



## The Gospel of Matthew - Chapter Twenty Three

### **XII. Matthew 21:1-23:39 - The Messiah Asserts His Authority over Jerusalem (continues/concludes)**

#### Summary of Chapter Twenty Three

Jesus warned the crowd not to live their lives in the way that the scribes and Pharisees did for, although they had the authority and knowledge to teach Scripture, they were so full of hypocrisy, pride and self-importance, that they failed to live in the way they should. The disciples were not to be called teacher, Jesus was their teacher; nor should anyone on earth be called their Father; God was their true Father.

Jesus then turned to the scribes and Pharisees directly, pronouncing seven woes in judgement on their misguided attitudes in many different aspects of their teaching and lifestyle choices. They would receive the judgement that their misdemeanours, corruption of the law and indeed treachery before both God and man deserved.

The chapter concludes with Jesus lament over Jerusalem the city and indeed the whole Jewish nation for their failure to know that their Messiah had come as their saviour, the persecution of him and those who were faithful to his call. He provided a warning that the city faced destruction, then left his Father's house for the very last time.

#### **XII.e Matthew 23:1-36 - Jesus Denounces Scribes and Pharisees**

Having been challenged by the religious leaders in the foregoing chapter, Jesus warned the crowd and his disciples not to follow the false leadership of the Pharisees (vv.1-12), then directly pronounces woes upon those leaders for their deadly actions (vv.13-39).

Here, Matthew forced leaders in his own community to see themselves through the prism of a disobedient religious establishment that opposed its Lord and thereby summonsed them to be warned.

XII.e.i Matthew 23:1-12 - Warnings against the teachers of the law and the Pharisees

Jesus acknowledged the right of the religious leaders to teach the people, and indeed that much of what they taught was scriptural. However, they failed to live according to the will of God and should not be emulated.

Jesus also warned his disciples not to allow themselves to be called teacher, for Christ alone was their teacher. Neither should they call anyone on earth Father for that was the role of their God in heaven.

**<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup> ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat;**

Matthew 23:1-2

To the crowds and to his disciples. Although Jesus was teaching generally, he was targeting the two groups with the same instructions but for different reasons.

The scribes and the Pharisees were two distinct groups, although there was some overlap between them: the scribes were the professional interpretative experts on the Torah itself, while the Pharisees were experts in theological matters that the Torah raised, applying the law and their traditions to everyday life situations.

The duties of the scribes included the preparation of legal documents as well as some teaching duties, especially for children.

Although Pharisees existed in many towns and cities, both within and outside of Judæa, e.g. Paul was from Cilicia, they tended to cluster in Jerusalem, especially those that formed an elite, with the main schools of Pharisaic teaching located close to the temple area.

Moses’ seat is traditionally understood as referring symbolically to the authority of Moses’ teaching: <<*For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues*>> (Acts 15:21). However, recent archæological evidence has revealed a literal chair found in early synagogues. Whether literal or figurative, it refers to a place from which experts on the law taught. It was a term that Jesus’ listeners would have recognised as a symbol of authority: <<*Moreover, in Jerusalem Jehoshaphat appointed certain Levites and priests and heads of families of Israel, to give judgement for the Lord and to decide disputed cases. They had their seat at Jerusalem*>> (2 Chronicles 19:8).

Matthew Henry wrote: ‘It is no new thing for the vilest men to be exalted even to Moses’ seat; and, when it is so, the men are not so much honoured by the seat as the seat is dishonoured by the men’. The role of the church in society is to be upheld from generation to generation even if there are instances of individual people, or indeed instances of whole churches, that fall well below the standards expected by the one whom they profess to serve.

**<sup>3</sup> therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach.**

### Matthew 23:3

Do whatever they teach you and follow it. Jesus recognised the Pharisees' official function as interpreters of the Law of Moses, and insofar as they taught ethically and accurately interpreted Scripture, they were to be obeyed. However, therefore, also translated as so, the Greek word *oun*, connects this verse with v.2 and the mention of Moses. Therefore, whatever they teach you should probably be limited to 'whatever they tell you about the Law of Moses', and does not include the Pharisees' later extensive additions to Mosaic laws which rabbinic teachers made.

But do not do as they do. Jesus is about to show that much of the Pharisees' practice and their extra biblical tradition is wrong. Paul was a Pharisee and could recognise this failing in himself and others: <<*you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal?*>> (Romans 2:21). A serious failing in church leadership is where those teaching from the front do not live a lifestyle that reflects their own teaching.

In general, whatever the subject matter, it is better to pronounce the benefits of one's own viewpoint than to focus on a negative campaign against the opposition. Normally, that was the way Jesus did things but on this occasion he felt it necessary to speak out against the scribes and Pharisees, for they held sway over the ordinary people and had the potential to even draw good disciples away from their calling.

Anyhow, people must be told of the wolves: <<*I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them*>> (Acts 20:29-30), of the dogs: <<*Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!*>> (Philippians 3:2), and of the false teachers: <<*For such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ*>> (2 Corinthians 11:13), so that they may know to stand upon their guard. Jesus teaches not only the general crowd, but especially his own disciples, who should also take heed of these cautions; for good disciples are still apt to have their eyes dazzled by the world.

There are many religious Christians today who act in the same way as the Pharisees did by being harsh on the shortcomings of others and yet lenient on their own!

<sup>4</sup> They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

### Matthew 23:4

Heavy burdens describe the extra biblical traditions of the rabbis that were a pillar of the Pharisaic branch of Judaism. It was intended as a means of making the OT relevant to new life situations, but its massive obligations had become burdensome and oppressive. This, along with some specifically Jewish

requirements such as circumcision, was known as a yoke and was referred to by Peter at the Council of Jerusalem: <<*Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?*>> (Acts 15:10). The Gospel message was diametrically opposed to what these men were advocating: <<*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*>> (Matthew 11:29-30).

They themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. This was the hypocrisy that so angered Jesus that leaders of the church in any generation, Jewish or Christian, should burden people down and do nothing to lighten their load, which is what Gospel proclamation should be achieving. God has always opposed such leaders: <<*You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them*>> (Ezekiel 34:4).

<sup>5</sup> They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.

#### Matthew 23:5

They do all their deeds to be seen by others. Whereas phylacteries were supposed to glorify God, the wearers here use them to draw attention to themselves, i.e. they make their phylacteries broad. It should be noted that Jesus would have worn such garments. The issue here is not about wearing fringes or not, but whether the wearers seek honour for themselves or for God alone; a sincere matter of the heart.

Phylacteries are small cube-shaped cases made of leather, containing passages of Scripture written on parchment. They were worn on the left arm and forehead as a literal way to obey the admonition of Deuteronomy 10:6 <<*You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead*>>. Similar instructions can be found in: <<*It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips; for with a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt*>> (Exodus 13:9), and: <<*Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead*>> (Deuteronomy 6:8). Essentially, it was about owning the Word of God and binding it in their hearts: <<*My child, keep my words and store up my commandments with you; keep my commandments and live, keep my teachings as the apple of your eye; bind them on your fingers, write them on the tablet of your heart*>> (Proverbs 7:1-3), thus keeping the ways of God as the focus of their daily lives.

Fringes refer to tassels with a blue cord that were attached to the four corners of a man's garment. These were to be worn by all Jews to differentiate them from other nations: <<*The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so*>>

*that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God>> (Numbers 15:37-41), and: <<You shall make tassels on the four corners of the cloak with which you cover yourself>> (Deuteronomy 22:12), reminding the people to obey God's commandments and to be holy in everything they do, say and are.*

**<sup>6</sup> They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues,**

### Matthew 23:6

Place of honour. Seating at banquets was assigned to guests based on their rank or status in society. Jesus used an example of this custom to teach on the need for and the benefits of humility: *<<When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, "Give this person your place", and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted'>> (Luke 14:7-11).*

Best seats in the synagogues. Excavations at early Galilæan synagogues indicate that bench seats were built along the sides of the synagogue; refer to the comments made on Luke 4:16. In any meeting place, some seats were regarded as better than others.

**<sup>7</sup> and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi.**

### Matthew 23:7

Greeted with respect in the market-places. Social etiquette dictated the manner of the greeting; one must greet one's social superior first.

The market-places were the customary meeting points for commerce, politics and social gatherings, as well as the place where casual labours would ply for hire: *<<When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right">> (Matthew 20:3-4).*

Rabbi in Hebrew literally meant 'my lord', but it was used generally for outstanding teachers of the law, most frequently heads of rabbinical schools.

Verses 6-7 demonstrate just how easy it is for anyone to be drawn to the trappings of office or service, rather than being content simply to serve with

thanksgiving to God. Diotrephes was an example of the former: <<*I have written something to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority*>> (3 John 9); Christ is the epitome of the latter. So too King David, who held the highest office in the land and yet submitted to God in all things: <<*For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness*>> (Psalm 84:10).

<sup>8</sup> But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. <sup>9</sup> And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven. <sup>10</sup> Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.

### Matthew 23:8-10

Not to be called rabbi, call no one your father on earth, nor are you to be called instructors. Jesus' disciples should not try to gain authority over one another as teachers or masters, since Jesus is ultimately each disciple's teacher and master, for you have one teacher, one instructor, to whom the disciple is accountable. Jesus does not literally forbid use of the titles 'teacher', 'doctor', or 'father' for all time in all circumstances, but he prohibits his disciples from using these terms in the way the Pharisees used them, in a spirit that wrongly exalted leaders and reinforced human pride.

Paul provides an excellent summary statement on this issue: <<*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all*>> (Ephesians 4:4-6). He took it a stage further on a personal level: <<*For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them*>> (1 Corinthians 9:19).

John Meier, a Roman Catholic scholar, notes Jesus' prohibition of the title father and questions the use of ecclesiastical titles, which arose even in Matthew's church in Syria a few decades after his Gospel came into circulation. In some circles, ordained ministers are taken aback if they are not greeted with the title Reverend, which literally means 'one worthy of reverence, one who should be revered'. Is it possible that the very criticisms Jesus laid against the religious establishments in his day now stand institutionalised in most of his church? Church leaders should command and not demand respect. Church leaders are called to serve and not to be served.

Disciples are the servants of God and are called to service in order to win disciples for Jesus, not for themselves: <<*Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them*>> (John 13:16).

You are all students is also translated as: <<*But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers*>> (v.8 NIV), showing that there should be equality within the church, irrespective of gifts or the role to which one is called, for all are of one body: <<*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many,*

*are one body, so it is with Christ*>> (1 Corinthians 12:12). However, it is appropriate for members to defer to church leadership in appropriate matters of doctrinal teaching and church discipline: <<*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing – for that would be harmful to you*>> (Hebrews 13:17).

<sup>11</sup> The greatest among you will be your servant. <sup>12</sup> All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

### Matthew 23:11-12

The greatest among you has echoes of Jesus' earlier teaching: <<*So the last will be first, and the first will be last*>> (Matthew 20:16), with references to subsequently becoming a servant to others in Matthew 20:25-27. Refer to the comments made on those passages.

All who humble themselves will be exalted. It is God who does the exalting and he will deal with the proud: <<*The haughty eyes of people shall be brought low, and the pride of everyone shall be humbled; and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day. For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high*>> (Isaiah 2:11-12), and: <<*thus says the Lord God: Remove the turban, take off the crown; things shall not remain as they are. Exalt that which is low, abase that which is high*>> (Ezekiel 21:26).

### XII.e.ii Matthew 23:13-36 - Woes of judgment against the teachers of the law and the Pharisees

Jesus now addresses the scribes and the Pharisees directly, declaring a series of seven woes upon them that echoes the criticisms he has repeated throughout his ministry. These seven woes stand in contrast to the first seven blessings that introduce the Sermon on the Mount and describes Jesus' true disciples: <<*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God*>> (Matthew 5:3-9).

Seven in Scripture is symbolic of perfection or completion, providing additional emphasis to what Jesus was saying to and about such men as these. Jesus' woes are the angry laments of wounded love, incited by compassion for those whom religious leaders have led astray. For a similar list of woes, refer to Luke 11:37-54 and the associated comments.

Jesus was thundering against many popular preachers and people who seemed to be living holy lives, because they were practicing human religion rather than serving God with purified hearts. When rightly understood, Jesus' woes may strike too close to home for comfort. When religion becomes a veneer of holiness to

conceal unholy character, it makes its bearers less receptive to God's transforming grace; indeed, it opens a doorway for the enemy.

**<sup>13</sup> 'But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.**

### Matthew 23:13

**The first woe: the locked door.**

The woes are a mixture of condemnation, regret and sorrow. The scribes and Pharisees are false leaders who have drawn the people away from the Kingdom of Heaven instead of toward it.

For you lock people out of the Kingdom of Heaven. The religious leaders had been given the key of knowledge to the Scriptures and yet would not unlock the door to the Gospel in order to enter and lead others with them into the Kingdom by following the one with the eternal key: *<<I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open>>* (Isaiah 22:22).

You stop them. These teachers were more intent on making disciples for themselves than for God and were thus training them to think and act in the way of their own teacher. They saw the teaching and works of Jesus not as a way into heaven but as a threat to their own earthly lifestyle and therefore they opposed him at every opportunity. Since the teachers were not going to enter the Kingdom then neither would their followers or the general public who held them in high regard as leaders in the church.

[[Other authorities add verse 14 here, or after verse 12]]

[[<sup>14</sup> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance you make long prayers; therefore you will receive the greater condemnation]]

It is certain that Jesus spoke this woe over such men as these at some point but it is not clear whether it occurred on this occasion and may have been a later addition to manuscripts. There is nothing theologically wrong with its contents. For comments made on this woe refer to Luke 20:45-47.

**<sup>15</sup> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.**

### Matthew 23:15

**The second woe: entrapped converts.**

Jesus does not criticise proselytism per se, but the manner in which the Pharisees zealously sought converts, i.e. you cross sea and land to make a single convert,

only to place them under the burdensome weight of the many requirements in their extra biblical traditions.

**Make a single convert.** Although seeing someone come to faith for the first time is one of the greatest miracles that one can witness, it should never be forgotten that it is the Holy Spirit that does the converting, not the person who shared the Gospel with them, introduced them to church, ran an Alpha course, or whatever else they may have done to help a person into a place where the Spirit could impact upon them. People are not trophies of people; they belong to God alone.

**Child of hell** is literally ‘child of *Gehenna*’, and is a reference to the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, just south of Jerusalem, where refuse from the city was burned. Jewish and NT writings used it as a metaphorical picture of eternal punishment. Refer to the comments made on Matthew 18:6-9.

Such converts were rescued from paganism simply to follow men who were taking them straight into hell, thus making them **twice as much a child of hell.**

**<sup>16</sup> ‘Woe to you, blind guides, who say, “Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.” <sup>17</sup> You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? <sup>18</sup> And you say, “Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.” <sup>19</sup> How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?’**

### **Matthew 23:16-19**

#### **The third woe: binding oaths.**

**Woe to you, blind guides.** Jesus had a similar conversation with the Pharisees over their spiritual blindness: <<*Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains*>> (John 9:39-41).

The Pharisees distinguished between oaths made **by the sanctuary** and those made **by the gold of the sanctuary**, and between oaths made **by the altar** and those made **by the gift** on it. **The sanctuary** symbolises God, whereas that placed in it is the sacrificial offering, a worldly thing that the people value more than God does. The same applies to **the altar**. As with much of their belief system, they focus on misguided superficial distinctions and overlook the higher principles of the law.

**<sup>20</sup> So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; <sup>21</sup> and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; <sup>22</sup> and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.**

## Matthew 23:20-22

**Whoever swears.** Those with faith in God who recognise their constant accountability in his presence need only give a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as a binding oath: *<<But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”; anything more than this comes from the evil one>>* (Matthew 5:34-37).

**Whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.** This is ultimately what any oath represents for: *<<It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior>>* (Hebrews 7:7), and God is far superior to anything else in existence.

Any oath is implicitly undertaken in God’s name: *<<The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear>>* (Deuteronomy 6:13). Jesus’ attack is ultimately directed against the profanation of God’s name. For any surrogate oath nevertheless represents God’s name and implicitly calls him to witness; any breach of truthfulness demands judgment no less severe.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practised without neglecting the others.

## Matthew 23:23

The fourth woe: neglecting the weighty matters of the law.

**Tithe.** The Mosaic Law required giving a tenth of all that one produced or earned for the ongoing work of the Lord through the Levites and priests, for example: *<<All tithes from the land, whether the seed from the ground or the fruit from the tree, are the Lord’s; they are holy to the Lord. If persons wish to redeem any of their tithes, they must add one-fifth to them. All tithes of herd and flock, every tenth one that passes under the shepherd’s staff, shall be holy to the Lord. Let no one inquire whether it is good or bad, or make substitution for it; if one makes substitution for it, then both it and the substitute shall be holy and cannot be redeemed>>* (Leviticus 27:30-33).

Jesus now turned to their inconsistency in other respects, beginning with tithing. Ancient Israel had been an agrarian society, and Israelites brought one-tenth of their produce into storehouses to provide for all the landless Levites and priests, and once every third year for a major festival, paying the way of the poor who otherwise could not afford to participate. This was a requirement of the law but should have been a matter of the heart for pious Jews. It had become a neglected duty: *<<I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them; so that the Levites and the singers, who had conducted the service, had gone back to their fields. So I remonstrated with the officials and said, ‘Why is the house of God forsaken?’ And I gathered*

*them together and set them in their stations. Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses>> (Nehemiah 13:10-12).*

Mint, dill, and cummin. The Pharisees were so scrupulous in following this injunction that they paid a tithe even from their smallest garden crops. Jesus does not say that they were wrong in this, i.e. it is these you ought to have practised, but that they should do this without neglecting the far more important matters. However, the Pharisees would use such cheap ways of tithing to enhance their own reputation and self-standing in the community: *<<I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess>>* (Luke 18:12 KJV).

They had neglected the weightier matters of the law. Although all of God's laws should be kept, the leaders frequently debated which laws took precedent and which could be overlooked: *<<So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being>>* (Deuteronomy 10:12-13), and: *<<He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?>>* (Micah 6:8). Ultimately, to break one law is to break the whole law: *<<For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. For the one who said, 'You shall not commit adultery', also said, 'You shall not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the law>>* (James 2:10-11).

Justice and mercy and faith. God is just, merciful and faithful. Therefore, he expects his disciples to show the same qualities: *<<For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings>>* (Hosea 6:6 NIV).

<sup>24</sup> You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

#### Matthew 23:24

You strain out a gnat. The rabbis strained wine to remove even small, unclean insects that could contaminate it: *<<But all other winged insects that have four feet are detestable to you>>* (Leviticus 11:23), and: *<<All creatures that swarm upon the earth are detestable; they shall not be eaten>>* (Leviticus 11:41).

Swallow a camel. The camel was the largest land animal in Palestine and was used in an analogy to show how hard it is for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom: *<<Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God>>* (Matthew 19:24), and was ceremonially unclean: *<<But among those that chew the cud or have divided hoofs, you shall not eat the following: the camel, for even though it chews the cud, it does not have divided hoofs; it is unclean for you>>* (Leviticus 11:4). Jesus was speaking in obvious hyperbole, an intended overstatement to make a point. The Pharisees had become lost in the minute details, while neglecting the law's overarching intent and failing to recognise the

magnitude of their own sin of complacency and the prevention of bringing others to a place where they would receive saving faith.

The most poignant analogy here is that these men would lead Jesus to be sentenced to death but they would not enter the building that would make them ceremonially unclean, thus unable to celebrate Passover: <<*Then they took Jesus from Caiaphas to Pilate's headquarters. It was early in the morning. They themselves did not enter the headquarters, so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover*>> (John 18:28).

<sup>25</sup> 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. <sup>26</sup> You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.

#### Matthew 23:25-26

The fifth woe: clean outside, filthy inside.

You clean the outside of the cup and of the plate. Ritual had replaced their devotion to God: <<*and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles*>> (Mark 7:4).

Clean the inside. While seeking external purity, the Pharisees were oblivious to the corrupt internal condition of their hearts.

The School of Shammai were less concerned whether one cleansed the inner or outer part of a cup first. In contrast, the Hillelite Pharisees thought that the outside of a cup was typically unclean anyway and thus, like Jesus, insisted on cleansing the inner part first. On the surface Jesus' statement challenged Shammaite practice; but he actually addressed the purity of all their hearts, a point he reinforced in his next illustration.

<sup>27</sup> 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. <sup>28</sup> So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

#### Matthew 23:27-28

The sixth woe: whitewashed tombs.

The Pharisees were like whitewashed tombs, which in Jesus' day could be outwardly very beautiful, although within they held nothing but death and decay.

Jesus was no doubt alluding to corpse uncleanness but may have had another Scripture in mind, showing the folly of their actions: <<*Because, in truth, because they have misled my people, saying, 'Peace', when there is no peace; and because, when the people build a wall, these prophets smear whitewash*>>

on it. Say to those who smear whitewash on it that it shall fall. There will be a deluge of rain, great hailstones will fall, and a stormy wind will break out. When the wall falls, will it not be said to you, 'Where is the whitewash you smeared on it?'">> (Ezekiel 13:10-12). The leaders' outward appearance merely provided a veneer for the impurity, hence lawlessness, of their hearts. To those who prided themselves on obedience to Torah, the charge of lawlessness would be deeply offensive and shaming.

These tombs were customarily whitewashed to identify them clearly to passersby, since people would be rendered unclean for seven days through any contact with them: <<Whoever in the open field touches one who has been killed by a sword, or who has died naturally, or a human bone, or a grave, shall be unclean for seven days>> (Numbers 19:16), and: <<Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realising it>> (Luke 11:44).

<sup>29</sup> 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, <sup>30</sup> and you say, "If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets." <sup>31</sup> Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. <sup>32</sup> Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors.

#### Matthew 23:29-32

The seventh woe: descendants of those who murdered the prophets.

We would not have taken part. They claim that they would not have been like their predecessors and yet they would become implicated in the crucifixion of their Messiah: <<They know God's decree, that those who practise such things deserve to die – yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practise them. Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things>> (Romans 1:32-2:1). In scheming to have Jesus executed, the religious leaders showed that they were following in the footsteps of their ancestors, who had persecuted and murdered God's prophets.

Taking the reverse of the situation of the Jews, how many Christians today would claim they would be more honouring to Christ in their walk had they lived in his era and not their own?

Jesus challenged the hypocrisy of those who honour the prophets by caring for their tombs, yet like their ancestors will kill *the Prophet* who had come to them. Their behaviour proved that, spiritually speaking, they were not descendants of the prophets, but rather descendants of those who killed them.

Tombs, graves. Funerary art became rich and varied around this time, with widespread ornamentation of tomb facades, ossuaries, and stone coffins, as well as wall paintings and graffiti.

An ossuary was a box used for burying the bones of the dead. A tomb was usually opened up after several months or even a year in order to recover the bones from the decayed corpse and re-inter them in the ossuary, which might contain more than one set of bones.



This Ossuary is believed to have contained the bones of the High Priest Caiaphas

Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. Employing irony in a manner typical of the prophets, Jesus told the leaders to fill to the brim the role of prophet murderers they had inherited, so that the judgment accumulating for generations would finally be poured out.

The prophets sometimes told the people to go on sinning but to expect God's judgment for it: <<And he said, 'Go and say to this people: "Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand"'>> (Isaiah 6:9), <<Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: You and your wives have accomplished in deeds what you declared in words, saying, "We are determined to perform the vows that we have made, to make offerings to the queen of heaven and to pour out libations to her." By all means, keep your vows and make your libations! Therefore hear the word of the Lord, all you Judæans who live in the land of Egypt: Lo, I swear by my great name, says the Lord, that my name shall no longer be pronounced on the lips of any of the people of Judah in all the land of Egypt, saying, "As the Lord God lives"'>> (Jeremiah 44:25-26), <<But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God'; let those who will hear, hear; and let those who refuse to hear, refuse; for they are a rebellious house>> (Ezekiel 3:27), and: <<Come to Bethel – and transgress; to Gilgal – and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days; bring a thank-offering of leavened bread, and proclaim freewill-offerings, publish them; for so you love to do, O people of Israel! says the Lord God>> (Amos 4:4-5). This was just a few days before these men were among those who would call for Jesus' execution: <<They cried out, 'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!' Pilate asked them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but the emperor'>> (John 19:15).

<sup>33</sup> You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?

### Matthew 23:33

Snakes and brood of vipers were virtually synonymous terms that magnify the guilt of these religious leaders. The Pharisees had been called brood of vipers by John the Baptist: <<*But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'*>> (Matthew 3:7), and by Jesus before: <<*You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks*>> (Matthew 12:34). Refer to the comments made on Matthew 3:7 and 12:33-35.

**These men may indeed have had a venomous bite but the Holy Spirit would suck out the venom from the wound when he raised Jesus from the dead to the glory of God the Father.**

How can you escape being sentenced to hell? Jesus' words on judgement sound like a lament, for he does not want anyone else to face the wrath of God. It has become unpopular in the modern church for leaders to preach on the realities of hell and the judgement to come. Many prefer to speak of the love, grace and mercy, all of which are the exceptional qualities of an amazing God. Yet God's prophets and Jesus himself thought it right to speak on both the grace of God and the reality of the wrath to come against those who will choose to go their own way in this life.

**Although it would be wrong to scare people into the Kingdom, it is equally as wrong to ignore the realities of the eternal hell that awaits those both inside and outside the church who will not truly come to God through Christ.**

<sup>34</sup> Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, <sup>35</sup> so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

### Matthew 23:34-35

I send you prophets is a statement of Jesus' deity for it is he that sent the prophets and it will be he that would send forth the apostles to spread the Gospel and build the church: <<*Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you'*>> (John 20:21). It was to the Jews that he would first send them, reaching out beyond them to the nations when many Jews still declined to accept the good news following the resurrection of their Messiah: <<*Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles'*>> (Acts 13:46).

Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. This verse is clearly understood to represent the church age and not the OT

era. Sages, Greek *hokmim*, are wise men, part of the group of teachers, apostles, missionaries and indeed Jesus himself, who came to spread the Gospel and would be persecuted in varying degrees for doing so. Jesus knew how those he sent would be treated but he sent them anyway for such is the calling of some. Their reward will be far greater than their sacrifice and their blood will be avenged: **<<From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight>>** (Psalm 72:14).

The interval from the blood of righteous Abel: **<<Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.' And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?' And the Lord said, 'What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground! And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand'>>** (Genesis 4:8-11), to the blood of Zechariah: **<<Then the spirit of God took possession of Zechariah son of the priest Jehoiada; he stood above the people and said to them, 'Thus says God: Why do you transgress the commandments of the Lord, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the Lord, he has also forsaken you.' But they conspired against him, and by command of the king they stoned him to death in the court of the house of the Lord. King Joash did not remember the kindness that Jehoiada, Zechariah's father, had shown him, but killed his son. As he was dying, he said, 'May the Lord see and avenge!'>>** (2 Chronicles 24:20-22), encompasses all of OT biblical history. Abel was the first person murdered in the OT and Zechariah is the last murdered, since 2 Chronicles, where the murder of Zechariah is recorded, is the last book in the Hebrew canon.

However, there is a difficulty with the phrase son of Berechiah, since in 2 Chronicles 24:20 Zechariah is called the 'son of the priest Jehoiada', while the more famous prophet who wrote the book of Zechariah is 'Zechariah the son of Berechiah' in Zechariah 1:1. Several solutions have been proposed:

1. Just as Zechariah the prophet can be called either 'the son of Berechiah' in Zechariah 1:1 or 'the son of Iddo' in Ezra 6:14, where Iddo was his grandfather; so the Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24:20 could have been the son of an otherwise unrecorded Berechiah, with Jehoiada, who lived for 130 years according to 2 Chronicles 24:15, being Zechariah's grandfather.
2. As was the case with a number of people in the OT, the father of Zechariah mentioned in 2 Chronicles 24:20 could have been known by more than one name, i.e. Jehoiada and Berechiah.
3. The reference may not be to the Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24:20-22 but to Zechariah the prophet, as is suggested by some extra biblical Jewish literature that includes a tradition telling about the murder of Zechariah the prophet, who comes near the end of the OT prophets. It is certainly not Zechariah the father of John the Baptist!
4. The phrase 'son of Berechiah' may have been a very early textual addition by a scribe who thought 'Zechariah the son of Berechiah' was intended. One significant early manuscript, Sinaiticus, in fact, omits the words 'the son of Berechiah'.

Each of these proposed solutions presents a plausible possibility, although there is not enough information to determine which is most likely.

An added complication comes from the work of Josephus, Jewish War 4.335, where he recounts that Zechariah the son of Baruch was killed in the temple by the Romans shortly before they destroyed it in AD70.

John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury between 1691 and 1694, believed that Jesus was referring both to the historical killing of Zechariah the priest and foretelling the future martyrdom of the Jew protecting the house of God from the Romans.



Archbishop John Tillotson

<sup>36</sup> Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.

#### Matthew 23:36

Rather than respond to the unique opportunity they had to receive their Messiah and participate in the Kingdom of Heaven, the religious people of this generation would continue to spill righteous blood, now that of Jesus and his followers, and so would face God's wrath.

It was the leaders of this generation that would see the destruction of the temple in AD70 and a near disintegration of the Jewish nation that would not be re-established until 1947. The events following Jesus' crucifixion marked the start of the final church age of judgement for the whole world, something that could also be viewed as this generation.

#### XII.f Matthew 23:37-39 - The Lament over Jerusalem

Jesus bemoaned the fate of Jerusalem with its inhabitants at the time being around 25,000 to 30,000 people. His lament, however, also applied to all of Israel since Jerusalem was the religious and political centre of the nation.

<sup>37</sup> 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

#### Matthew 23:37

Jerusalem, Jerusalem. This was the city where the name of God was supposed to be proclaimed higher than all other things and yet it was the city where he had so often had to make a judgement on his people: <<*The Lord said, 'I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel; and I will reject this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there'*>> (2 Kings 23:27), and: <<*O Jerusalem, wash your heart clean of*

*wickedness so that you may be saved. How long shall your evil schemes lodge within you?>> (Jeremiah 4:14).*

The city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! Jesus, it seems, deliberately used the present tense in this statement. Although many prophets had been killed in other parts of the land and indeed in exile, most were martyred at the hub of Jewish religion, indeed some in the very house of God. Jesus' lament reflects not just the apostasy of the city where God had placed his name but a whole people who had lost sight of its purpose in being called by God.

Luke records this lament in part within events that occurred while Jesus was travelling up to Jerusalem, concluding it on his arrival in the city. It seems likely that there was only one event that is dealt with by the different Gospel writers thematically and topically to aid understanding of other aspects of Jesus' teaching. Refer to Luke 13:34-35 and 19:41, along with the comments made on those verses.

As a hen gathers her brood under her wings is a common metaphor for loving care and similar to: *<<like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft>> (Deuteronomy 32:11), or <<May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge>> (Ruth 2:12), <<Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings>> (Psalm 17:8), and: <<How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings>> (Psalm 36:7). God had always loved his own: <<the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you>> (Jeremiah 31:3).*

You were not willing. God had held out his hand in reconciliation but the Jewish people generally and certainly most of the religious leaders were not prepared to accept this gift of grace.

The imagery of Michelangelo's Adam gives the perfect illustration of just how half-hearted the human response has been to God in accepting his gracious offer of life eternal.



Michelangelo's Adam

<sup>38</sup> See, your house is left to you, desolate.

#### Matthew 23:38

Your house is left to you, desolate, the Greek word *eremos*, which also means wilderness. In the OT, house is an expression for the temple, i.e. God's house; although possibly here it has broader reference to Jerusalem's leadership. All Jewish religious authority would collapse with the destruction of the temple by the Roman Army in AD70.

*Jerusalem had been left desolate after the Babylonians had captured it: <<How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal>> (Lamentations 1:1). Jesus knew it was about to become so once again; spiritually bereft at least. Why? <<Jerusalem sinned grievously, so she has become a mockery; all who honoured her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; she herself groans, and turns her face away>> (Lamentations 1:8).*

<sup>39</sup> For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

#### Matthew 23:39

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. As Jesus cites Psalm 118:26, which is the manner in which the crowd greeted him during the Triumphal Entry, refer to Matthew 21:9, he identifies himself with God's Messiah and Saviour, who will once again come to his people, but only after a time of great judgment, when they are finally ready to receive him.

In the next chapter the account will continue with: *<<As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple>> (Matthew 24:1)*, showing that Jesus would leave the temple after his statement you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord". There is no record to say that he ever entered the temple, his Father's house, again.