

# MATTHEW

## Chapter 23

### *Seven Woes*

**Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:** <sup>2</sup> “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. <sup>3</sup> So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. <sup>4</sup> They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. <sup>5</sup> “Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; <sup>6</sup> they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; <sup>7</sup> they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’ <sup>8</sup> “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. <sup>9</sup> And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. <sup>10</sup> Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ. <sup>11</sup> The greatest among you will be your servant. <sup>12</sup> For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. <sup>13</sup> “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. <sup>15</sup> “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are. <sup>16</sup> “Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ <sup>17</sup> You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? <sup>18</sup> You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.’ <sup>19</sup> You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? <sup>20</sup> Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. <sup>21</sup> And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. <sup>22</sup> And he who swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by the one who sits on it. <sup>23</sup> “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. <sup>24</sup> You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. <sup>25</sup> “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. <sup>26</sup> Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. <sup>27</sup> “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. <sup>28</sup> In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and

wickedness. <sup>29</sup> “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. <sup>30</sup> And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ <sup>31</sup> So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. <sup>32</sup> Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers! <sup>33</sup> “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? <sup>34</sup> Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. <sup>35</sup> And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. <sup>36</sup> I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation. <sup>37</sup> “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. <sup>38</sup> Look, your house is left to you desolate. <sup>39</sup> For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

**Ch 23** Exasperated at the Pharisees’ obstinacy, Jesus makes His last word about them a sustained and scathing condemnation. (TLSB)

**23:2** *sit in Moses’ seat.* The authorized successors of Moses as teachers of the law. (CSB)

Jesus does not deny that the scribes and Pharisees are Moses’ successors and teach with his authority. Granting that, Jesus lambastes them for their miserable stewardship of the sacred duties entrusted to them. “The Sacraments and Word are effective because of Christ’s institution and command, even if they are administered by evil men” (AC VIII 2). (TLSB)

**23:3** This command must be understood in light of Jesus’ disagreement with, and corrections of, pharisaical teachings elsewhere (e.g., 12:1–8; 15:1–20). Jesus stresses that, insofar as the Pharisees rightly interpret and uphold God’s Word, their teaching should be affirmed and followed. At the same time, Jesus warns against their hypocrisy. (TLSB)

**23:4** Because the Pharisees often went beyond God’s commands when they interpreted the Law, Jesus described them as “laying heavy burdens” on the people. (TLSB)

**23:5** *phylacteries.* These boxes (see NIV text note) contained four passages (Ex 13:1–10; 13:11–16; Dt 6:4–9; 11:13–21). (CSB)

Small leather boxes containing Scripture verses. They were tied around one’s forehead or arms (see note, Dt 6:8). (TLSB)

*fringes.* Tassels containing blue strands that Jews attached to the corners of their garments to remind them of the Commandments (cf Nu 15:38–40). (TLSB)

**23:6–8** *best seats ... greetings ... being called rabbi by others.* Pharisees flaunted the privileges their teaching office afforded them, misusing them to exploit others. (TLSB)

*one teacher ... brothers.* Jesus, of course, is the one authoritative teacher among Christians. Under His headship, all Christians, esp leaders, exhibit fraternal love and respect for others. (TLSB)

**23:8–10** The warning is against seeking titles of honor to foster pride. Obviously, we should avoid unreasonable literalism in applying such commands. (CSB)

**23:9–10** *call no man your father.* Not speaking of biological relations. In ancient Judaism, “father” referred to esteemed teachers and the revered dead. Cf 2Ki 2:12. (TLSB)

**23:10** *instructors.* Gk *kathegetes*, “one who leads the way.” Instruction might take place in a group at a school (as today) or through tutoring and mentoring. Because Jesus is God’s Son, He is the Scripture’s ultimate interpreter and revealer of divine things. Only He teaches with full authority. (TLSB)

**23:11–12** Jesus previously defined greatness in terms of humble service. Here He adds a promise: God will exalt those who humbly serve for His sake. In contrast, the proud will be abased. (TLSB)

**23:13–36** First of seven “woes.” Such woes also appear in the OT prophets (e.g., Am 5:18; Is 5:8–30; Mi 2) and function as a negative counterpart of the Beatitudes (or blessings) Jesus promises throughout Mt (most notably in 5:1–12). The first six woes are presented in pairs of themes (vv 13–15 [proselyte], 16–24 [matters of Law], 25–28 [cleansing]). (TLSB)

**23:13** *shut the kingdom of heaven.* By demanding a righteousness based on human achievement and by insisting on an obedience to human rather than divine commands. (TLSB)

**23:15** *travel ... to make a single proselyte.* Emboldened by the reign of the Maccabees, first-century Judaism was mission-minded, though not as zealous in proselytizing as Christianity. (TLSB)

*Twice as much a son of hell as you are.* Doubly zealous for ritual purification, which fostered pride and false security and brought no salvation. (CSB)

The Pharisees’ zeal for making converts was laudable, but the content of their preaching was deficient. (TLSB)

**23:16–22** Jesus refers to His adversaries’ practice of swearing by sacred things (e.g., the temple, its gold, the altar) rather than by God’s name, so as to avoid breaking the Second Commandment. Jesus dismisses such hypocrisy. (TLSB)

**23:16** *blind guides.* Ironic, in view of their responsibility to lead Israel (v 2). They could not even recognize the Messiah. (TLSB)

**23:17** God’s presence (1Ki 8:27–30) made the temple holy, not its furnishings. (TLSB)

**23:18–20** The temple's altar is similarly greater than the gifts placed on it, for it is the source of an offering's holiness. It is the height of presumption to imagine that an offering placed on the altar gives value to God's temple. (TLSB)

**23:21–22** All such vows ultimately invoke God's name and are to be used cautiously. Jesus warns His followers against making frivolous vows in 5:33–37. (TLSB)

## **Jewish Sects**

### **Pharisees**

Their roots can be traced to the second century B.C.—to the Hasidim.

1. Along with the Torah, they accepted as equally inspired and authoritative, all material contained within the oral tradition.
2. On free will and determination, they held to a mediating view that made it impossible for either free will or the sovereignty of God to cancel out the other.
3. They accepted a rather developed hierarchy of angels and demons
4. They taught that there was a future for the dead.
5. They believed in the immortality of the soul and in reward and retribution after death.
6. They were champions of human equality.
7. The emphasis of their teaching was ethical rather than theological.

### **Sadducees**

They probably had their beginning during the Hasmonean period (166–63 B.C.) Their demise occurred c. A.D. 70 with the fall of Jerusalem.

1. They denied that the oral law was authoritative and binding.
2. They interpreted Mosaic law more literally than did the Pharisees.
3. They were very exacting in Levitical purity.
4. They attributed all to free will.
5. They argued there is neither resurrection of the dead nor a future life.
6. They rejected a belief in angels and demons.
7. They rejected the idea of a spiritual world.
8. Only the books of Moses were canonical Scripture.

### **Essenes**

They probably originated among the Hasidim, along with the Pharisees, from whom they later separated (I Maccabees 2:42; 7:13). They were a group of very strict and zealous Jews who took part with the Maccabees in a revolt against the Syrians, c. 165–155 B.C.

1. They followed a strict observance of the purity laws of the Torah.
2. THEY WERE NOTABLE FOR THEIR COMMUNAL OWNERSHIP OF PROPERTY.
3. THEY HAD A STRONG SENSE OF MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY.
4. DAILY WORSHIP WAS AN IMPORTANT FEATURE ALONG WITH A DAILY STUDY OF THEIR SACRED SCRIPTURES.

5. SOLEMN OATHS OF PIETY AND OBEDIENCE HAS TO BE TAKEN.
6. SACRIFICES WERE OFFERED ON HOLY DAYS AND DURING SACRED SEASONS.
7. MARRIAGE WAS NOT CONDEMNED IN PRINCIPLE BUT WAS AVOIDED.
8. THEY ATTRIBUTED ALL THAT HAPPENED TO FATE.

## ZEALOTS

They originated during the reign of Herod the Great c. 6 B.C. and ceased to exist in A.D. 73 at Masada.

1. They opposed payment of tribute for taxes to a pagan emperor, saying that allegiance was due only to God.
2. They held a fierce loyalty to the Jewish traditions.
3. They were opposed to the use of the Greek language in Palestine.
4. They prophesied the coming of the time of salvation.

**23:23** Jesus does not criticize the observance of the minutiae of the law (he says, “without neglecting” them), but he does criticize the hypocrisy often involved (see **note** on 5:18–20).

*tithe ... cumin.* Some Pharisees were so scrupulous about tithing that they even gave 10 percent of their garden herbs. (TLSB)

*justice ... mercy ... faithfulness.* Compared to the Pharisees’ failure to keep the weightier portions of the moral law—the commands to act justly and mercifully toward others—their painstaking tithing of garden produce is absurd. (TLSB)

*without neglecting.* Jesus does not condemn their scrupulousness in tithing but rather their failure to act with love and compassion. In other words, the Law of God applies and is good. But God’s people live by the full teaching of God’s Word—both Law and Gospel. (TLSB)

**23:24** *strain out.* The strict Pharisee would carefully strain his drinking water through a cloth to be sure he did not swallow a gnat, the smallest of unclean animals. But, figuratively, he would swallow a camel—one of the largest. (CSB)

While obsessing over trivial things, they ignore truly weighty matters (cf 15:1–10). (TLSB)

**23:25–26** The Pharisees are more concerned with outward religious observances than with the heart and its unending battle with sin. (TLSB)

**23:27–28** Affirms the point made in vv 25–26. A piety that is merely external is like a beautiful tomb. It may look good from the outside, but it is dead within. (TLSB)

**23:27** *whitewashed tombs.* A person who stepped on a grave became ceremonially unclean (see Nu 19:16), so graves were whitewashed to make them easily visible, especially at night. (CSB)

Clean, whitewashed limestone facades. (TLSB)

*uncleanness.* Jewish purity system held that contact with human remains rendered one ceremonially unclean (Nu 19:11). (TLSB)

**23:28** Jesus has repeatedly charged His opponents with hypocrisy. This charge of lawlessness is even more serious. (TLSB)

**23:29–33** As Jesus pronounces this seventh and climactic woe, He completes His denunciation. The charge shifts from hypocrisy and defective observance to rejection of the prophets and violence against them. (TLSB)

**23:29** *build ... decorate.* Building and adorning the tombs of great people can be a positive thing if it reinforces the good values embodied by those resting within. The Pharisees were not following the prophets' teachings, even as they claimed to honor them. (TLSB)

**23:30–31** Jesus accuses His opponents of being the spiritual heirs of those who rejected and killed the prophets, as His opponents' words and actions reveal. (TLSB)

**23:31** The people of Israel had a long history of rejecting and oppressing God's messengers. (TLSB)

**23:32** Sarcasm. Jesus mockingly commands His opponents to do exactly what they ought not to do. This is a tragic recognition that some of Jesus' adversaries are beyond correction. (TLSB)

**23:33** Repetition highlights the hard-heartedness of those denounced. Only repentance and faith can save such people from eternal condemnation. Cf Jn 3:7. (TLSB)

**23:34** *send.* Remarkably, God's gracious revelation was sent first to those who rejected and crucified Jesus (cf Ac 1:1–8:3). (TLSB)

*prophets ... scribes.* Jesus includes Himself in this company, along with the apostles He sent (10:5–15). (TLSB)

*flog.* Peter, John, and Paul were flogged by Jewish religious leaders, as were other Christian preachers (Ac 5:40; 2Co 11:23–25). (TLSB)

**23:35** *righteous blood.* Many prophets were innocently killed. (TLSB)

*Abel to ... Zechariah.* The murder of Abel is recorded in Ge 4:8 and that of Zechariah son of Jehoiada in 2Ch 24:20–22 (Chronicles comes at the close of the OT according to the Hebrew arrangement). The expression was somewhat like our "from Genesis to Revelation." Jesus was summing up the history of martyrdom in the OT. (CSB)

I.e., all the prophets, from first to last. (TLSB)

*between the sanctuary ... altar.* Cf 2Ch 24:20–22 for the story of this murder in the temple.

**23:36** *upon this generation.* In AD 70, the Romans leveled Jerusalem and its magnificent temple. This destruction partially fulfilled Jesus' woes.

**23:1–36** Jesus criticizes the Pharisees' hypocrisy and obstinacy. Of all the charges that will be laid against God's people on Judgment Day, none is more damning than the accusation that they despised God's Word. Even Jesus' most acrimonious denunciations are motivated by His sincere desire that people turn from sin and death and receive the gift of eternal life. • Lord Jesus, thank You for loving us enough to warn us when we stray from Your Word. Keep us steadfast in Your truth. Amen.

**23:37** *Jerusalem, Jerusalem.* Jesus begins to direct His words to the entire city. For His double address, see note, Lk 10:41. (TLSB)

*How often.* Indicates that Jesus often visited Jerusalem. Cf Ex 23:17. *as a hen gathers her brood.* (TLSB)

*you would not!* "The human will rejects or perverts the means and instrument of the Holy Spirit, which God offers it through the call" (FC SD XI 41). (TLSB)

**23:38** Another reference to the destruction of the temple in AD 70. (TLSB)

**23:39** Different use of the psalm sung earlier (21:1–9). Those who rejected and killed Jesus did not see Him after the resurrection. They will, however, see Him when He returns in glory (Php 2:10–11). (TLSB)

**23:37–39** Just days before His sacrificial death for all people, Jesus laments the fact that so many of His people reject Him and the gift of eternal life. In the end, those who reject Jesus and refuse His offer of eternal life will be judged. Even when hated and rejected by many, Jesus never stopped loving and sincerely reaching out to them. He does the same with us. • Fill us with Your unbounded love, O Lord, that we never cease to love and long for the salvation of all, even for those who revile You and hate us as Your disciples. Amen. (TLSB)