

The Pharisees (Part 3)

Matthew 23

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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In the first two parts of this series on the Pharisees we learned about the history and the general characteristics of the Pharisees, as well as the points of contention between them and Jesus.

We learned, especially in the first sermon, that their dedication to the law really was admirable, especially at the beginning. They started out with fine intentions. As we read there in Nehemiah 8, they dedicated themselves to the keeping of the law and doing the things required of them because they wanted to make sure that the mistakes that were made before they went into exile did not happen again.

They understood from the writings of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, and other prophets, that their problems were idolatry, and Sabbath-breaking, and generally a breakdown in the way that the people kept the law. Those who dedicated themselves did their utmost to keep the law as meticulously, and perfectly as possible.

But somewhere along the way, their human nature, rather than God and His Word, began to define their quest to follow the law perfectly.

As a result, their whole pursuit became vainglorious. It became a one-upmanship type of thing where they tried to show themselves more holy, more pious, more righteous than others. It began to be a way that they could climb the ladder—a way in which they attracted attention to themselves.

And so over time—maybe 100, or 150 years—they had already become a byword for hypocrisy in Judea and Galilee.

So when we get to the Bible and the evangelists and apostles about these people, they present them as hypocrites. They are merely, as the gospel writers say, self-seeking, play-acting posers.

Now, the second sermon concentrated on their confrontations with Jesus. We saw that they usually centered on the Pharisees accusing Jesus, or His disciples, of breaking the law. Oftentimes the "law breaking" had something to do with the Sabbath. Very often it was a Sabbath issue that they had with Jesus.

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But, those confrontations usually end with a stinging rebuke from Jesus, and He condemns them for misinterpreting or misapplying God's law.

Here were the people who were supposed to be dedicated to the law—good examples of proper law keeping—and Jesus points out time after time that they are doing it all wrong.

They thought that He was a radical liberal trying to undo all of the good work that they had done over the past 150 years or so. But, they failed to understand that He was teaching the spirit of the law—that is, what God intended for the law to be, and to work on a person's application of it.

Then we found out (when we went to Matthew 12) that Jesus' attitude toward the Pharisees is summed up in what He said there, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." He is paraphrasing Micah 6:6-8.

Another way to put it would be that He emphasized liberty under the law, as it says there in Luke 4:18—setting people at liberty who were in bondage, and not slavery to the law.

That is the way He saw their application of the law. Their interpretation of the law was pretty much abject slavery to it, rather than using the law properly with the liberty that God allows us under it, and being joyful in the law. That is how Jesus lived it.

Today in this third and final sermon, if I can speak quickly, we are going to analyze Matthew 23, which is the major chapter within the Bible (in the Gospels especially) on the Pharisees. It is the most concentrated of Jesus' discourses regarding the Pharisees.

We will see His severe judgment upon them, not only them as people, but upon their teaching and their practices.

(I hope to get all this done in one more sermon. There are 39 verses, though! A bit of background is necessary.)

Matthew places this discourse right near the end of Jesus' ministry. In fact, it is in Jerusalem after His triumphal entry, just a few days before the Passover on which He is crucified.

From the content of the diatribe that He has here (all 39 verses), I could say that it is a safe bet that He gave it there at the end of His ministry, because this is something you

leave to the end when you know that you are not going to be around any longer. It is stinging. It is personal. It is in your face, you might say.

And had He said anything like this earlier in His ministry, the Pharisees would have found a way to get rid of Him sooner.

Now if you look at chapters 21-25 as a whole, these are His discourses at the end of His life. Once you get into chapter 26, it is the Passover service, the Last Supper. Of course, we know from John that He spoke at that point just to His disciples.

But, these others are public in nature. You might say that they are judgments of the Son of God, which is quite a contrast to much of His earlier teaching, which was far more benign. It too was stinging, but in a more cloaked way. Of course, there were times when He had to run for His life, or slip through the crowd, but generally His earlier teaching was not as harsh as this is.

I mean, this is just a diatribe once you get into it and see just how severe His judgment is upon them!

So, in this section His judgments are direct, and unambiguous. He hides nothing. He is right in their face. He calls them hypocrites, blind guides, fools and blind, blind Pharisees, serpents, brood of vipers—He does not hold back one bit.

So, at this time in His ministry, He had nothing to lose. He just let it rip. He went for broke. He gave it all he had.

The setting for this discourse is, more than likely, in or near the Temple. If you go all the way back to Matthew 21:23 He was teaching in the Temple. There is really no break in the story flow and setting, at least from what I could see.

And if you go to Matthew 24:1 you see them leaving the Temple. So, it seems to me that chapter 23 was given right there at the Temple, maybe in the courtyard of the Temple, maybe on Solomon's Porch where Peter would soon preach as well.

But, this is where teachers and rabbis frequently taught. If you wanted to hear a good message, and hear what the latest rabbis were preaching, the place to go would be the Temple precincts to hear one of the rabbis who were expounding on whatever.

Jesus did the same thing. And since this was right before Passover, there were multitudes there, as it says there in Matthew 23:1.

Matthew 23:1 Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes

So, there maybe were a couple million people in Jerusalem, and how many hundreds of thousands were there in the Temple area that could have come through and heard Him speak.

So, there were especially large crowds there, and they were mixed. What that means is that there were Judeans there, obviously. And there were Galileans there, down from around the Sea of Galilee. There were Jews of the Diaspora, from Babylon, and wherever else they had settled who had come in on pilgrimage to be there for the Feast. There were proselytes, and there were "God-fearers" there, too, as well. We can see that this was the case if we would go to Acts 2, and see the list of those who were there from the various parts of the Roman Empire, and beyond—the occasion when the apostles spoke, and everybody heard in their own language. And then, Luke lists all those places where these people were from.

So, we know that there were large crowds of mixed peoples. He did quite a bit of preaching at this point, and evangelizing, you might say.

Now, earlier that day, if we would go back to chapter 21 and 22, He had been challenged repeatedly by various groups; by the chief priests, the elders, and by the Pharisees themselves, by the Sadducees, by the Herodians, by the scribes. Each one of those groups was trying to get their shot in, trying to trip Jesus up somehow. Just one after another, He mowed them down by turning a phrase on them, or telling them to consider some other scripture, and other methods of shooting their ideas down.

For example, the Sadducees came and asked Him about a woman who ended up marrying seven brothers, and whom would she be married to in the resurrection. And He reminds them that there will not be marrying in the resurrection. They will be like the angels of God.

So, there are vignettes of this sort all the way through chapters 21 and 22. But, He leaves the best for chapter 23. You might say that it is the climax of these rebukes on these various Jewish groups.

Matthew 23:1-3 Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. "Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.

Now, let me read that to you as I think it should be read, because these words make the most sense if we take them as being said with heavy sarcasm!

Matthew 23:1-3 "The **scribes** and **the Pharisees** have sat in Moses' seat. "Therefore whatever they tell you to do, do it, observe and do it, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.

Now, if you use sarcasm here, or if you read it with sarcasm, the apparent contradiction of what is said here with other parts of the Bible melt away.

For instance, let me give you one of these apparent contradictions that scholars bring up. The Pharisees did not sit in Moses' seat! And that is true. The Pharisees were laymen, as I mentioned in the first sermon. They had no authority to sit in Moses' seat. That was the scribes' job.

Now, we will go back to Nehemiah 8 and see what the job was here of a scribe. If you go a bit before verse 8, you would find that Ezra was the one leading this. He was a ready scribe as it says there in Ezra. And, all these other men in verse 7 help the people to understand the law. They were the Levites. They were the ones who were authorized by God to do this sort of thing. And what did they do?

Nehemiah 8:8 So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.

Now these scribes, these Levites, were ones who were authorized to help people understand the law. They were the ministry, if you will. They were supposed to come up with answers to disputes and show the people the sense—the right meaning—of the words of the law.

Well, the Pharisees were laymen. And so what Jesus said here is, "The **scribes** and **the Pharisees** have sat in Moses' seat." "Have sat" is correct because "sit" is present tense, but the verb tense here in the Greek is *aorist*, which is difficult to translate, but normally the simplest way is simple past tense, which would be "sat." Now saying it with sarcasm, "have seated themselves," is an even better way to put it. There are translations that put it this way too.

"The scribes, and the Pharisees have seated themselves in Moses' seat."

I think that what Jesus is doing here is He is pointing out that the Pharisees have gone way beyond the simple dedication of themselves to the law. They had taken authority to themselves that God never gave them. And so, He is pointing out very pointedly to the people that these Pharisees were taking a prerogative that was not theirs.

They were being presumptuous.

He starts out with it right away. First thing out of His mouth is that they are being presumptuous to fashion themselves as the teachers of Israel. And maybe in saying what He did to Nicodemus there in John 3, "You are a teacher of Israel, and do not you know these things?" is along these same lines. Because Nicodemus, being a Pharisee, should not have been a teacher of Israel, he was just a learned and wealthy layman.

Now the first half of verse 3, (I have been talking about verse 2 up to this point) up to the words, "observe and do," continues the sarcasm. If you read it with a wink, or a twinkle, you can see the sense.

"Therefore, because they are such authoritative masters of the Law, make sure that you do exactly what they say! They are the experts!"

That is the sense of that first part, "whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do." He is saying, "Oh yeah! They are the ones that you ought to listen to! Because, they are, you know, the best in the country at interpreting the law!"

And then, by the time He gets through with verse 3, He is serious; that next portion of the verse. I will paraphrase that: "But, do not mimic their actions, because we all know that they can talk the talk, but they do not walk the walk!"

He probably got a good chuckle out of the crowd at this point because, as mentioned before, they had already become a byword for hypocrisy. Everybody in Judea and Galilee knew how pompous the Pharisees were. I am sure that His parable there of the Publican and the Pharisee hit a chord with people, because the people understood that basically, that is the way things were.

And so, by starting out this diatribe against the Pharisees, He probably got the crowd into it, because they understood exactly what He was talking about. They had seen it themselves.

And it did not end. Please go to Romans 2 and Paul makes a similar point against them to those in Rome. It was exported there from Judea to Rome.

Now, if we look at this with a bit of sarcasm, this makes a great deal of sense also.

Romans 2:17-24 Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law. You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, "Do not commit adultery," do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," as it is written.

He did not pull any punches either!

"You people out there who think you know the law so much, and you think that you are so much higher than the babes who are out there, the 'blind' as you call them, do you break the law? You sure do," he says. "You are making a mockery of God's Law before the Gentiles," he says.

This is a very big problem that did not end. Jesus' diatribe here in Matthew 23 just made them all the worse, maybe. But, He certainly pointed out their flaws. He gave them a witness, certainly. And He basically condemns them at the end of the chapter.

He shows them what their punishment is going to be. Remember, He is speaking as the Judge, the Son of God. And what He says indeed comes to pass.

He explains what it is that they do wrong:

Matthew 23:4 "For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.

He identifies a major problem, here, with the Pharisees. They were quite skilled at

imposing restrictions, regulations, and duties that made life hard, nearly unbearable for others. But, they did nothing to facilitate the worship of God to make it joyous.

Jesus may also imply here (a suggestion rather than outright) that the Pharisees considered the regulations that they came up with, and imposed, to be for others, but not for themselves. See? These regulations were for, as mentioned before, the blind, the babes, the simple.

But, they were beyond all that! They did not need these little laws and regulations themselves. They could break them at will because they had a greater understanding. They had a better "relationship" with God, you might say, so that either He would look the other way, or that He owed them one, like I mentioned in the first sermon. They kept tabs on whether they or God were on the right side of the ledger!

To sum this up, they exempted themselves from their regulations, except when it suited them, and they wanted to appear pious before the public.

Remember we saw back in Matthew 16 that Jesus called their doctrine "leaven." I explained that their religion and belief produced one not of faith, but of sight. They walked simply by their own senses and not with any trust in God.

And what we see here in verse 4 (Matthew 23) is that their religion was fundamentally negative. It was full of "do nots," and "thou shalt nots" and offered very few, if any, positive, helpful, liberating teachings.

People who lived the Pharisaic life were always aware of the burden of keeping the law. They never felt that there was any way that their religion would lead to any growth, or happiness. It was a burden.

Essentially, the Pharisees had devised a religion of slavery to inward looking rules—meaning rules that were designed to keep you from sinning. They took the place of God's way of abundant life and outgoing concern for others.

So, it got them looking inside themselves all the time. Actually, not inside themselves, but to appear righteous by all these little things that they did to make themselves seem righteous. But, it never really led to any growth. All it led to was abiding by rules. The rules never went any further than their outward appearance, and their outward function.

On the other hand, Jesus preached a far different religion—practice, application—of God's law.

Jesus did not preach this religion of regulations, rules, and burdensome restrictions and duties. He taught that life of liberty, of growth, of happiness and joy.

Matthew 11:25-27 At that time Jesus answered and said, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.

This is interesting in this light, because the Pharisees thought that they knew God. But, Jesus is saying here that He did not reveal the Father to them, but to the babes that they had despised. They were the ones who would come to know God.

We will see the contrast now:

Matthew 11:28-29 "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. "Take My yoke upon you. . .

Now a yoke we normally think of as work. A yoke is something that is put on oxen, or some other beast of burden, or draft animal, and he pulls a load, like a plow.

Matthew 11:29-30 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart [quite different from the Pharisees who were harsh and haughty], and you will find rest for your souls. "For My yoke is easy. . .

And that does not mean easy in the terms of the way we think of easy today. There is obviously work that we have to do, and we know that overcoming and growing is not easy in the least. It takes a lot of gumption, a lot of courage to make some of the decisions that we have to make.

And so what this word easy means here is "well-fitting," "tailor made," and "designed just for you." It is the idea that the yoke that was put on the animal fit the animal so perfectly that the animal hardly felt the burden at all. It was positioned just so on his body, so that his natural weight and balance would pull the load without a problem. And he did not feel fatigued at the end of the day.

And so, Jesus says, "the burden that I put upon you, fits you exactly. It will bring you through your life without your feeling so taxed and distraught that you give up hope."

And then He says,

Matthew 11:30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

It is not going to feel as heavy as what the Pharisees had put on them.

What we have just set up is a dichotomy. You have Jesus on one side preaching a gospel of hope of the Kingdom of God, of light (Matthew 11), of being well fitting, of being designed especially for you, a gospel that will promote growth and happiness, and joy—against this other side which was done by people who were haughty, snobbish, and who were in a position that God had not given them.

All they did was constantly preach this adherence to law, law, law! There was never any hope of anything beyond the law. There was only restriction and burden. And so Jesus is presenting it in stark contrast to His own ministry and message.

In verses 5 through 12, there is one theme, and it starts out right away:

Matthew 23:5 "But all their works they do to be seen by men."

That is the theme for this section. Here are the examples:

Matthew 23:5-12 "They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. "They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, "greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' "But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. "And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. "But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. "And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

So, what He does here is to show this contrast again between these people who had

been teaching them, and His own way, and His own disciples and servants.

What He shows in verse 5 through 7 is that the real reason for their piety is not to please God. Nowhere in there do you see any reason that has to do with God for what they do.

Their reason is to receive acclaim. They want to be seen by men. They want people to say, "Look how righteous he is! I wish I could be like Rabbi so-and-so!"

They wanted the crowd to fall at their feet. I am sure that Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem really stung. What He received is exactly what they wanted. They wanted to be acclaimed as the Messiah. They wanted to be acclaimed as righteous. They wanted to be acclaimed as the first-coming!

But, He was saying that they have no spiritual reason to receive that acclaim. We will look at a few of these examples.

Before we do that I just want to mention that back in the Sermon on the Mount, He had already publicly criticized them, although He never mentioned the word Pharisee. If you go back to Matthew 6 down through those three sections about giving alms, praying, and fasting, He does not use the word Pharisee. He uses the word hypocrite.

But, I am sure that everyone in the audience knew who He was talking about, because it was the Pharisees who were known to blow trumpets before them when they gave alms. It was the Pharisees who were known to pray in public places to receive the acclaim of the crowd to be thought of as pious and righteous. It was the Pharisees who made their fastings public twice a week—Tuesdays and Thursdays I think it was—just so everyone would know just how pious they were. And how much they conformed to the law of God, and put everything aside to do the things that God wanted them to do—or so they thought.

In this passage, it is merely an expansion on their hypocritical works. He had already covered giving alms, praying, and fasting; now, He talks about other things that they do.

We will look at those things called phylacteries. Phylacteries are really weird boxes. That is all they were. They were small boxes just a few inches square, which were bound by leather straps one to the right wrist, and to the forehead. They would bind these to these parts of their bodies while they were praying.

These little boxes had little bits of parchments in them on which were written four texts

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from the Torah. If you want to write them down to look at them later, they were Exodus 13:2-10, and then another one was Exodus 13:11-16. And then, there were two texts from Deuteronomy. One was Deuteronomy 6:4-9, and the other was Deuteronomy 11:13-21.

We will read a couple of these later, and what comes out in them is, "you shall write these on your right hand, and on your forehead." That is one part of the text contained therein.

These boxes were strange. The box that was for the right wrist had one compartment with a slightly larger piece of vellum upon which the four texts were written on the one piece. I said strange because the one that went on the forehead had four little compartments with four very small pieces of parchment which had one text written on each of them.

For some reason, they put one compartment on their wrist, and four compartments on their forehead. It is just a weird tradition, to my way of looking at things at least.

Now, Jesus here said that they made their phylacteries broad. It is sort of an enigmatic way of saying something. It does not quite convey what He meant. It could be that He was pointing out that their boxes were larger than normal. I almost get the idea of this huge thing like the bill of a cap or something was on their forehead so that it would stand out; and people would notice, "Ah! There is a righteous Pharisee. Look how big his phylactery is!"

Also, it might have been rather than thin straps of leather, they were using very thick or broad straps of leather so that they might look like a Native-American with a headband on or something, and again draw attention.

Still, another thing that He might have been pointing out is that this word "broad" could also have to do with time. It has a somewhat temporal meaning to it. So, what He may be meaning here is that it is not that their phylacteries or straps were any larger than normal, but rather they were wearing them all the time. They were supposed to be wearing them only when they pray, according to the rabbi. But some Pharisees, trying to appear more righteous, would wear them out in public giving the impression that they were praying all the time; they never quit praying. How righteous is that?

What is really choice in this phylactery business is that God never commanded them to wear them.

In Exodus 13 we will see the command. But, what we are going to see is that the sense of His commands is metaphorical. It is not actual. Notice how He phrases this:

Exodus 13:9 "It shall be as a sign to you on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the LOORD's law may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the LOORD has brought you out of Egypt.

This is just after He mentioned to them to tell their sons what has been done in Egypt and why. This eating of unleavened bread, then, was to be a sign to the Israelites for what God has done.

Now if they wanted to get literal, they could have put Matzo on their forehead, and on their wrist, because that was the symbol that God was talking about. But, they did not. They decided that they would use these texts and roll them up in little scrolls, and put them in these little boxes.

Exodus 13:16 "It shall be as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes, for by strength of hand the LOORD brought us out of Egypt."

This is having to do with the redeeming of the firstborn. And if you did not redeem it, you broke its neck. Of course, all firstborn Israelites had to be redeemed, but the animals, if they could not redeem them, had their necks broken.

It was this dedication, and redemption of the firstborn that was the sign. Not the little scrolls in the boxes with the leather straps.

Now if we go to Deuteronomy 6:8 you will see the same thing. Here, He has just given them what they call the "Shema," which is the "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." He is talking about them loving the Lord, and obeying the commandments.

Deuteronomy 6:8 "You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.

What was He talking about?

He was talking about the words of the commandments. Chapter 5 has the 10 commandments in them. It was the commandments that they were supposed to be

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living, and putting into their lives. But, no! They put verses 4 through 9 in their boxes, rather than the commandments.

If we would go to chapter 11, we will see the same sort of thing.

Deuteronomy 11:18 "Therefore you shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.

It is the same sort of thing. They took a metaphor and made it an actual thing that they wore. And it became a point of hypocrisy.

Back in Matthew 23:5 it is interesting that this word phylacteries is the word phylacteries. The Jews did not use the word phylacteries. They used *totapot*. This is the word that is elsewhere translated as frontlets, as we saw in the Old Testament.

Now, He did not use the other word *tephilem*, which is the word that modern Jews use for phylacteries.

No. He used *phulakterion*. This is a Greek word, not Hebrew, or Aramaic. This word suggests amulet, or talisman—pagan things worn as charms! And so this may be a backhanded dig at the Pharisees, saying, "You are making your pagan amulets large, to be seen by men." He was saying that they had taken something that God had said in righteousness (the four texts) and made them into something that was not anything more than a pagan charm.

Now we go to "enlarge the borders of their garments."

Borders should probably be either "fringes," or "tassels." These **were** commanded by God of the Israelites back in Numbers 15.

Numbers 15:37-40 Again the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel: Tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a blue thread in the tassels of the corners. "And you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them, and that you may not follow the harlotry to which your own heart and your own eyes are inclined, "and that you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy for your God.

Now the Pharisees were again making these tassels ostentatiously large or lengthy. Can you imagine a tassel that is about a foot long so that everybody could see it?

In that day, like today, as in any time in human history, clothes make the man. Well, in the Pharisees case, his clothing said that he was self-absorbed, a show-off, and vain. None of these show righteous character.

The following illustrations that we see in verses 6 through 7 or so, are the same sort of thing. They want to be seated to the left or the right of the host at the dinner parties so that everyone would know that they were the most important persons there.

They wanted to have the seat in the synagogue on the dais facing the audience so that everybody that came knew that they were important.

They wanted to be known as an important man in the business circles so that the people in the marketplaces would say, "Oh! Look who is here! Look who has blessed us with his presence!"

They wanted to be recognized as an authority on the law. That is what is meant by, "Rabbi! Rabbi!"

Each of these is self-exultation and vainglory. It is the furthest thing removed from what a true servant of God should do, want or desire.

Then He goes on and tells His disciples how it is that they should act. They should not want to be called, "rabbi," because, they have a Rabbi. They are not to be called "teacher." They are not to call others, "Father," to be called "Father" themselves, because they have one Father—God.

But unlike the Pharisees, His disciples—the ones who He sends out as teachers—are supposed to be servants. And so, if they are servants, they are going to be exalted. But, if they are like the Pharisees, and exalt themselves, they are going to be abased.

What we get here in verse 12, then, is a hint or foreshadowing that there is a reckoning coming. Matters will be set straight in the judgment.

Now we get to verses 13 through 36, and they contain a series of woes addressed both to the scribes and the Pharisees.

The word woe is a type of word called *onomatopoeia*. It is a word that means what it sounds like. This word sounds like an expressions of grief, like a groan. What He is saying is a combination of judgment and denunciation on one hand, where there is anger; and on the other hand there is grief that somebody had not reached the standard.

Of course, the obvious conclusion of something like that—anger on the one hand, and grief that someone has not reached the standard on the other—is a sentence, or judgment.

That is exactly what we have here. We have formal judgments from the Son of God as He sits in His position as Judge.

These judgments fall into four basic categories. Scholars call this the chiasm. What it means is that they are like steps. The first is like the last, and then the second is like the next to the last. They build upon one another.

So, it will start out with several which are different, and then it comes back through and repeats the points backward to the beginning. It is an inversion. You start out one way, and return backward the same way.

The first category of these four is the failure to recognize God at work. The first woe in verse 13 is the failure to recognize God at work in Christ, and in His teaching. And the eighth woe is also a failure to recognize God at work, but this time in the prophets. And they ended up killing the prophets. And we know they ended up killing the Son as well.

The second woe category is misguided, harmful, self-aggrandizing zeal. This is the second, the third, and the seventh woes. (I will return to the second woe in just a bit.)

The third category is the misuse of scripture. This is the fourth, and sixth woes.

And the fourth category is the failure to discern what is important to God. That is the fifth woe.

So, as we saw, the first and the eighth are the same; the second, third, and seventh are the same; the fourth and sixth are the same; and the fifth stands alone as the centerpiece.

You might also say that as the centerpiece, that fifth woe is the heart of their problem. They failed to discern what is important to God. That goes right back to what I said there

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about Jesus telling them He desires mercy and not sacrifice (Micah 6:6-8).

In most of our Bibles, (most of us are using New King James, or the Old King James), if you count the woes, you will come up with eight. But, most scholars say that woe number two in verse 14 should not be there. They say that it is an interpolation from Mark 12:40, and Luke 20:47 which is the same verse found in those gospels. Maybe some scribe in the distant past, knowing that this verse was not in Matthew, but in Mark, and Luke, stuck it in here because it seemed to fit.

How can we know? I mean they have deconstructed the text, and, I guess, found out that this is what it should be. But they do not know either. They are guessing.

So whether there are seven woes, or eight, it does not seem to matter a whole lot because, frankly, verse 14 fits! And whether there was a scribe that did that, or whether Matthew wrote it himself in this position, it does not seem to matter at all because it fits the theme of the chapter.

If you would go look in Mark 12, and Luke 20, you would find out that this was used in similar denunciations of the Pharisees or lawyers.

I can see no reason why it should not be included here just because a few early manuscripts do not seem to include it. Like I said, it fits the theme of Jesus' discourse. It is doctrinally orthodox, and it is fine in both Mark and Luke, so why not fine in Matthew? To me it seems like a lot of argument over nothing. It gets the point across.

There is another way of looking at these woes as eight individual failings, or sins of the Pharisees. I am going to give these eight to you, and they all have to do with these woes. And as we go through the eight woes, I will give you this failing.

Matthew 23:13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

Remember I said that this category is failure to recognize God at work in Christ. It was Christ who was the One who was bringing the message of the Kingdom of God. And so what they had done by rejecting Him is that they were failing to go in themselves, and they were also warning their people not to follow Him. And so they were keeping other people from going in.

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What they were doing was rejecting the good news of the Kingdom of God in a competitive sort of way.

So their failing here is that they were teaching false doctrine. They believed and taught false doctrine. That kept them, and their adherents, from the Kingdom of God.

So, it is false doctrine, false teaching which kept them and their adherents from the Kingdom of God.

Matthew 23:14 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.

The basic idea here is that they were using religion to take advantage of the weak for their own gain. That is their failing.

It says here that they were devouring widows' houses. This means that they were taking the money widows had to live on. They were gobbling them up in an avaricious sort of way.

And, as a pretense making long prayers. Sure, they *seemed* pious enough. They prayed like they were good guys doing only the best for the people. But, their greed was showing through in their actions such as this. Third woe:

Matthew 23:15 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

In a way, they made fanatical devotees to their religion. Their failing then? Their zealous partisanship bordering on fanaticism. One way that you might think of this is that they were not proselytizing to make converts to God's way of life, but they were making converts to Pharisaism.

So instead of making God-fearing proselytes, they were making hypocritical Pharisees of these people. They were telling them to follow their example, and follow their teaching; and all they were really doing was making fanatics. Fourth woe:

Matthew 23:16-19 "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by

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the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.' "Fools and blind [undiscerning]! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold [They had gotten it totally switched]! "And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.' "Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift?

Again, they were making the things that they do more important than the things that God did, which leads into the next one; we will get to that in a moment.

Matthew 23:20-22 "Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. "He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. "And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it.

This one is kind of difficult to see the failing, but to put it into few words it is practicing sly deceit to take advantage of the unwary, simple, or the trusting.

Now, I need to explain what they did here:

Remember that the scribes and Pharisees knew the law fairly well. And so what they had done is that they had come up with a whole slew of ways to make an oath. There were dozens of them—you could swear by this, but not by that; you could swear this way, but not that way. They knew all the ins and outs of the various ways of swearing an oath.

So, in a business deal they would say something like, "I swear by the gift on the altar. By my gift on the altar I will pay you 15 drachma before such-and-such a time as payment for whatever."

Now, the other party say, "That sounds great!" And they shake hands, and they go their various ways. But, what actually happened was to make a worthless oath.

And so, by the law, they were not bound to it. And so, they could defraud this person that they had made a contract with, under oath, and never pay them. The letter of the law said that if you swore by the gift on the altar, it was a worthless oath—an oath like this meant nothing.

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As Jesus points out, the altar is important, and the Temple is important, and ultimately the most important thing is God Himself! And the Jews knew this.

The bottom line was that if you did not use the name of God in the oath, it was worthless.

So, they would make these grandiose oaths, and the unwary, the simple, and the trusting would take their word for it, and get snookered! That is why I say that the failing here was practicing sly deceit to take advantage of these poor losers. Fifth woe:

Matthew 23:23-24 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. "Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"

As I said, this is the central one. The failing here is a twisted, or deficient sense of proportion regarding what is important.

They got down to the point where they were tithing on the herbs in their vegetable gardens—they were counting leaves and seeds to make sure that they were giving their tithe. And Jesus says here, "That is fine! But, you spend so much time counting leaves and seeds that you have neglected what God really wants you spending your time doing, and learning, and putting into practice."

And so they had totally distorted what was really important in God's way of life. They wanted to be so exact in following this law of tithing, yet they were willing to rob widows' houses. They were willing to defraud a business partner. They were willing to do all these evil things, but they had to get their tithing right!

And Jesus said, "You should do your tithing right. But, you should have known that you were supposed to take more time, and more effort to produce things like justice, and mercy, and faithfulness in your lives."

And then He says, "Blind guides who strain out a gnat, and swallow a camel!" I do not know if this was a saying, or not, but it is a pun.

In Aramaic the two words are *gamla*, and *qamla*. One means gnat, and the other means camel. But, what is interesting is that both of them are unclean, right?

But, what He is saying here is giving you the sense of what He means by this.

"You spend all your time putting your wine, or whatever through cloth to strain out the gnats, but you are so blind to that camel sitting on your cup. You have blinders on. You are just looking for gnats. You missed the camel."

That is how they were looking at the law.

God's intention is the big thing—the camel. But, they missed the big thing, the very theme that goes through the whole Old Testament. Instead, they just found this one little bit of the law that they paid rigorous attention to, making their whole life from it. Sixth woe:

Matthew 23:25-26 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. "Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.

Now He tells us what the failing is here right in the verse, it is extortion and self-indulgence. They had done so much to make themselves look righteous or pious on the outside. But, He is saying that on the inside of them are these attitudes of extortion and self-indulgence. Jesus is saying that they needed to look at their own attitudes. Seventh woe:

Matthew 23:27-28 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead *men's* bones and all uncleanness. "Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

And, there is the flaw: hypocrisy and lawlessness. It is similar to the last one, except in this case, He uses the illustration of whitewashed tombs.

Tombs to a Jew were off-limits. And if you somehow touched one of them you were ritually unclean for a long time. And if a Jew visiting (during the pilgrimage for the Passover) from Babylon, or someplace, and were to go traipsing around Jerusalem, and suddenly touch a tomb, because he did not see that it was there, he would be unable to keep the Passover.

So, before the Passover these Pharisees would go out and whitewash all the tombs so that everybody knew where they were, and could avoid them.

And they said that these beautiful tombs, all whitewashed and pristine, glinting in the sun are hiding all this evil, putrescence, wickedness, decay, and corruption behind them.

And Jesus said, "That is how you Pharisees are! You dress in all these fine robes and such, with your big tassels, and phylacteries, and you get the praise of men, and that is about it. Inside, you are full of hypocrisy, and lawlessness. It is so easy to see." Eighth woe:

Matthew 23:29-30 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 'and say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.'

"Nah! We would not have martyred them! We are smarter than our forefathers."

Matthew 23:31 "Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.

He is saying that because they admit that they are the sons of those who murdered the prophets, they would have done the exact same thing. Sons almost always do as their fathers do.

Matthew 23:32 "Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' *guilt*.

"It is coming down to you, guys!"

Matthew 23:33 Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?

You cannot!

Matthew 23:34-36 "Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, 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, "that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. "Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

What He tells them here is that they are going to end up doing the same exact things that their fathers did, which they claim they would not do.

And, they started with Him, and killed Him a few days later. And, they killed Stephen. And then they killed James. And then they killed, and killed, and killed!

They fulfilled this prophecy. And so their failing is a spirit of murder. With all their outward piety, and righteousness, inside, they were full of murder.

Now, to verses 37 through 39 where He says how He really feels, even though He has just condemned them to this terrible end which did come upon them in 70 AD. He felt for them! He says:

Matthew 23:37-39 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her [for their own good]! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! "See! Your house is left to you desolate; "for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LOORD!'"

He did not want to condemn them. As He says here, He wanted to take them under His wings. But they would not! They rejected Him, and everyone whom He had sent. They were not willing to trust themselves into God's care. Over time, that just made His severe judgment inevitable, and necessary. It had to happen. Jerusalem's house had to be made desolate.

That is exactly what happened. As He goes on to say in chapter 24, verse 2, the Temple would be defiled, and razed to the ground till not one stone was left on another. And the Jews, would all be exiled from Jerusalem as Roman slaves. They scraped the Temple Mount clean, took all the Jews away, and renamed the city, Aoliacapitolina. They took

even the name away.

Let us go back just for a moment to Matthew 21, where He gives another one of these judgments.

Matthew 21:42-45 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LOORD's doing, And it is marvelous in our eyes'? "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it. "And whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder." Now when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them.

They knew it. There was nothing innocent about them at all. And as the next verse says, they sought to lay their hands on Him.

These judgments are not the end. It did come upon them, but Zechariah prophesies here:

Zechariah 12:1-6 The burden of the word of the LOORD against Israel. Thus says the LOORD, who stretches out the heavens, lays the foundation of the earth, and forms the spirit of man within him: "Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of drunkenness to all the surrounding peoples, when they lay siege against Judah and Jerusalem [a yet future time]. "And it shall happen in that day that I will make Jerusalem a very heavy stone for all peoples [This is coming to pass in our day.]; all who would heave it away will surely be cut in pieces, though all nations of the earth are gathered against it. "In that day," says the LOORD, "I will strike every horse with confusion, and its rider with madness; I will open My eyes on the house of Judah, and will strike every horse of the peoples with blindness. "And the governors of Judah shall say in their heart, 'The inhabitants of Jerusalem are my strength in the LOORD of hosts, their God.' "In that day I will make the governors of Judah like a firepan in the woodpile?

And that seems like what Mr. Sharon, and all those other people are doing now.

Zechariah 12:6-10 ?and like a fiery torch in the sheaves; they shall devour

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all the surrounding peoples on the right hand and on the left, but Jerusalem shall be inhabited again in her own place—Jerusalem. "The LOORD will save the tents of Judah first, so that the glory of the house of David and the glory of the inhabitants of Jerusalem shall not become greater than that of Judah. "In that day the LOORD will defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem; the one who is feeble among them in that day shall be like David, and the house of David shall be like God, like the Angel of the LOORD before them. "It shall be in that day that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. "And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn.

It will be a far different attitude among the Jews when He returns. They will receive Him unlike His first coming. They will repent of their stubborn rebellion. They will finally accept Him as their Lion, and as the Son of David; and He reciprocates.

He will forgive them, and give them His Spirit. And the taint of Pharisaism, which they still possess in a large measure, will be just a bad memory; part of their history that they will shake their heads over in bewilderment at their stupidity and their blindness.

That is for us. We must make sure that we learn the lesson that we can see in the Pharisees.