

Matthew 23-24

Hypocrisy Denounced

March 17, 2024

HPC Trinity class



The scribes and Pharisees have failed to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah who was prophesized in Scripture (MT 22). As a result, Jesus now turns to strong language against these religious leaders: “fools,” “hypocrites,” “blind guides,” and “sons of hell.” These epithets were not tossed out by Jesus in anger, as one might do if upset by the religious competition; rather, this is a divine warning and condemnation.

Jesus began denouncing these leaders about a year earlier (MT 15:7). Later he warned his disciples about them (MT 16:5-12). Now he is warning the general public.

Chapter 23

Jesus had been with his disciples for about a year at this point. The “crowds” mentioned in v.1 were no exaggeration; the city would have been overflowing at this time of year.



[READ 23:1-3]

A **scribe** (Heb.: “to cipher” or “to write”) was sometimes a Pharisee, also. He was trained from youth to know God’s Law plus civil and criminal law. Though scribes were considered professionals and were the learned men of their day, they (and the Pharisees) were not usually wealthy men. They often lived off of gifts and tithes, and many had common trades, such as butchers, bakers, stone masons, etc.

Unlike the scribes a **Pharisee** was often simply a layman, with no training or authority to teach the Law---or that was the original intent, anyway. By Matthew’s time, however, the Pharisees’ role seemed to have shifted more towards teaching.¹ Pharisees were not much concerned with the Temple and its rituals; that was the Sadducees’ job². His world was in the day-to-day adherence to a detailed set of religious laws and in continually discussing the interpretation of these laws. Many Pharisees were fanatical about religious purity and did all they could to avoid the “people of the land” (*am ha-aretz*).



¹ Carson, pg. 470.

² The Sadducees were from prestigious, wealthy families. They basically bought their way into the Temple and its politics. They were very strict literalists, with the Torah as their sole guide.



23:4---The “heavy loads” were the demands of the religious leaders. This is very unlike Jesus, whose burden was light and who promises rest. **[READ MT 12:29-30]**

23:5---“Everything they do is done for men to see: they make their phylacteries wide ... and the tassels on their garments long...”³



Seven Woes (Luke shows only six).MT 23:13-32.

“Woe” is best translated today as “alas,” meaning laments. Jesus pronounced woes upon the Pharisees frequently, similar to the woes declared by the prophet Isaiah in Is 5:8-23 against the people of his time.

[READ MT 23:13]--- Woe #1.

Verse 14 does not appear in the oldest texts and manuscripts of MT. It’s considered an interpolation of MK 12:40 and is often omitted or placed in brackets.

[READ MT 23:15]--- Woe #2.

Many historians attest that the final generations of the Temple (@10 B.C. until 70 A.D.) witnessed an incredible missionary zeal by Jewish leaders. The result, however, was that the proselytes became followers of the Pharisees rather than God.

Woe #3 --- This is similar to MT 5:33-37.

“Mosaic law forbade irreverent oaths, light use of the Lord’s name, and broken vows.”⁴ Swearing an oath was not forbidden. However, one had to word each oath correctly; the vast majority of people tended to use oaths carelessly. For instance, “I swear by Jerusalem that XYZ is true,” is not a problem if the vow is not kept. But to swear toward Jerusalem was binding and could spell disaster for the one breaking this oath.

Oaths were so prevalent in Jesus’ day that an entire Mishna tract was dedicated to the topic. Because these intricate rules seemed to trap the unwary and the innocent with their clever lies and deceit, Jesus said it is best to not swear an oath at all (5:34).⁵

³ Phylacteries were often made of black calfskin. Inside they contained slips of vellum on which was written extracts of scripture: Exodus 13:2-10 and 13:11-17, plus Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21.

⁴ Ibid., pg. 153.

⁵ “Many groups (e.g., Anabaptists, Jehovah’s Witnesses) have understood these verses absolutely literally and have therefore refused to take court oaths. Their zeal to conform to Scripture is commendable, but they have probably not interpreted the text very well.” (Carson, pg. 154).

[READ MT 23:23-24] -- Woe #4

Jesus doesn't condemn the Jewish leaders for following the Law of Tithing (DT 14:22-29). But scribes and Pharisees seemed intent on following the command at the expense of more important matters, such as justice, mercy, and faithfulness. (FYI, both the gnat and the camel are "unclean" to Jews.)

Woe #5

"Hey religious leaders! You look really sharp and classy. Nice dressers. But your insides are rotten." They do not need piety, rather a total re-thinking is necessary regarding justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Once this is done, the outside will cleanse itself.

[READ MT:23:27-28]

Woe #6

{Watch out: this is tricky}

It was customary in this region for people to whitewash graves with limestone each year during the month of Adar, which was just before Passover. With so many religious pilgrims flocking to the Jerusalem area, the faithful did not want a stranger from out of town to inadvertently stumble upon a grave. Even touching a grave made that person "unclean" and unable to participate in Passover.



PROBLEM:

Monuments such as graves were normally considered beautiful and pure unless they had been whitewashed, which implied that something underneath the paint required hiding. Therefore, when Jesus mentions that whitewash was necessary to hide these beautiful tomb monuments, he is comparing the Jewish leaders with the whitewashed graves: pretty outside but unclean inside. "The point that Jesus is making is not that the scribes and Pharisees were deliberate and self-conscious hypocrites, but that in their scrupulous regulations they appeared magnificently virtuous but were actually contaminating the people."⁶



Woe #7---

[READ MT 23:29-32]

The implication of this passage to the religious leaders is clear: God will only tolerate hypocrisy so far. And despite what you say, Israel, your attitude is no different than that of your forefathers.

[READ MT 23:33-36]

Abel's murder is in Genesis; Zechariah's is in 2 Chronicles, which was the last book of the Hebrew canon. As a comparison, it's like us saying "from Genesis to Revelation."

⁶ Ibid., pg. 483.

[READ MT 23:37-39]

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[READ LUKE 13:34-35]

These are nearly identical, which demonstrates that Matthew and Luke used the same source (Q?), at least in this case. One difference: In MT we hear Jesus giving this sad testimony near the end of his ministry; in LK it is near the mid-point.

Chapter 24

“Few chapters of the Bible have called forth more disagreement among interpreters than Matthew 24 and its parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21.”⁷

For a couple of centuries before and after Jesus apocalyptic literature flourished in both Christian and Jewish circles. The only such writings in use today by Protestant churches are the Books of Daniel and Revelation.

Let's make sure of our terms:

- APOCALYPSE (Gk: “uncovered” or “revealed”). All apocalyptic writings are narratives involving a human “seer” to whom heavenly secrets are revealed. This style of writing is marked by symbolic imagery, pseudonymity, and the expectation of an imminent cosmic cataclysm.⁸ It anticipates God taking decisive action against Satan (or Rome), destroying him and his evil, and raising the righteous to life in a messianic kingdom. The final battle takes place at Armageddon (Rev. 16:14-16).
- ESCHATOLOGY (Gk: “last” or “farthest”) is a branch of theology concerned with the final events in history. It encompasses the doctrines of Christ's Second Coming and the final judgement of the world.

- This chapter and the next are known as “The Olivet Discourse” because Jesus spoke these words from the Mount of Olives. His message here is strongly eschatological.
- We as Christians believe that history will ultimately show that God was/is/will be acting in history for His glory.

Signs of the End of the Age [READ MT 24:1-5]

The disciples hold their tongues about this destruction until they are alone with Jesus. Then they have three big questions:

1. When is the Temple going to be destroyed?
2. How will we know you are coming back?
3. How will we know when the “end of the age” (the Apocalypse) is here?

⁷ Ibid., pg. 488.

⁸ All definitions compliments of Merriam-Webster online dictionary.

Jesus goes to great lengths to give his followers a peek of what to expect. Though it may sound gloomy, the point he stresses is that they need to be alert. Don't be discouraged by all of the chaos that will come, but also don't be lured by false leaders who claim to be the Christ.

[READ MT 24:6-14] Wars, famines, earthquakes—and this is just the beginning. Jesus then hits home: Then YOU, my disciples, will be killed for your faith in me, though it will not be in vain.

[READ MT 24:15-25] What is “the abomination that causes desolation”??⁹

This phrase is also found in the historical/apocryphal book of First Maccabees and the book of Daniel. It most likely refers to an event that occurred about 200 years earlier,

when the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes sacrificed a pig to Zeus in the Temple. This act was the culmination of a campaign of repression Antiochus had launched against the Jewish religion. It helped fuel the Maccabean Revolt which lasted eight years.

- “let the reader understand” (v.15) is simply a sidenote that the abomination mentioned in Daniel 8:13, 9:27, and elsewhere now makes sense. Destruction is near.
- Don't delay. Escape Jerusalem at the first hint of trouble. (Many Christians fled Jerusalem from 66-68 A.D., before it was destroyed in 70 A.D.)

- Mark, in MK 13:14, was the first Gospel author to use this strange wording from Daniel. He (and/or Matthew) may have felt too threatened by the ever-present Roman authorities to give a straight-out warning of the impending doom. Thus, a Jewish reader who read Mark or Matthew and saw this Old Testament phrase would be alerted that total destruction was soon coming from the oppressor (Romans). Yet, it would have been seen as nothing but more religious garbage to the non-Jewish Roman soldiers and officials. Thus, by adding “let the reader understand,” the Gospel writers were giving a knowing “wink-wink” or “heads up” to their readers.

⁹ *Interpreter's*, pg. 13, “Abomination That Makes Desolate.”

24:32-34---Remember the fig tree lesson.

[READ MT 24:36]

24:36-51--- Jesus calls for us to live in hope and in His service, not in a fear of the end of life, and not solely for ourselves. Just as in Noah's day people will act like there is always a tomorrow. But someday...unexpectedly...the Lord will come. Be ready always!

“The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (24:44).



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