

UNMASKING THE HYPOCRITE

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By the Book™ A Chapter by
Chapter Bible Study Series
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Let's Begin

The comic book character Batman has been around a long, long time. Known as the "Caped Crusader," he watched over Gotham City by night, rounding up the worst of the worst criminals the city suffered.

By day, Bruce Wayne was a billionaire businessman. By night, under a cape and behind a mask, he was Batman.

In Matthew 23, Jesus dealt with an entire subculture of Jewish leaders who hid behind masks. Jesus called them "hypocrites," a term often used in his day to refer to the play actors who stood on the stage, in full costumes and facial masks, and entertained audiences. They pretended to be what they were not.

The religious leaders were little more than similar play actors, pretending to be in touch with God, but were not. This chapter constitutes the most provocative language Jesus ever uttered. It fully reveals how Jesus viewed religion as a substitute for a fulfilling relationship with God.

As we consider this chapter, we'll follow the outline below:

- I. Jesus Explains Their Situation (vv. 1-12)**
- II. Jesus Expounds Their Sin (vv. 13-33)**
- III. Jesus Expresses His Sorrow (vv. 34-39)**

I. Jesus Explains Their Situation (vv. 1-12)

As we noted earlier, this chapter is one of the most shocking in the Bible. Jesus possessed the tenderest heart a human breast could contain. He came to teach us God's love. The most popular verse in the Bible reveals that "God so loved the world..." (John 3:16).

Yet here we find on Jesus' lips language like Amos', the fiercest prophet in the Old Testament. "For three sins and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof" the Tekoan prophet thundered toward both foreign nations and Israel, God's choice nation (cp. Amos 1:3; 2:4, 6). And again, "Woe to them that are at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1). Similarly in Matthew, we find Jesus speaking of "woe," "hypocrites," "blind guides," "fools," and "offspring of vipers." He asks, "How can ye escape the damnation of hell?" (v. 23)

This causes us pause and consider the view the Bible presents of Jesus in contrast to the way culture many times views Jesus. Today, it is not uncommon to hear descriptions of Jesus as a puny weakling who, almost in cowardly fashion, just passively accepted things as they were, never upsetting the apple cart, so to speak. We've already seen the fallacy of that view (21:12). What Jesus was doing here in Matthew 23 was basically signing His own death warrant. Unmasking these hypocrites and exposing the phony religion they possessed was an act of courage that cannot be captured in words.

As He systematically unmasked their religion, we find three flaws in the Pharisees' faith that we need to examine.

The first flaw in the Pharisees' faith was a lack of sincerity (vv. 1-3). Jesus begins: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat" (v. 1). This meant they were in a place of authority. Moses' seat indicated a special function of official status. They were the anointed interpreters of the law—at least anointed in their own eyes. Notice Jesus says, "They sit." No one authorized them to do so, much less God. They simply seated themselves.

Reflection Connection

Compared to today's standards, do you think Jesus was too harsh on the Pharisees?

Why or why not?

Reflection Connection

What are some marks of false religion today? Are the marks any different now than then?



Reflection Connection

Is it possible to judge and do so without questioning someone's sincerity? Is there ever a time when sincerity should be questioned? Why or why not?

One trait leaders of empty religion exhibit is that they take authority into their own hands. Unlike today, the people at large didn't have Bibles. The scrolls of the Old Testament were both exceptionally rare and very expensive. The Pharisees told others what to believe about the Bible, which brings up a further trait of insincerity: though they were vocal about telling people how to live, their own lives were void of practicing the truth themselves. That's what Jesus is driving at in verse 3: do as they say but don't do as they do. And why not? Because "they say, and do not."

The people looked to them for truth. They controlled the scripture. This may be the greatest danger of faulty religion—controlling the Word of God. Sadly, the Roman Catholic Church controls the Word of God for millions of people.

Worse still, groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses control the Word of God through their official interpreter, The Watch Tower Society. Mormons control the Word of God through their visionary, Joseph Smith. Here is a lesson we all may learn: whenever someone steps between you and the Bible as the official interpreter, you may be certain that flawed religion is being peddled to you.

The second flaw of the Pharisees faith that we find is a lack of *empathy* (v. 4). Jesus indicted the Pharisees for binding the people with "heavy burdens" which were "grievous to be borne." Even more, He said that once the burdens were given to others to accomplish, that the Pharisees themselves would "not move them with one of their fingers" (v. 4).

I once knew a pastor who would insist that all his staff and deacons show up on Tuesday nights to go visiting prospects in the neighborhood. After they all left, he'd go and sit in a restaurant. That's very similar to Jesus' words here.

The Pharisees had turned faith into servitude. One example of that was the list of rules they had made to keep people in line on the Sabbath. They could not so much as brush their teeth else the Sabbath would be profaned. That's why we see them so often criticizing Jesus and His disciples, for even picking an ear of corn for a snack.

A flawed faith—an empty religion—always makes people's burdens heavier than they are. Later on, Jesus' disciple would write a beautiful reply to folks like the Pharisees concerning keeping God's commandments: "For this is the love of God that we keep His commandments and His commandments are not grievous" (1 John 5:3). Living a life of obedience to Him was never meant to be drudgery; instead obedience is meant to be delight! The Pharisees just didn't get it.

The third flaw we find in the Pharisees' faith is a lack of *humility* (vv. 5-12). The Pharisees had no sincerity, thus they were hypocritical. They had no empathy, thus they were hardened. The Pharisees had no humility, thus they were haughty. This haughty, prideful mindset may have been the chief culprit that ruined their character. After all, scripture teaches that "pride goeth before a fall" and "God hates a proud look."

To them, success was measured by the recognition and praise of men. Notice Jesus referred to their "phylacteries" and their "borders" (v. 5). Phylacteries were tiny leather boxes strapped to their foreheads. The "borders" were tassels on their robes. Both were meant to remind one of the centrality of the Word of God over all of life. Instead, the images became corrupted and were used only

Reflection Connection

Have you had to deal with either Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons in your neighborhood? Be prepared to discuss this in class. Invite the pastor or staff member to share in this part of the discussion.

Reflection Connection

If it is not wrong to work on Sunday, what can your church do to assist people in your church or community to have an opportunity to worship at a time they do not work?



as visible badges of honor, an ancient form of a bumper sticker that says, “Honk if you love God.” These were nothing but show and pomp.

In addition, the Pharisees not only sat in Moses’ seat, they also expected to sit in seats of honor and recognition elsewhere, especially where a crowd was gathered. “They love the uppermost rooms,” Jesus said (v. 6). Nor would their pride allow them to be of humble service to others (vv. 11-12). These three flaws found in the Pharisees’ faith exposed them for what they were—hypocrites.

II. Jesus Expounds Their Sin (vv. 13-33)

After explaining the situation Jesus experienced in His encounter with the Pharisees that revealed the insincere, hardened and prideful community they’d become, He went even further in revealing how their empty religion affected other people. It’s been well said that we can not hold beliefs that do not affect our personal behavior. Even worse, our personal behavior affects other people. We do not live in a vacuum.

The Pharisees, the crowd, and even Jesus’ own disciples must have been utterly stunned at Jesus’ words. The disciples knew that meant only trouble remained ahead for our Lord. When God speaks a strong word to us, our true character will inevitably bleed through. If we’re truly disciples, repentance and sorrow are sure to result. However, if anger and vindictiveness result, our lack of connection with God will visibly appear. Just look at the Pharisees.

We can not hold beliefs that do not affect our personal behavior.

In this part of Matthew 23 Jesus spoke the thunderous judgment of God, as we noted earlier, similar to the fiery prophet from Tekoa (Amos 6:1; 5:18; cp. also Micah 2:1; 7:1). He uttered a series of eight “woes” toward the Pharisaic faith, exposing even further that not only was their hypocrisy a cover for the selfish lives they’d chosen, but also it led to the total breakdown in their moral behavior toward others.

We find this first in their *mistreatment* of others (vv. 13-15). Jesus said, “Ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men” (v. 13). They were keeping people from being saved! While we do not think so often about this, is it possible that the choices we make, the life we live hinders others from coming to Christ? Could we be a door closer to God’s Kingdom?

One way the Pharisees did so was by falsely measuring the power of prayer by meters and not meaning. Their prayers were long and no doubt impressive. The problem was their prayers lacked reality. Jesus further noted that they zealously attempted to make others exactly like themselves: “Ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte” (v. 15). Sadly, they succeeded.

In fact, they succeeded very well, making some twice the children of hell that they were! If we seek to make people in our images, we will probably succeed.

Reflection Connection

What is the normal reaction when people are confronted with their sin? What is the proper response? What can we do to insure that we react biblically when the Bible confronts us with our sin?



Our real success, however, will only populate hell not heaven. These are stinging words our Lord speaks.

Second, they *misunderstood* oaths (vv. 16-22). The Pharisees were blind to the true values of life (v. 17). Their subtle thought patterns enabled them to make fine distinctions giving them a loop hole out of the oaths they found uncomfortable. We've already seen how they cheapened God's Word by using shady means to avoid responsibility in Matthew 15:1-9. Here, Jesus addressed it again. Their problem was that material substance and personal comfort overshadowed their commitment to spiritual necessities. In many ways, the Pharisees were like the third soil. Jesus spoke about those who receive the Word but the "*cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches*" void the Word out, making their lives barren (v. 13:22).

Reflection Connection

Is it wrong to swear in a court of law? Why or why not?

Third, the Pharisees *mistook* obligations (vv. 23-24). It is not that the Pharisees completely overlooked the Mosaic Law and created their own. Rather, they obeyed it in many respects. For example, they were noted for their tithing practices (v. 23). In fact, the Pharisees meticulously tithed things not considered mentionable in the Old Testament. They tithed even the tiniest spices, carefully making sure that one tenth got taken to the temple.

Unfortunately for them, the tiny tithing became such an obsession that what Jesus referred to as the "*weightier matters of the law*" got completely overlooked (v. 23). They were so careful to tithe the little things they became careless with the big things. Tithing is biblical and a great starting point for new believers. But the lesson all should remember is this: right giving can never substitute for right living.

Fourth, the Pharisees *misled* observers (vv. 25-28). Jesus makes use of colorful images as He focused on the Pharisees' flawed religion. He likened their lives to a cup which had been hand-rubbed beautifully clean on the outside while the inside of it was crusted over with various stains. Recall how the barren fig tree advertised itself as having fruit (21:19). Similarly, the cup advertised itself as being clean. It was not. Instead, it was unfit for use. The Pharisees sold themselves as being holy and pure but their hearts were filled with "*extortion and excess*" (v. 25).

It's all too evident that often others see what appears to be a clean, honorable life but all they see is the outside. The inside may be either a dirty cup, as we've just noted, or even worse, a neatly cared-for gravesite filled with lifeless skeletons (v. 27).

The point Jesus makes is simple: the external purity of our life should reflect the internal purity of our hearts. To behave otherwise is to mislead others.

Finally, because of all this, the scribes and Pharisees *merit* outrage (vv. 29-33). Jesus is the last in a long line of prophetic voices the scribes and Pharisees had received. Many of them had come to hear Him speak truth and wisdom; but what became of them remains unspeakably tragic: "*Ye build the tombs of the prophets*" (v. 29).

The prophets of God came but they were persecuted, pronounced guilty as enemies of God, punished severely and many were plunged to their death. For that reason, the Son of God came. Still, rather than repent, they struck a bargain with the Devil to rid themselves of the heir. Jesus then said: "*Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers*" (v. 32). Judgment was imminent and there would be no safe exit to escape (v. 33).



III. Jesus Expresses His Sorrow (vv. 34-39)

Jesus did not hold back. He explained the situation at hand (vv. 1-12) and then, through one thundering utterance after another, He exhaustively expounded to the scribes and Pharisees the fatal flaws of their faith (vv. 13-33). Jesus Himself must have suffered fatigue when this sermon was over. It was not easy doing what He did.

There are some preachers who seem to enjoy preaching on judgment, sin or hell. Not Jesus. He knew He must speak the truth, but perhaps more than any other place in the gospel record we find the heart of Jesus broken apart. Why does Jesus lament so? We see two reasons in the final verses.

First, Jesus expresses His sorrow because of their *rejection* (vv. 34-36). Once again the historical tape plays. The innumerable prophets that preceded Jesus stun us, and God's patience stuns us even more. One after another—from "righteous Abel" to Zechariah, who suffered death in the temple of all places—was rejected. The religious leaders' hearts never softened; their lives never changed. But God kept speaking.

How often do we know God has spoken to us in some sure way but, like the Pharisees, we reject God by refusing to obey? Jesus hears our rejection but He does so with tears in His eyes.

Second, Jesus expresses His sorrow because of their *desolation* (vv. 37-39). "O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem," comes the cry from our Lord's lips—his heart broken and tears flowing (v. 37). Know also, that even though we find Jesus here lamenting over Jerusalem, He also laments the lost-ness of the entire world.

Not one soul that's ever been born escapes the heart of Jesus. He came so that all could have life. He gave up His so we could keep ours. But the Pharisees' rejection was now complete. The desolation was fixed: "*Behold your house is left unto you desolate*" (v. 38). Jesus knew what would be.

In His mind's eye, He saw hundreds of thousands of them murdered. The city of Jerusalem faced the feared siege which would cut them off from the outside world. Titus, the brutal Roman warrior and general, would march his troops within a generation of that very moment, to the walls of Jerusalem and there he would not budge until the great city, the stunning temple and all her citizens were ground into the dust. That's His lament, His sorrow, His broken heart.

Wrap Up

Jesus said, "How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not" (v. 37). Even at that moment, Jesus invited with open arms those who would to come to Him and He'd give them life.

Why people do not come to God is easy to answer. They do not come because they will not come. Some have a problem understanding God's Sovereignty and human responsibility. Whatever problem may exist, one thing is for certain: the problem is not with God. Instead the problem lies in the stubborn foolishness of people. If you have not given your heart and life to Jesus Christ, I encourage you: do so today.

Reflection Connection

Do you think hell is an appropriate topic to preach? Why or why not? Do you think people respond to such topics today? How should people's response affect the way we should preach?

Golden Greek Nugget

Jesus uses a term translated "phylacteries" which means "to guard" (v. 5), often used in connection with a Roman garrison. Our Lord noted that the Pharisees wore them to "be seen of men." These "phylacteries" were small amulets that were worn around the forehead or displayed somewhere visibly on the body. In the hollowed center of the amulet was a small piece of scroll with a Bible verse written on it. What began as a genuine attempt to keep the Word of God before one's eyes at all times deteriorated into a hypocritical attempt to make oneself look spiritual before men. Jesus denounced such as empty acts of meaningless religion.

