

### Matthew 23:1 – 39

<sup>23:1</sup> Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying: ‘The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; <sup>3</sup> therefore all that [he tells] you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. <sup>4</sup> They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. <sup>5</sup> But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. <sup>6</sup> They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, <sup>7</sup> and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. <sup>8</sup> But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. <sup>9</sup> Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. <sup>10</sup> Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. <sup>11</sup> But the greatest among you shall be your servant. <sup>12</sup> Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. <sup>13</sup> But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. <sup>14</sup> [Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.] <sup>15</sup> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. <sup>16</sup> Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’ <sup>17</sup> You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? <sup>18</sup> And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.’ <sup>19</sup> You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? <sup>20</sup> Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. <sup>21</sup> And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. <sup>22</sup> And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it. <sup>23</sup> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. <sup>24</sup> You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! <sup>25</sup> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. <sup>26</sup> You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. <sup>27</sup> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. <sup>28</sup> So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. <sup>29</sup> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, <sup>30</sup> and say, ‘If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ <sup>31</sup> So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. <sup>32</sup> Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. <sup>33</sup> You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? <sup>34</sup> Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, <sup>35</sup> so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel

to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. <sup>36</sup> Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. <sup>37</sup> Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. <sup>38</sup> Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! <sup>39</sup> For I say to you, from now on you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!''

### Cultural and Historical Background

- In Mt.23:3, most Bible translations follow the Greek manuscript, which reads 'All that *they* tell you, do and observe,' which would require the disciples of Jesus to follow the Pharisaic and rabbinic tradition. This is hard (impossible) to reconcile with Jesus' rejection of the Pharisaic tradition (Mt.6:1 – 18; 15:1 – 9; 16:6 – 12; 23:4 – 12). However, in the manuscript of the Hebrew version of *Matthew* in the British Library, Jesus says, 'Therefore all that he [i.e. Moses] tells you, do and observe, but do not do according to their [i.e. the Pharisees'] deeds.'<sup>1</sup> I believe that the Hebrew reading of Matthew 23:3 is the original: Jesus did *not* instruct his Jewish disciples to follow the Pharisaic (rabbinic) expansion and interpretation of the Law of Moses, but rather the Law of Moses itself. Note that Karaite Jews like Dr. Nehemia Gordon also reject the rabbinic expansion of the Law of Moses and simply follow Moses himself.<sup>2</sup>
- Recall that Jesus pronounced eight blessings (beatitudes) in Mt.5:3 – 12.
  1. <sup>3</sup> Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
  2. <sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
  3. <sup>5</sup> Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.
  4. <sup>6</sup> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
  5. <sup>7</sup> Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.
  6. <sup>8</sup> Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
  7. <sup>9</sup> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
  8. <sup>10</sup> Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup> Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
- 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' is a quote from Psalm 118:26. The Psalm involves recognizing Jesus as the chief cornerstone of a new Temple (Ps.118:22), which Jesus challenged them about in Mt.21:42.
- 'This generation' (23:36) does not refer to all Jews since Jesus. It is specifically the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem who will continue between Jesus' time and the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

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<sup>1</sup> This reading is found in the oldest surviving physical manuscript of *Matthew* written in Hebrew (or any other Semitic language), that of the 14<sup>th</sup> century to Shem-Tov Ibn Shaprut, who was a 14<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Jew. Note that Papias (60 – 130 AD) refers to Matthew writing his *Gospel* in Hebrew first: 'Matthew collected the words in the Hebrew language, and each translated them as best he could.' (Papias, *Fragment VI*, found in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 3, chapter 39). See the book and youtube video by Nehemia Gordon, *The Hebrew Yeshua vs. the Greek Jesus*.

<sup>2</sup> Nehemiah Gordon explores the many similarities between Jesus and the Karaite position. I strongly commend his youtube video.

## Questions

1. What was the purpose of the Jewish Law? How much of it are we still supposed to follow? Are we supposed to swear oaths by the Temple (Mt.23:16 – 22), or tithe mint, dill, and cumin (Mt.23:23) if we garden?
  - a. Recall that Jesus was restoring all humanity back to God's original *creation order*, the order of human life that existed before 'hardness of heart' set in after the Fall.<sup>3</sup> Jewish Law (from Sinai from Exodus 19 – Deuteronomy 34) was derived from God's *creation order ethics* of Genesis 1 – 2, and yet inferior to it because Israel's 'hardness of heart' prevented them from fully being what God intended. Thus, this raised the question of what ethics Christians should follow, and whether being Jewish or Gentile affected the answer. Integrating the many statements Jesus and Paul make about the Jewish Law, I affirm this conclusion:
    - i. Jewish Christians were still invited to follow the 'cultural' aspects of the Jewish Law (Jewish kosher laws, calendar observances, etc.) as part of their heritage (Romans 14 – 15; 1 Corinthians 8 – 10), but without the 'condemnation' or 'sting' of that Law found in Dt.27 – 28 (Acts 15:10; Romans 8:1 – 4; 1 Corinthians 15:54 – 58).
    - ii. Gentile Christians were not to follow the Jewish Law but God's *creation order* directly (Galatians 2 – 5; Ephesians 2:11 – 22; Colossians 2 – 3; 1 Timothy 1).
    - iii. By preserving the memory of historic Judaism, the church was to reflect the fact that God was bringing Jew and Gentile together in one community.<sup>4</sup>
  - b. Note that Matthew 5:17 probably means, 'I have not *only* come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but *also* to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law [Gen.1 – Dt.34 as one *prophecy*<sup>5</sup>] until all is accomplished...'
    - i. Literary evidence: Every other place where a biblical writer says 'not A but B,' he really means 'not *only* A but *also* B.'<sup>6</sup> Examples:
      1. 'You have not lied [only] to men, but [also] to God' (Acts 5:4)
      2. 'He who believes in me does not [only] believe in me, but [also] in Him who sent me.' (John 12:44)
      3. For the kingdom of God does not consist [only] in words, but [also] in power.' (1 Corinthians 4:20)
    - ii. Biblical evidence: Inconsistencies with the idea that all Christians are called to practice the Jewish Law
      1. We do not work 6 days a week even though Moses required it in the Law.
      2. Isaiah prophesied that eunuchs, in the new covenant, would be admitted to the worship assembly (Isa.56:1 – 7), because circumcision would no longer be a defining characteristic of God's people, even though Moses forbade the inclusion of eunuchs in the Law (Dt.23:1). The same is true with foreigners (compare Isa.56:3 and Dt.23:2).
      3. Jesus commanded his Jewish disciples to leave their ancestral lands behind (Mt.6:19 – 34; 19:13 – 30; 28:16 – 20) even though Moses commanded Israel to possess the land in the Sinai Law.
      4. In my assessment, those Christians who argue that Christians are 'under the Law' in a moral sense are not properly discerning creation order ethics that stands behind the Jewish Law.
2. There is an introductory section in 23:1 – 12 where Jesus teaches his (Jewish) followers how to engage with the scribal and Pharisaic tradition. Please be sure to note that Jesus is not critiquing 'all Jews' here. This is not a caricature of Judaism as a whole, but specifically the scribal and Pharisaic tradition.

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<sup>3</sup> See Jesus' comments in Mt.19:3 – 12. For helpful discussions of this, see Oliver M.T. O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (); Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* ()

<sup>4</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (); Four Views on Law and Gospel ()

<sup>5</sup> See the chiasmic structure of the Torah and my notes on it at <http://nagasawafamily.org/article-pentateuch-chiasm.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Gary Tuck, *Matthew 5:17: Jesus Did Come to Abolish the Law... And He Said So*; <http://nagasawafamily.org/matthew.05.17.not-only-but-also.pdf>

- a. This is the beginning of the rabbinical tradition. Many Pharisees were originally allied with the militarist revolutions. But when those failed, the disappointed rabbis focused less on nationalist hopes and instead focused on Jewish traditional piety and Torah-reading.
  - b. Why does Jesus critique them in the passage?
    - i. Their reading of Moses is incorrect (v.1 – 4)
    - ii. They do not faithfully practice and observe their own interpretations (v.3 – 4)
    - iii. Their motivation is to impress one another (v.5 – 7)
    - iv. They use titles like rabbi, father, and leader (v.8 – 12), which Jesus views as honorifics that detract from his mission. They also detract from Jesus being teacher and leader, and from God being Father
3. (Optional) Notice that this gives us insight into why we call God ‘Father’ even though it’s a good question why we don’t call God ‘Mother’ or ‘Parent’ or ‘Father and Mother.’
- a. One reason why people are reluctant to call God ‘Father’ is because ‘fatherhood’ is so broken today because ‘fathers’ are absent, controlling, flaky, demanding, alcoholic, etc. But Jesus is saying that if the word ‘father’ is so broken when it comes to the human experience of ‘fatherhood,’ then remove it entirely from the human sphere and use it only to refer to God.
  - b. Other people are reluctant to call God ‘Father’ because of the idea that this makes God male. But in reality, God is not male. Nor did He beget the Son at a certain point in time, although both gender and time might be implied by the ‘Father-Son’ language. And the heretic Arius reasoned from his own human experience that these words meant, ‘There was a time when God became a Father; there was a time when the Son was not.’ However, the Nicene theologians were correct in saying that God was without gender and that the Father-Son relationship is eternal, not temporal.
  - c. Why can we use any human words to describe God or refer to Him? After all, God is love, but in what sense do we mean that? The human love we experience is seeing something valuable, desiring it, and coming to possess it for yourself. Is that how God loves? No. God loves by envisioning someone of value to Himself and then creating that being by giving it existence. Words used to refer to God are analogies. They always contain some truth, and some parts of the word need to be actively thought away. The alternatives are:
    - i. Univocal: Words speak with one voice, and they mean *absolutely the same* thing when we use words to speak about God as when we use words to speak about God. But this would mean that God the Father is male, that he became Father whenever He created the Son, etc.
    - ii. Equivocal: Words do not convey *any* valid information when used to speak about God
    - iii. Analogical: Words convey *some* valid information when used to speak about God
  - d. God certainly has ‘feminine’ qualities, just as He has ‘masculine’ qualities. Using the term ‘Father’ for God is still warranted for three main reasons: (1) Jesus still believed this was the most accurate language with which to speak; (2) the human institution of fathers giving an inheritance to sons seems to be a primary reference – God give an inheritance of land first to Adam, and then Eve by marriage to Adam (Gen.1 – 2), He gave an inheritance of the Promised Land to Israel when He called Israel ‘my firstborn’ (Ex.4:22), and He gave an inheritance of the nations to the king of Israel (Ps.2), which Jesus claimed in its totality as Israel’s true king (Mt.28:18 – 20); (3) the human experience of motherhood, when the child is within its mother’s womb, might mistakenly import an overlap of personhood between the Father and the Son, rather than the stronger distinction of personhood implied in the father – son relation.
4. How many ‘woes’ are there? Eight. Just like Jesus said eight beatitudes in Mt.5:3 – 12.
- a. What is a woe? A warning
  - b. Why are there woes in addition to blessings? Logically, because Jesus makes clear what it means to turn away from him, from his kingdom, and from his definition of blessing.
5. The first woe: Woe for not entering the kingdom (23:13)
- a. Jesus said the poor in spirit will enter/have the kingdom of heaven in 5:3
  - b. What is the kingdom of heaven, again? The kingdom is the reign of God over human flesh and in human life. Thus, the kingdom starts with Jesus Christ. As he shares his life with us, and we draw from him and imitate him, we manifest the kingdom of heaven.
  - c. To deny Jesus is to deny the reign of God over human flesh and *in* human flesh. This is a personal-relational issue to God, and not just a ‘moral’ one.
6. The second woe: Woe for devouring widows’ houses and making long prayers for a pretense (23:14)

- a. Jesus said those who mourn for sin, rather than indulge in it, will be comforted (5:4).
  - b. How are the Pharisees and scribes devouring widows' houses? By making up new traditions by which Jews could give to the Temple and not financially support their parents (Mt.15:1 – 9). And by making up new traditions of giving that required even poor widows to give (e.g. Lk.21:1 – 4)
7. The third woe: Woe for converting people to your own pseudo-godly 'tradition' and making them twice a son of hell as you (23:15)
  - a. Jesus said those who are peacemakers – those who proclaim peace between God and humanity, and also peace between people based on Jesus – will be 'called sons of God' (5:7)
  - b. There were attempts by the Jews, especially in the Diaspora, to win converts
8. The fourth woe: Woe for swearing by the gold of the temple, demeaning God, and reversing first and second things (23:16 – 22)
  - a. Jesus had taught about vows and swearing in Mt.5:33 – 37
9. The fifth woe: Woe for tithing mint, dill, cumin but neglecting justice, mercy, faithfulness (23:23 – 24)
  - a. This always gets me. Are there ways we focus on ceremonial things, but neglect care for the poor and vulnerable (justice), reconciliation and forgiveness in interpersonal relationships and beyond (mercy), and integrity and prayerfulness (faithfulness)?
  - b. Application: A true Christian is always more offended by his or her own sin than other people's, because we should know about our unfaithfulness, unmercifulness, and injustice more intimately.
  - c. Illus: I was impressed with this news article. Please consider it: 'Think your relatively poor or ordinary congregation can't make a difference? Think again. Meet the congregation of Jeff Street Baptist in Louisville, Ky., featured in the January 2013 magazine article "Multiplying Loaves," by Beth Newberry. Not only has this modest church raised \$180,000 to provide micro loans to people around the world, but members are also lobbying for payday lending reform nationwide and taking on the payday lenders in their local community. According to the Center for Responsible Lending (CRL), from California to North Carolina payday lenders disproportionately target and exploit African-American and Latino communities. Through loans with interest rates of more than 400 percent, payday lenders often trap borrowers in a cycle of debt. Payday lenders claim their loans are short-term and for emergency use, but most borrowers cannot afford to pay back their loan plus the charges when the high-interest loan becomes due in two weeks. Borrowers then end up taking out repeated loans, paying an additional fee each time. To put that in perspective, at the end of eight back-to-back loans, a typical \$325 loan would have accumulated \$468 in interest, according to a CRL study. The borrower would have to pay \$793 to retire their \$325 payday loan. To counter these predatory practices, Jeff Street Baptist members Susan Taylor and Andy Loving created the Louisville Loan Club, which opens in early 2013 and will provide borrowers with socially responsible loans. The company offers reasonable interest rates and will teach participants how to develop good credit and savings. Read more about the Louisville Loan Club in "Loan Stars." In early 2013, religious groups nationwide can take part in a day of action—organized by Rev. Soaries Jr. and supported by CRL—to stop payday lending. Their goal is to mobilize and equip thousands of people of faith to raise awareness about and take action against predatory lending in local communities. To participate in the National Day of Action to Stop Predatory Lending, sign up here: <http://newdatecoming.weebly.com/index.html> (and see <http://www.responsiblelending.org/payday-lending/>) Check out CRL's Faith and Credit program for more faith-based resources—including church discussion guides, statements, and materials—to end payday lending.'<sup>7</sup>
10. The sixth woe: Woe for cleaning the outside but not the inside (23:25 – 26)
11. The seventh woe: Woe for beautifying the outside for appearances, but being lawless and hypocritical on the inside (23:27 – 28)
  - a. The above two woes are similar in thought: focusing on outward appearances rather than the inward substance. We depend on Jesus for our inward health and purity.
  - b. Illus: Here's an example of that, and what God's response is to that. My friend recently wrote on a Facebook post: 'I was sitting in prayer with a woman, feeling pretty angry with God and reluctant to interact with him. Basically, I was tolerating the prayer that she was offering and as we prayed she asked me if God was showing or speaking anything to me (He was). She asked me to speak it out loud... [I] refused to share with her what I was sensing. I told her, with great

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<sup>7</sup> Elaina Ramsey, 'Faith Groups Take On Payday Lenders', Sojourners, January 2013

attitude, that if SHE wanted to say what God was telling HER on my behalf that she should feel free. Well, with eyes closed she proceeded to name all of the images, pictures and memories that I had been mulling over in those moments-things that I had never spoken out loud. She just went down the line as I sat in surprise and wonder. God wanted me to know that He could hold my anger and that He was listening....' *God knows us and keeps calling out to us even when we refuse Him and His deepest work in us.*

- c. Application: What are ways we might, or might be tempted to, focus on outward appearances of religiosity rather than cultivate a dynamic spiritual life with Jesus?
12. The eighth woe: Woe for opposing God's prophets (23:29 – 39)
- a. This contrasts with the eighth beatitude in 5:10 – 12, which involves the disciples being persecuted like the prophets were. The link is that Jesus' disciples will be the prophets and wise men that Jesus sends to the Pharisees and scribes.
  - b. Application: According to this passage, and Jesus' word in Matthew 5:10 – 12, we are still called to be the prophets and wise men (and women) who speak to the Jewish rabbinical tradition. That requires that we know the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, but not in merely a devotional sense. We have to know them in a prophetic sense, in the sense that these writers looked ahead to an Israel without a 'hardness of heart' problem, to the Messiah to resolve the problem of a corrupted human nature for all humanity, and a God who would dwell with us but not in a building. When I was the IVCF staff at Tufts University, I was asked to speak with the Hillel rabbi, with a group of Jewish and Christian students in the audience, on the topic 'What Are You Waiting For? Jewish and Christian views of the Messiah.' I argued that one common Jewish argument Jesus being the Messiah was the argument that he should have rebuilt the physical Temple in Jerusalem. I shared mostly from the chiasmic structure of the Pentateuch and the Prophets' criticism of the Temple, like in Daniel 9:24 – 27, that the Temple was God's 'Plan B.' It was not God's 'Plan A.' And Jesus got us back to God's 'Plan A.' After my comments, he did not engage me on Scripture at all. He changed topics to ask about how Jewish people have been mistreated by Christians. I actually shifted with him and said that that was a question for me in coming to faith (many American Christians were for the internment of Japanese Americans despite it being a Civil Rights violation). But nevertheless, I was persuaded by the truth of the Scriptures and of history. So we do need to learn the Hebrew Scriptures in such a way as to be more grounded in our faith, and articulate to Jewish people of various levels of devotion.