

Matthew Chapter 23 Continued

Matthew 23:23 "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier [matters] of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone."

Mint, anise, and cummin are various spices. Some of them were used for fragrance from time to time. They were also ground up and used for medicine. This really was not what God had in mind when He spoke of the tithe, but they had gotten so technical with their performance they had forgotten the purpose behind it.

“Pay tithes of:” A tithe or tenth of all produce was, by the Mosaic Law, to be given for the use of the priests and Levites (Lev. 27:30). Several species of “mint” grow in Palestine. “Anise” (Greek anethon) is better rendered “dill.” It grew both wild and cultivated, its fruits being used for medicine. The seeds of “cumin,” which resemble caraway, were used as spice in seasoning.

“Tithes of mint and anise and cummin”: Garden herbs, not really the kind of farm produce that the tithe was designed to cover (Lev. 27:30). But the Pharisees fastidiously weighed out a tenth of every herb, perhaps even counting individual dill seeds. Jesus’ point, however, was not to condemn their observance of the law’s fine points.

The problem was that they “neglected the weightier provisions” of justice and mercy and faith, the moral principles underlying all the laws. They were satisfied with their focus on the incidentals and externals but willfully resisted the spiritual meaning of the law. He told them they should have concentrated on those large issues “without neglecting the others.”

In such little matters the Pharisees were most careful to keep the law, yet they had completely overlooked its more important precepts.

Verses 24-26: “Strain at a gnat,” better “strain out a gnat”: The Jews strained (Greek diulizo), wine before drinking it so as to avoid touching or swallowing anything unclean. “But within they are full of extortion and excess:” The “of” should be read “from.” The Pharisees’ living was obtained by extorting wrongfully from others.

Matthew 23:24 "[Ye] blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel."

“Strain at a gnat and swallow a camel”: Some Pharisees would strain their beverages through a fine cloth to make sure they did not inadvertently swallow a gnat, the smallest of unclean animals (Lev. 11:23). The camel was the largest of all the unclean animals (Lev. 11:4).

Matthew 23:25 "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess."

“Ye make clean the outside”: The Pharisees’ focus on external issues lay at the heart of their error. Who would want to drink from a cup that had been washed on the outside but was still filthy inside? Yet the Pharisees lived their lives as if external appearance were more important than internal reality. That was the very essence of their hypocrisy, and Jesus rebuked them for it repeatedly.

Matthew 23:26 "[Thou] blind Pharisee, cleanse first that [which is] within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also."

“Thou blind Pharisee”: Well might Christ call such a one a blind Pharisee, who was so scrupulously careful to cleanse his cup and platter; and yet made no conscience of filling them with what was gotten in an unjust way, and so defiled himself and them.

Cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. Get food and drink in an honest way, remove all extortion and oppression out of thine hands, and luxury and intemperance from thy table. And so shall the outward cleanness of thy cup and dish, be no reproach unto thee, or testimony against thee, of thine hypocrisy.

So the great concern of all men should be inward purity; that their hearts be purified by faith in the blood of Christ, and sprinkled from an evil conscience by the same. That principles of grace and holiness be formed in them by the Spirit of God. And then their outward lives and conversations being influenced thereby will be honorable and agreeable to their professions.

Otherwise an external reformation or an outward show of holiness and pretense to it, without internal grace, will never be of any avail in the sight of God.

Here Jesus was speaking of cleaning up the heart of man. His heart must be washed in the blood of the Lamb, and cleansed from all unrighteousness.

These Pharisees appeared from the outside to be living for God, but their hearts and spirits were not in it.

Verses 27-33: “Whited sepulchers:” Since contact with a dead body rendered a person unclean according to the Mosaic Law, graves were customarily painted white to make them conspicuous and give the opportunity of avoiding contact with them.

“The children of them which killed” means literally “those who murdered.”

“Generation” denotes “offspring.”

“The damnation of hell” might be translated “being judged worthy of Gehenna.”

Matthew 23:27 "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead [men's] bones, and of all uncleanness."

“Whited sepulchers”: “Tombs” were regularly whitewashed to make them stand out. Accidentally touching or stepping on a grave caused ceremonial uncleanness (Num. 19:16). A freshly white washed tomb would be brilliantly white and clean looking, and sometimes spectacularly ornate. But the inside was full of defilement and decay. Contrast Jesus’ words here and (in Luke 11:44).

Once a year, about the fifteenth of the month of Adar, the Jews painted their tombs with whitewash to denote where the dead bodies were. Jesus, in this statement, was accusing these scribes and Pharisees to be dead inwardly, but whitewashed on the outside.

Probably from the world's point of view (the outside), they were super religious, but it was all on the outside. Inside there were dead men's bones. They were covering up their lust of the flesh with this whitewash.

To whitewash something today means, to attempt to cover up something very evil. In our society today, we see this in preachers who lead two lives; one for the public to view, and another private life that cannot stand up under the light. It is explained (in verse 28).

Matthew 23:28 "Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity."

“Even so ye also ... appear righteous unto men”: But what will this appearance avail a man, when God sits in judgment upon his soul?

But their outward show and appearance of righteousness, was only "unto men", not unto God: they did not appear so to him, who is the searcher of hearts, and knows what is in man, and knew all the secret wickedness that was in them. For though they imposed upon, and deceived men, they could not deceive God.

Nor was their iniquity hidden from Christ, who adds, "but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity": which was evident from their ambition and vain glory, in desiring the uppermost rooms at feasts, the chief places in the synagogue, greetings in the markets, and titles of honor and grandeur.

And their greed and cruel oppression of the widows and fatherless using a pretense of long prayers. Also from their neglecting the weightier matters of the law: judgment, mercy, and faith, and practicing extortion and excess.

Matthew 23:29 "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchers of the righteous,"

“Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites”: This is the seventh and last time, in which these words are delivered in this exact form by our Lord, in this chapter; and expresses the certainty, both of their sin and punishment.

This shows the hypocrisy of these persons, and supports the character given of them and also furnishes a sufficient reason, why a woe is denounced upon them,

Because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchers of the righteous; meaning the prophets, and also other righteous men besides them.

Now our Lord must not be understood as blaming them for barely building the tombs of the prophets, and garnishing the sepulchers of the righteous, which they might have done without blame. But because they did all this, that they might be thought to be very innocent and holy men, and far from being guilty of the crimes their forefathers were.

Especially when they were of the very selfsame blood thirsty, persecuting spirit; and did, and would do the same things to the prophets and apostles of the New Testament, their fathers had done to the prophets of the Old.

Matthew 23:30 "And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets."

“We would not have been partakers”: A ridiculous claim to self-righteousness when they were already plotting the murder of the Messiah (John 11:47-53).

Matthew 23:31 "Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets."

"Ye be witnesses unto yourselves": The emphasis, here, lies in the words "to yourselves." It is an appeal to their conscience. It was not by their building the tombs that they were witnesses that they were the children of those who killed the prophets.

That in spite of all this pretense of piety, under all this cloak of profession, they knew in their consciences and were witnesses to themselves, that it was mere hypocrisy, and that they really approved the conduct of those who slew the prophets.

“Children of them”: Resembling them; approving their conduct; inheriting their feelings. They not only showed that they were descended from them, but that they possessed their spirit, and that, in similar circumstances, they would have done as they did.

Matthew 23:32 "Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers."

“Fill ye up, then”: This is a prediction of what they were about to do. He would have them act out their true spirit, and show what they were, and show to all that they had the spirit of their fathers. This was done by putting him to death, and persecuting the apostles.

“The measure”: The full amount, so as to make it complete. By your slaying me, fill up what is lacking of the iniquity of your fathers until the measure is full; until the national iniquity is complete. Until as much has been committed as God can possibly bear, and then shall come upon you all this blood, and you shall be destroyed (Matthew 23:34-35).

It seems that these scribes and Pharisees made large graves and mausoleums to say to the world that they were opposed to the killing of the prophets. In essence they were saying had they been living instead of their ancestors, they would not have killed them. They lied.

These scribes and Pharisees had not only rejected the prophets, but they had gone even further and had rejected the very Son of God. It is so easy to say what you would do, if you do not have the decision facing you.

These scribes and Pharisees were quick to criticize, but they would make a much more serious denial when they participated in the crucifixion of Jesus the Christ the Son of God. Their cup of iniquity would be more than full.

Matthew 23:33 "[Ye] serpents, [ye] generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?"

“Ye serpents”: This name is given to them on account of their pretending to be pious, and very much devoted to God, but being secretly evil. At the heart, with all their pretensions, they were filled with evil designs, as the serpent was (Genesis 3:1-5).

“Damnation of hell”: This refers, beyond all question, to future punishment. So great was their wickedness and hypocrisy, that if they persevered in this course, it was impossible to escape the damnation that should come on the guilty. This is the sternest language that Jesus ever used to wicked people. But it by no means authorizes ministers to use such language to sinners now.

Christ knew that this was true of them. He had an authority which none now have. It is not the province of ministers to denounce judgment, or to use severe names, least of all to do it on pretense of imitating Christ. He knew the hearts of people. We know them not. He had authority to declare certainly that those whom he addressed would be lost. We have no such authority. He addressed persons; we address characters.

Verses 34-39: “That upon you may come:” The generation to which these words are addressed represents the climax of the whole sinful history of the nation, beginning with the murder of “Abel” by his brother Cain (see Gen. 4; Heb. 11:4), and going on to the murder of “Zechariah son of Barachias.”

In (2 Chronicles 24:20-21), we find the account of the murder of Zechariah son of Jehoiada “in the court of the house of the Lord.” Since the books of Chronicles closed the Hebrew order of the

Old Testament canon, if this is the incident here referred to, the mention of Abel and Zechariah may be intended to cover the whole Old Testament revelation.

This passage is also recorded (in Luke 11:49-51), and was evidently understood by His listeners. Jesus' statement that they would "not see me henceforth" foreshadows His death, resurrection, and ascension.

Matthew 23:34 "Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and [some] of them ye shall kill and crucify; and [some] of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute [them] from city to city:"

"Prophets, and wise men and scribes": I.e., the disciples, as well as the prophets, evangelists and pastors who followed them (Eph.4:11).

Matthew 23:35 "That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar."

"Abel ... Zacharias": The first and last Old Testament martyrs, respectively.

"Son of Barachias": (Zech. 1:1). The Old Testament does not record how he died. However, the death of another Zechariah, son of Jehoiada, is recorded (in 2 Chron. 24:20-21). He was stoned in the court of the temple, exactly as Jesus describes here. All the best manuscripts of Matthew contain the phrase "Zechariah, son of Berechiah" (though it does not appear in Luke 11:51).

Some have suggested that the Zechariah (in 2 Chron. 24), was actually a grandson of Jehoiada, and that his father's name was also Berechiah. But there is no difficulty if we simply take Jesus' words at face value and accept His infallible testimony that Zechariah the prophet was martyred between the temple and the altar, in a way very similar to how the earlier Zechariah was killed.

Remember, these were the religious people of their day, but it was an outward religion for show. They had nothing good going on inside them. They (as a whole), would not accept Jesus.

In not accepting Him, who was the perfect Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice, it was as if they themselves had killed the prophets that led up to Jesus. Their message was of His coming. In not accepting Him, they did not accept their message as well.

Matthew 23:36 "Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation."

"This generation": Historically, this was the generation that experienced the utter destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the temple in A.D. 70. Jesus' lament over Jerusalem and His removal of the blessing of God from the temple (verses 37-38), strongly suggest that the sacking of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was the judgment He was speaking about (22:7; 24:2; Luke 19:43).

Jesus here, was speaking of them rejecting the Savior of the world (Jesus Christ).

Matthew 23:37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, [thou] that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under [her] wings, and ye would not!"

“Would I have ... ye would not”: God is utterly sovereign and therefore fully capable of bringing to pass whatever He desires (Isa. 46:10), including the salvation of whomever He chooses (Eph. 1:4-5). Yet, He sometimes expresses a wish for that which He does not sovereignly bring to pass (Gen. 6:6; Deut. 5:29; Psalm 81:13; Isa. 48:18).

Such expressions in no way suggest a limitation on the sovereignty of God or imply any actual change in Him (Num. 23:19). But these statements do reveal essential aspects of the divine character: He is full of compassion, sincerely good to all, desirous of good, not evil, and therefore not delighting in the destruction of the wicked (Ezek. 18:32; 33:11).

While affirming God’s sovereignty, one must understand His pleas for the repentance of the reprobate as well meant appeals, and His goodness toward the wicked as a genuine mercy designed to provoke them to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

The emotion displayed by Christ here (and in all similar passages, such as Luke 19:41), is obviously a deep, sincere passion. All Christ’s feelings must be in perfect harmony with the divine will (John 8:29), and therefore these lamentations should not be thought of as mere exhibitions of His humanity.

Jesus' desire was that the Hebrews would accept His free gift of salvation. They were the chosen of God. Jesus; like a hen that sees a storm coming and gathers her little chickens and covers them with her wings to protect them, wanted to protect them by covering them with His shed blood.

They would not accept Him. They went so far as to crucify the Son of God. Jesus knew this when He made this statement and mourned for Jerusalem. "O Jerusalem."

Matthew 23:38 "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate."

“Your house is left unto you desolate”: A few days earlier, Christ had referred to the temple as His Father’s “house” (21:13). But the blessing and glory of God were being removed from Israel (see 1 Sam. 4:21). When Christ “came out from the temple” (24:1), the glory of God went with Him.

(Ezekiel 11:23), described Ezekiel’s vision of the departure of the Shekinah glory in his day. The glory left the temple and stood on the Mt. of Olives (24:3; Luke 19:29), exactly the same route Christ followed here (24:3).

Jesus' foreknowledge helped Him see the desperate thing they would do and become totally separated from God.

Matthew 23:39 "For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed [is] he that cometh in the name of the Lord."

“You shall not see me”: Christ’s public teaching ministry was over. He withdrew from national Israel until the time yet future when they will recognize Him as Messiah (Rom. 11:23-26). Then Christ quoted from (Psalm 118:26).

This verse 39, I believe, means that Jesus did not appear to these particular people after the resurrection. I believe at the second coming of Christ (when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord), these people will realize that Jesus is Messiah.

The Israelites have always looked for a Messiah that would be a physical king and save them from their neighbors. Jesus will be LORD OF LORDS and KING OF KINGS when He returns to earth. They truly will say, "Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord:

Matthew Chapter 23 Continued Questions

1. These woes were spoken to whom?
2. By whom?
3. What were they tithing?
4. What were they omitting?
5. What did Jesus call them when He said they strain at a gnat and swallow a camel?
6. These people had gotten caught up in what?
7. What did Jesus mean when He said they cleaned the outside of the cup but inside was full of extortion and excesses?
8. What did He tell them to do about it?
9. What was Jesus really telling them to cleanse?
10. What were they likened to in verse 27?
11. Inward they were full of what?
12. How often did the Jews whitewash the tombs?
13. What does whitewash mean today?
14. How did these scribes and Pharisees think they were better than their ancestors?
15. What was worse about the scribes and Pharisees?
16. What two names did Jesus call them, when He asked them how they could miss hell?

17. Jesus said they would be guilty of the blood of two men that covered the Old Testament, who were they?
18. What did Jesus compare His desiring to protect them with?
19. What 3 words indicate Jesus mourning for this people?
20. What did verse 39 mean about when they would see Jesus again?
21. What name would they call Him?
22. What will they do to show that they recognize Him?