four conclude, not with Jesus’ word, but with the public’s response that, in each case, passes more honor from Jewish leaders to Jesus.

Chapter 22 concludes with the important words, “no one dared to ask him any more questions.” This is first-century shorthand for the conclusion, “we’re not going to get our honor back from Jesus by this usual method.” By ending chapter 22 with these words, Matthew is letting us know that Jesus is aware of Jewish leaders’ refusal to listen to anything else positive he might have to say. He also knows that more drastic measures to regain their honor will most likely include crucifixion. Deut.21:22 was interpreted to include crucifixion.

Matthew writes the teaching episode we find in chapter 23 as though it were the next event in Jesus’ life. Those Jewish leaders who had questioned Jesus have walked off in shame, most likely to plan what they needed to do to get their honor. He talks to the crowd that’s still there around him as well as his disciples. He talks about the Pharisees, saying basically that they have an important position in the society, and that the people need to follow their instructions, but not their example. He intimated that their say is often legitimate in relationship

to the law, but how they live is all about image. At some point these leaders come back to hear what he's saying. Jesus is aware that most see any value for themselves in what Jesus says, so he just engages in a no-holds-barred exposé of their behavior. Thus, verse 13 begins this part of the speech, known as "The seven woes on the Pharisees and teachers of the law."

I. Woe #4 on tithing compared to justice and mercy. Matthew 23:23-24 (wait to start the reading)

The first woe is against their restrictive attitude toward those who may be included in "the kingdom." The second woe is against the evangelistic, missionary activity which creates disciples who behave like they do. The third woe is against the practice of creating a spiritual hierarchy by which one swears in affirming the truth of what they're saying in a public setting. In all three cases, Jesus calls these Jewish leaders 'hypocrites,' and the third time he adds 'blind guides' to his comment. Both those titles will be repeated as Jesus continues. Our lesson starts at woe #4, and we can now read the selected text in vv. 23-24.

Most of us are aware that the benign sense of the word 'hypocrite' has to do with the entertainment industry of acting, in particular the feature of 1st-century actors wearing large masks so that you can't see the real person who's underneath. The negative sense is used when speaking about a person whose speech and action don't agree with each other. The prefix "hypo" often has negative connotation because it's literal meaning is the preposition, 'under.' "Hypocrite" literally means "judged or evaluated by what's underneath the mask."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How many of you have known people for whom their spiritual life or the hope of their salvation was linked to tithing?
2. How important is tithing to our personal salvation?
3. What do you understand to be Jesus' point in this 'woe'?
4. What would the title 'blind guides' have to do with this point?

In-class Illustration regarding the "gnat" and the "camel."

Pastor Mark's reference to several Old Testament Prophets in his sermon last week was a call reminding us of God's desire for his people to engage effectively and consistently in the alleviation of injustice. Jonathan Burkey's message in chapel on Monday morning was all about that call. He mentioned three specific areas of social injustice in our country which he and the Elm Street Church of the Nazarene are involved in: the care of foster children, the restoration into society of recovering drug and alcohol addicts, and the plight of immigrants. There are, of course, other areas of injustice which some of us are already engaged in, and more of us could be. I myself, have enrolled in a book study on how the church can better address the issue of racism in our culture. That starts this week.

II. Woes #'s 5 & 6. *Outside and Inside* **Matthew 23:25-28**

These two woes are not necessarily the same thing, but they can be handled together. They both treat the difference between what is on the inside and what's on the outside which the world around us evaluates. If WHAT we stand for and HOW we stand for it don't agree, we are "evaluated by what's underneath the mask." We cannot get away from the fact that much of American Evangelicalism is still both racist and elitist, condemning without compassion.

In these two woes, we move from emphasizing the unimportant over the important, to creating the right image over full transformation of character. The word picture of cleaning the cup and the dish is obviously figurative, whereas paying the tenth of one's spices was actually literal. Illustration: One of our missionaries in Senegal would tell the Senegalese about the flaw of how they cleaned their teeth with a specific kind of stick. They meticulously worked the outside of their teeth for hours a day and wondered why they still lost teeth to decay. They never thought about doing similar work on the inside of their teeth (the stick wouldn't fit). I don't know about you, but I check my dishes when they come out of the dishwasher.

The second word picture is both literal and figurative. Cemetery markers and tombs were unclean, and touching them rendered you unclean for seven (7) days. Whitewashing tombs was a method of helping people avoid touching them. In honor of the one entombed, it would look clean, in spite of it being unclean to the touch. Again, the point is 'image.'

Before I go on to any questions for discussion on this section, I want to remind us that as we, in the twenty-first century, look at this text, the point is not to seek out the pharisees of our day, but rather to seek within ourselves any signs of the kind of hypocrisy that's being demonstrated here.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What appears to be wrong about the concept of 'image' that's being underscored here?
2. Describe some ways we can see that in our society. What might we see in the church?
3. In 1 Timothy 2:8 Paul writes, "I desire that ... men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling." What do you see as the point of praying by "lifting up holy hands"?
4. How do these woes help us see at least one of the reasons for declining church attendance in our country? What can we in this class do about it?

III. *The final woe, which fit Matthew's situation.* **Matthew 23:29-36.**

Like the beatitudes in Matthew 5, where Matthew has Jesus treating the last one at great length because it touches the daily lives of Matthew's audience more than the others do, he handles this series of "woes" with the same 'periodic' presentation—the last element being the one that touches the immediate situation.

ASK: What do you see as the point of the claim in v. 30? How is Jesus applying it to his current situation in A.D. 30?

As Jesus opens what looks like another paragraph, he begins by quoting John the Baptist, calling the same people what John called them, “brood of poisonous snakes.” Jesus, however, takes John’s warning even farther. John suggested they could flee from the wrath to come, whereas Jesus says it is unlikely that they will escape being condemned to hell. Jesus word for “hell” here is *‘gehenna’* the place of eternal suffering, not *‘sheol’* the place of the dead.

Jesus’ conclusion about their actions is that they are demonstrating themselves to be the very sons of the ancestors whose behavior they claim somehow to repudiate. Thus, in verse 32, he has the nerve to say, “Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started.”

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What appears to be the point of Jesus’ statement here in v. 32?
2. How do verses 33-36 fit into the context of this woe and Jesus’ statement in v. 32?
3. How does any of this passage have anything to do with us?

Conclusion:

From the very outset of the Holiness Movement, both in Europe and in the US, we had a major concentration on the issues of Justice and Mercy, with rescue missions, orphanages, homes for unwed mothers, the Salvation Army, etc. Early missionaries exported this call with them. We did amazing things with the resources we had available. At a certain point in our history, in the mid-twentieth century a shift of emphasis took place away from that kind of concentration to that of holiness described in terms of personal behaviors and habits, which demonstrated itself more in criticism toward others than in compassion. In the 80’s of the last century, Dr. Ray Hurn, newly elected General Superintendent, inspired a renewal of the call to holiness as compassion. Questions arose among the ‘grass roots’ of the church as to whether this was a change in the meaning of sanctification. It wasn’t. It was a correction of its application.

What we just heard this past week was the best balance I’ve heard in a long time of what holiness is, both in terms of what God does **in** believers, and what God wants to do in this world **through** sanctified believers. One thing that struck me from the very beginning of the series was the play on words between “being atoned” and “being attuned.” It’s not enough for us to trust in the atoning work God in our lives through Jesus. The Christian life, as lived out daily is that of being “attuned” every day and in every circumstance to the voice of God through the Holy Spirit who has sanctified us holy and dwells in us.

What does that say about how we should apply this text. It is not our role to point out the failures, shortcomings, or even the sins of the people around us, whether in the church or not. Our task is to see in what ways Jesus’ criticism of the Jewish leaders of his day might describe *us* as leaders and mentors of the faith in *our* day. Then we are to be attuned to how God wants to express his grace and compassion *through us* in our time.