

Chapter 23

Outline of Matthew 23

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Eight Woes to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1–12)

Chapter 23 of the Book of Matthew is the most controversial chapter in Matthew. “The pitch of Jesus’ prophetism in this sermon is so high and its attack so bitter that some interpreters have difficulty believing that the historical Jesus ever said much of it...” [It is] “the most un-Christian chapter” in Matthew ... “the unloveliest chapter in the Gospel,” ... “In the Woe Speech of chapter 23, I stand as an interpreter next to the text in a state of shock and I sometimes wish that this chapter did not stand in the Bible.”¹ Statements like these are not uncommon in the commentaries. We read Jesus telling us to love enemies in 5:42-28 and love neighbor in 22:37-40. How can we harmonize these teachings with the curses of Matthew 23 and the chapters that follow? Many have a difficult time doing this.

But perhaps we are missing something here. To better understand chapter 23, let us look at the big picture, the outline to the book of Matthew. That may help.

Matthew is About Covenant Renewal

God is in a relationship with Israel by means of covenants. For our purposes here, let’s define covenants as *peace treaties*. We are at peace with God as we live in obedience with his stipulations or instructions in the Bible. The Ten Commandments are a succinct expression of those stipulations in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, the Sermon on the Mount serves as this standard of approved behavior. Through the Old Testament as Israel drifted from covenant faithfulness, the prophets of God called Israel back to obedience with God by means covenant renewal. The Book of Matthew is a call to covenant renewal with the establishment of the New Covenant by Jesus.

Matthew is anchored in the prophets of the Old Testament. A call by the prophets to covenant renewal is a common one in the Old Testament. As a result, it would be all but impossible that something as dramatic as the coming of the Son of God, and all the changes that this would bring to Israel, would occur without it also being a call to return to the covenant of their fathers. In other words, it is difficult to explain Christ and his ministry outside of the context of covenant renewal. It is the very form that a Jew would expect from the God of the Old Testament, calling his people back to covenant obedience. It is hard to believe that a Jew would take seriously a prophet that did not call his people to faith in this time-honored way.

Therefore, we conclude “the Lord of the covenant designed that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John should perform the same function for the church that the Gospel of Moses performed for Israel, their purpose is to provide documentary attestation to the new covenant.”² We see the early beginnings of this call through John’s and Jesus’ call to repentance.

“‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’” (Matthew 3:2–3, ESV)

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 428.

² Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Second Edition.; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997), 197. See also the writings of George E. Mendenhall.

“From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17, ESV)

This call to repentance is covenant renewal language. The Book of Matthew is a call to Israel to return and to renew the covenant with God. That is its central characteristic. The essential elements of a covenant outline are in the Book of Matthew just as clearly portrayed as they were in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. They are:

- I Preamble—The Covenant Giver (Matthew 1:1-2:12)
- II A Historical Prologue—The King’s Past Deeds (Matthew 2:13-4:25)
- III The Stipulations of the New Covenant—Terms of the Covenant (Matthew 5-7)
- IV A Declaration of Sanctions—The Blessings and Curses (Matthew 8-25)
- V Ratification of the Covenant—The Death of the Mediator (Matthew 26-28)

You will notice that our current chapter 23 is in the section called “A Declaration of Sanctions—The Blessings and Curses (Matthew 8-25).” Placing our chapter in this covenant outline is a key to explaining Matthew 23.

Most of Matthew from chapter 8 till 22 contain illustrations of God’s blessings in the ministry of Jesus. We see this in his healing diseases (8:1-17), his power over the natural elements of wind and waves (9:23-27), his teachings on righteousness 13:1-52), the feeding of the five thousand (14:13-18) and of the four thousand (15:32-39) and many more. To a limited degree there are also included in these chapters some announcements of curses as well (11:20-24), but they are not yet common.

When we complete Matthew 22 with the rejection by the leaders of Israel to Jesus ministry, the good times of Jesus blessings come to an end. Jesus now begins to address the coming curses of covenant failure found in chapter 23 through 25. These judgment pronouncements are common to a covenant and we see them in Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26.

“But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.” (Deuteronomy 28:15–19, ESV)

This is what we have before us in chapters 23-25, curses for covenant disobedience.

In the light of this context and explanation, I do not believe that chapter 23 is such an inexplicable chapter after all. Indeed, it would probably be a greater conundrum if these curses were missing. They are integral to a covenant relationship with God. They simply are the ways of God with men.

Upon the completion of his ministry in chapters 21-23, Jesus leaves the Temple never to return.

“And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons.” (Matthew 21:12, ESV)

“Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple.” (Matthew 24:1, ESV)

Matthew 23:1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,

the crowds and to his disciples.... Although Jesus was speaking to the crowds and to his disciples, he was speaking about the scribes and Pharisees who were probably continuing to listen in on his teachings.

Matthew 23:2 The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat,

sit in Moses’ seat.... The Greek word for **seat** is *kathédra* (καθέδρα) from which we get the English word *cathedral*.³ The cathedral is the place of the bishop’s seat in the Roman church.

Matthew 23:3 so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.

do and observe whatever they tell you.... This is a problem.

“It will occur to the reader to ask how Christ could teach that all things which the Scribes and Pharisees ordered should be done, when He so frequently blamed their doctrine and warned them (16:12) to beware of their leaven, and accused the disciples (verses 16, 17) of their false doctrine.”⁴

From this verse, Matthew 23:3, “We would have to assume that Jesus regards the teaching of the scribes and the Pharisees concerning such matters as the sabbath (12:1–14), ritual hand washings (15:1–2, 10–20), offerings (15:3–9), and divorce (19:3–9) as correct.”⁵ But of course, he did not.

In addition to these passages, we have these comments by Jesus:

“He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” (Matthew 15:3, ESV)

“Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” (Matthew 16:12, ESV)

And shortly he will entirely reject their status as teachers, religious authorities and instructors for believers.

³ The word cathedral is derived from the Greek word *καθέδρα* and the Latin word *cathedra* ("seat" or "chair"), and refers to the presence of the bishop's or archbishop's chair or throne. In the ancient world, the chair was the symbol of a teacher and thus of the bishop's role as teacher, and also of an official presiding as a magistrate and thus of the bishop's role in governing a diocese.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathedral>

⁴ John Maldonatus, *A Commentary on the Holy Gospels* (ed. George J. Davie; trans. George J. Davie; vol. 2, Second Edition.; Catholic Standard Library; London: John Hodges, 1888), 246.

⁵ Mark Allan Powell, “Do and Keep What Moses Says,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 421.

“But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.”
(Matthew 23:8–10, ESV)

And he will also call them “*fools and blind*” because of their teaching on the temple and its sacrifices, Matthew 23:16-22.

Yet, here they are told to “**do and observe whatever they tell you.**” So, how can he now command his hearers to do everything that the scribes and Pharisees say considering how violently opposed to it he has been all these years? “...no sustained reading of Matthew would support these conclusions. Obviously, in every instance cited, the problem is not that the religious leaders do not follow their own teaching. The problem is that the teaching itself is wrong.”⁶

In the commentaries there are 10 different suggestions on how this verse is to be understood, none of which seem persuasive. But there is an eleventh that is most helpful.

The Answer

The answer is found in understanding that Jesus is not telling his disciples that the Pharisees are legitimate teachers of Torah, but they are legitimate readers of Torah. “When Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees sit on the seat of Moses, he might not be referring to their role as teachers at all, but to their social position as people who control accessibility to Torah. They are the ones who possess copies of the Torah and are able to read them. They are the ones who know and are able to tell others what Moses said.”⁷

“...the identification of the scribes and Pharisees as ones who sit in the seat of Moses could [should] be intended to summon images of them as synagogue leaders who read from the Torah rather than images of them as expounders or interpreters of Torah.”⁸

“In saying that the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, Jesus may be simply acknowledging the powerful social and religious position that they occupy in a world where most people are illiterate and copies of the Torah are not plentiful. Since Jesus’ disciples do not themselves have copies of the Torah, they will be dependent on the scribes and the Pharisees to know what Moses said on any given subject. In light of such dependence, Jesus advises his disciples to heed the words that the scribes and Pharisees speak when they sit on the seat of Moses, that is, when they pass on the words of the Torah itself. **The first activity of the scribes and Pharisees, the one that Jesus commends, refers not to teaching or interpretation of Moses but simply to citation of Moses.**

...

When Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees “speak” (λέγω) but do not “do” (ποιέω), the implication is that they “speak Torah but do not do Torah.” To “speak Torah” means to cite accurately what the scriptures say. To “do Torah” means to

⁶ Mark Allan Powell, “Do and Keep What Moses Says,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 421.

⁷ Mark Allan Powell, “Do and Keep What Moses Says,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 431.

⁸ Mark Allan Powell, “Do and Keep What Moses Says,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 431.

demonstrate understanding of Torah through word and deed (5:19). In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus claims that the scribes and Pharisees do cite the Torah accurately but he maintains that their words and their deeds reveal them to be "blind guides" who do not understand the Torah they cite (15:14; 23:16, 17, 19, 24, 26)."⁹

For they preach¹⁰ [say], but do not practice [do]. The word ***preach*** is not a good translation, it is a poor opinion as to what the translators believe is happening. The Greek word is simply ***say*** or ***tell*** or ***talk***.

The reason one does not do as the Pharisees do is because they don't themselves do what the Bible requires, but what they want. But as Jesus mentioned earlier, talk without walk is false discipleship.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21, ESV)

Matthew 23:4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear.... How? They do this by the strange way they explain the Bible and the demands they say it makes upon people. The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, provides examples on how Jesus gives the correct view on how the law of God is to be understood: "you have heard...but I say to you...."

lay them on people's shoulders.... As one would put a load on a donkey.

finger.... They will not make the slightest effort to help with the burden they have imposed.

Having read the Law, the Pharisees then "interpret" it in such a way as to make it onerous instead of a delight. Jesus, on the other hand, interprets the Law in such a way that in keeping it there is a delight to the soul.

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."¹¹
(Matthew 11:28–30, ESV)

"...those who follow the scribes and Pharisees find themselves "toiling and heavily loaded," (11:28) struggling under the weight of a hugely expanded legal code which enslaves rather than liberates those who follow it."¹¹

⁹ Mark Allan Powell, "Do and Keep What Moses Says," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 431–435.

¹⁰ *preach* λέγω to speak or talk, with apparent focus upon the content of what is said—'to say, to talk, to tell, to speak.' Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 396.

¹¹ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 861). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

Matthew 23:5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long,

to be seen by others.... Jesus list six ways they do this:

- 1) They make their phylacteries broad v. 5
- 2) Enlarge their borders of their garments v. 5
- 3) The best places at feasts v. 6
- 4) The best seats in the synagogues v. 6
- 5) Greetings in the marketplaces v. 7
- 6) To be called by men Rabbi. v. 7

To this list Jesus earlier added three more in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:1-18, to be seen by others:

- 1) Giving
- 2) Praying
- 3) Fasting

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.” (Matthew 6:1–2, ESV)

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.” (Matthew 6:5, ESV)

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.” (Matthew 6:16, ESV)

“The condemnation is that they do *all their works* (not for what they avail in the service of God, but) *in order to be seen by people.*”¹²

phylacteries “Phylacteries were pouches or boxes containing scrolls of parchment on which the Jews wrote certain portions of the Law and bound them on their foreheads and their wrists (Matt. 23:5; see Ex. 13:8, 9, 11–16; Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21). They ... reminded the Jews to keep the Law. They based this practice on Deuteronomy 11.

“You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.” (Deuteronomy 11:18, ESV)

A better way to understand what God is saying is “lay these words of mine in your heart and in your soul.” The eyes represent seeing the law, the hand represents doing the law. In other words, it is questionable that they were to actually put them on their bodies (instead of heart and soul).

¹² Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 574). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

broad.... They make them broad in order to be as conspicuous as possible. They don't want others to miss them and thereby miss the point of how holy these people are.

fringes "A border of the garment which the Jews ... wore in obedience to the Mosaic Law (Matt. 9:20; 14:36; 23:5; Mark 6:56; Luke 8:44; see Num. 15:38; Deut. 22:12). The scribes and Pharisees wore the borders of these flowing garments unusually large to call attention to their extraordinary piety and uncommon obedience to the divine commandment (Matt. 23:5)."¹³

"You shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of the garment with which you cover yourself." (Deuteronomy 22:12, ESV)

long.... They were going out of their way to be identified in their dress as being especially religious and therefore people to be admired. Special religious dress continues to be common in the religions of the world today, including Christianity.

Many religious leaders and practitioners often fall to the temptation of worldly praise by their special dress and the religious items they bear. Many wear robes, clerical collars, glittering beads and crosses as modern-day illustrations of this very verse. It is not a behavior that every leader in Christian circles have found themselves able to avoid.

Matthew 23:6 and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues

"Seeking a reputation for piety goes with seeking places of honor at great dinners or the most important seats—as close as possible to the law scrolls—in the synagogues...."¹⁴

Matthew 23:7 and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.

rabbi¹⁵.... Perhaps rabbi would correspond to our "Doctor" today. Many with doctor's degrees not only love the title, they *demand* to be addressed this way. But we should not fail to mention "Reverend" or "Father" or any one of dozens of other titles as a substitute for those who crave the honor but have not achieved the degree.

Matthew 23:8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.

not to be called.... Again, this brings into questions titles common to the ministry.

Rabbi.... "This Hebrew term, which literally means "my great one" or "my master," was used in the earlier part of the first century as a polite form of address in speaking to any Jewish teacher...."¹⁶

¹³ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

¹⁴ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 474). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

¹⁵ *rabbi* ῥαββί "A doctor, teacher, master; a title of honor in the Jewish schools which continues until modern times...." Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

¹⁶ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 266.

“Specifically, he says that they should not *be called “Rabbi,”* a title that sets the holder off from lesser mortals. Jesus’ followers did not have teachers that ranked with the Jewish rabbis, and they must not act as though there were outstanding people among them to whom they must give heed. *“One is your teacher,”* Jesus says, and that has its implications for all his followers. It does not mean, of course, that none of them can ever learn from any of the others. The very fact that the books of the New Testament were ever written is testimony to the fact that some Christians were able to teach others. And, of course, in every age there have been some Christians who have been able to give instruction to others. It must always be the case that some will know more than others and that they will have the duty of passing their knowledge on to others. Jesus is saying that among his followers there is to be no such system as that among the Jews, with the “great ones” expounding the law authoritatively and the rank and file permanently occupying an inferior place.”¹⁷ All are servants.

Matthew 23:9 And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.

Father¹⁸.... Jesus is not addressing biological fathers here, he is addressing those that arrogate this word to designate themselves as spiritual leaders in the Church.

“Its use in Judaism for an authoritative teacher is illustrated by the title of the mishnaic tractate *’Abot*, “The Fathers,” a collection of sayings of revered teachers past and present. But Jesus’ special emphasis on the disciple’s relationship with God as the one “heavenly Father” (especially prominent in the Sermon on the Mount) means that it should no longer be thoughtlessly used of other people....”¹⁹

“It is sometimes prefixed to the name of a teacher, such as “Abba Chilkiyya” and others (Dalman, p. 339), while the epithet “the fathers of the world” is used of Shammai and Hillel (*’Eduy*. 1:4). This would fit the context with its emphasis on teaching and on the right place for the teacher.”²⁰ This is exactly the way the Roman Catholic Church uses the term “Father,” the way here forbidden by Jesus Christ.

As instructions on religious titles, this prohibition had nothing to do with how they were to address their parents—or the way we address ours.

Matthew 23:10 Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.

instructors or ***teachers***²¹.... This is an unusual form of the word for teaching. “Its original sense was “leader” or “guide,” one who shows the way, but it came to be more

¹⁷ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 576). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

¹⁸ *Father πατήρ* “...a title for a person of high rank—‘father, the honorable, excellency.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

¹⁹ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (pp. 863–864). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

²⁰ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 577). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

²¹ *instructors καθηγητής* “A guide in the way, a teacher, leader (Matt. 23:8, 10). Equivalent to *rhabbí* ..., *rabbi*, master, a title of respectful address to Jewish teachers.” Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

commonly used for teachers, those who show the way intellectually or spiritually. It may therefore be a virtual synonym of “teacher” in v. 8....”²²

So, in summary we have three words Rabi, Father and Teacher all used in the context of religious authority. In this religious context, they are forbidden. Used outside this context, the words would have no offense.

for you have one instructor, the Christ. “Jesus’ enemies, the certified teachers of Israel, could not answer basic biblical questions about the Messiah [22:41-45]. Now he, Jesus the Messiah, declares in the wake of that travesty that he himself is the only one qualified to sit in Moses’ seat—to succeed him as authoritative Teacher of God’s will and mind.”²³

In the context of this passage, Jesus is criticizing the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and their craving for preeminence and honor as illustrated in their desire for special titles and greetings in the marketplace. They want to be noticed and they want to be held in high esteem. In response to this Jesus selects three titles that they find most pleasing, rabbi, father and instructor. No doubt he could have found many others to add to this list.

In our own day we could make a list as well. It would include such titles as Doctor, Reverend, Father, Patriarch, Bishop, Archbishop, Pope, Prophet, Apostle, etc. Mankind never tires of praising himself and is especially delighted when others do so. Jesus forbids it. Even in orthodox circles we must be careful with words like pastor, elder, deacon and not use them as Pastor, Elder or Deacon. That is, not to use them exactly like what Jesus is here condemning, titles of authority instead of descriptions of responsibility and service.

Jesus alone is the Rabi, Father and Teacher of his Church.

Matthew 23:11 The greatest among you shall be your servant.

This is the point; the titles of greatness obscure the point of Christian ministry; therefore, they are not to be used. Our leaders are not to elevate themselves above the community of faith in this way, they are to elevate Jesus.

Having someone knell and kiss your ring is exactly the opposite of what Jesus is talking about here. That behavior screams “the greatest of you shall require the peasants to knell and do obeisance.” That does not even vaguely resemble Christianity!

“It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,” (Matthew 20:26, ESV)

Matthew 23:12 Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

²² France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 864). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

²³ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 475). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Whoever exalts himself.... The religious leader with the ring on his hand demanding that you bow and kiss it would be a perfect example of this.

will be humbled... will be exalted.... That humility and exaltation may wait till judgment day, but it will come. This verse is given in the context of using religious titles, which by nature of their use, elevate the minister over the common believer. On the last day, apparently many ministers will be shocked to learn of their humbled status compared to the exaltation of many of the common believers who served without worldly distinction and with humility.

The Woes

“The Woes flesh out Jesus’ just given rule that “whoever exalts oneself will be humiliated” (23:12a), just as Jesus’ Blessings in the Sermon on the Mount can confirm that “whoever humbles oneself will be exalted””²⁴

“Jesus began his public ministry in his first great speech with nine Blessings (5:1–12); he now ends his public ministry...with seven Woes....”²⁵ “The Woes of Jesus as effectively communicate judgment to the unrepentant as his Blessings communicate salvation to the contrite....”²⁶

Woe 1. The Door Shutters, 23:13

Matthew 23:13 “**But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.**”

But.... This word connects us with the prior statement: “*Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*” (Matthew 23:12, ESV). What follows will give some information on those that exalt themselves.

woe²⁷.... This is an exclamation of coming horror and sorrow. “The Old Testament prophets frequently cried woe against Israel’s sins. For example, see Isaiah 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22 (a series of six woes); Amos 5:18; 6:1, 4; Habakkuk 2:6, 9, 12, 15, 19 (a series of five woes); Zechariah 11:17. These oracles spoke with a blend of anger, grief, and alarm about the excruciating consequences that would come upon Israel due to her sin.”²⁸ Jesus is now using these woes in the very same way the prophets of old used them.

²⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 442.

²⁵ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 442.

²⁶ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 443.

²⁷ *woe οὐαί* “...a state of intense hardship or distress—‘disaster, horror.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

²⁸ David Turner and Darrell L. Bock, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 11: Matthew and Mark* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 299.

scribes and Pharisees.... These are the primary religious leaders of Israel.

“Woe to my worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! Let his arm be wholly withered, his right eye utterly blinded!” (Zechariah 11:17, ESV)

hypocrites “...actor, in the sense *pretender, dissembler*....²⁹ “In Matthew hypocrites are more specifically those who live for fleeting human applause rather than for eternal divine approval (6:2, 5, 16). Hypocrites honor God outwardly, while their hearts are far from God (15:7–8). A hypocrite pretends to have sincere religious interest while questioning Jesus with evil intent. Further, such a person says one thing but does another (23:3; cf. Rom 2:21–24). Thus, in Matthew, hypocrisy involves religious fraud....”³⁰

you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces.... “They are not leaders but misleaders.”³¹

How do they do this? By the same methods many do so today. They decry the elements of the gospel:

the virgin birth,

“You are doing the works your father did.” They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—even God.” (John 8:41, ESV)

saving miracles,

“But the Pharisees said, “He casts out demons by the prince of demons.” (Matthew 9:34, ESV)

the physical resurrection of Jesus.

“and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’” (Matthew 28:13, ESV)

Through their religious teaching they divert the attention of their audience from the heart of the gospel to religious do-good-ism. This is the very same practice of the theological liberals of our day. “...to hinder the proclamation of the good news is to shut the doors of the kingdom.”³²

For you neither enter yourselves.... The scribes and Pharisees are not entering the kingdom because they refuse to recognize who Jesus is (22:41-46), the Messiah. They

²⁹ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³⁰ David Turner and Darrell L. Bock, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 11: Matthew and Mark* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 300.

³¹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 3; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 285.

³² W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 3; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 286.

knew who he claimed to be and "...they had *personally* rejected Jesus' teaching and claims...."³³

nor allow those who would enter to go in. "When the crowds begin to marvel at Jesus and suggest he may be the Messiah, the authorities do all they can to dissuade them (cf. 9:33–34, 11:19; 12:23–24; 21:15)."³⁴

Jesus has already given us insight into the ultimate destiny of those who neither enter themselves nor allow others to go in.

"but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea." (Matthew 18:6, ESV)

If that was better, what would worse look like?

"... to be thrown into the hell of fire." (Matthew 18:9, ESV)

Woe 2. The Widow Devourers, 23:14

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 same behavior is mentioned by Mark and Luke.

"who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." (Mark 12:40, ESV) and (Luke 20:47, ESV)

pretense³⁵.... The idea is to cloak one thing by the behavior of another thing. In order to devour widows' houses, they would cloak their greed with a pretense of spirituality with their prayers. And in this way, gain the trust of the widow. Television evangelists and health and wealth ministries do it all the time. The elderly, and especially widows, are prominent targets for greed, theft and fraud.

ye shall receive the greater damnation. Greater than what? Greater than punishment common to others who are guilty of the same sins but who are not "in the ministry." It is the preying on others "in the name of God" that earns this greater damnation, the preying by praying that earns the greater punishment.

We are again reminded that rewards in heaven and punishments in hell are by degree.

Woe 3, The Proselyte Seekers, 23:15

³³ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 444.

³⁴ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 478). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

³⁵ *Pretense* *πρόφασις* "An outward show or appearance, a pretense or pretext put forth in order to cover one's real intent, that which is put forth as a cause or reason, an apparent reason...." Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

Matthew 23:15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! “The fateful repetition of the verdict plus the address sound like the tolling of the bells of doom.”³⁶

you travel across sea and land.... “The expression was evidently proverbial for making a big effort to bring about a desired result.”³⁷ It still has that meaning today.

proselyte.... “But being a proselyte of the Pharisees meant that the person was instructed in Judaism according to Pharisaic understanding of that faith. And since the convert presumably knew little or nothing about Judaism other than the instruction he was given by those who converted him, he was a convert to Pharisaism. He knew nothing of any other way of understanding Scripture, so that any door that might have opened to him for a fuller knowledge of God was closed from the beginning. By indoctrinating with their own errors, minds that knew nothing of the new religion other than what they taught them the Pharisees, ensured that the proselytes were twice as sure of finishing up on the wrong track as they were themselves.”³⁸

twice as much.... “By adding “twice more than yourselves” Jesus implies that the scribes and the Pharisees are also “sons of Gehenna.” The comparative speaks of degrees of hellishness....”³⁹

child of hell.... ““Child of hell” is Semitic idiom for one who belongs to and is destined for hell (*geënnā*, for which see on 5:22); cf. “children of the Evil One” (13:38), “children of the kingdom” (8:12; 13:38).”⁴⁰

Jesus is heard following up on his first statement that they would not enter the kingdom of heaven with a new statement that clearly states that they would however go to hell.

“...the Pharisees’ teaching locked them into a theological frame that left no room for Jesus the Messiah and therefore no possibility of entering the messianic kingdom.”⁴¹

But compare this with those that “travel land and sea to win one proselyte” for Christ.

“And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” (Daniel 12:3, ESV)

³⁶ Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (p. 904). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

³⁷ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 579). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

³⁸ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 580). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

³⁹ Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (p. 905). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

⁴⁰ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (pp. 870–871). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

⁴¹ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 479). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Woe 4, The Oath Takers, 23:16-22

Matthew 23:16 *“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’*

“In a context in which oaths of all sorts had become **part of daily life** and in which there had been a huge proliferation of oath forms, there can be no doubt that for many it had become quite unclear what exactly the use of an oath was meant to add. It made the matter more serious; but how much more serious? And was there a gradation with different oath forms? And, most important of all, what oaths had legal force?”⁴² Jesus response is to bar all oaths **not required by law**.

““Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.” (Matthew 5:33–37, ESV)

blind.... Jesus addresses the Pharisees as blind on five different occasions in this chapter. He gives no hope to those who are willingly blind.

“Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” (Matthew 15:14, ESV)

he is bound by his oath.... It appears that many felt at liberty to lie if their oath was crafted in some way as to be non-binding.

Matthew 23:17 ***You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?***

temple.... “...the sanctuary imparts holiness to it [the gold], not the other way around.”⁴³

Matthew 23:18 ***And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’***

altar.... “Similarly, the significance of the gifts on the altar is based on the significance of the altar itself.”⁴⁴

Matthew 23:19 ***You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?***

⁴² Nolland John. (2005). Preface. In *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (p. 935). Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁴³ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. In *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (p. 936). Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁴⁴ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. In *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (p. 936). Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

or the altar that makes the gift sacred.... This was not new information but was addressed in the Book of Exodus.

“Seven days you shall make atonement for the altar and consecrate it, and the altar shall be most holy. Whatever touches the altar shall become holy.” (Exodus 29:37, ESV)

Matthew 23:20 So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.

“Again Jesus points to a flaw in the reasoning by which the Pharisees overlooked the fact that *the altar that sanctifies the gift* is surely greater than *the gift* it has sanctified. Jesus sweeps away the whole argument by saying that to swear by the altar is to swear by everything on it.”⁴⁵

Matthew 23:21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it.

swears by the temple.... The use of this phrase suggest that the temple is still standing and therefore, that the Book of Matthew was written before A.D. 70 when the temple was destroyed.

“That which makes a temple a temple is that it is the abode of the deity worshipped therein. If there is no deity, there is no temple. Therefore a man may not claim that he is not bound by his oath because he swore by the temple and not specifically by God. If he swore by God’s temple, then he swore by God, because it would not be a temple at all apart from the fact that God chooses to dwell in it.”⁴⁶

“...Jesus was indifferent to the fine distinctions between valid and invalid oaths because he presupposed that all oaths should be preempted by truthful statements.”⁴⁷

Matthew 23:22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

“People cannot escape the force of their oaths by wording them in such a way that, while they sound impressive, they lack the precise wording that makes them valid. This may serve in human courts, but it is quite invalid where God himself is concerned. Of course, for followers of Jesus it is not necessary to swear an oath at all, and he has already made it clear that they are expected to tell the truth at all times without the necessity of an oath to enforce truth (5:33–37).”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 581). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

⁴⁶ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 582). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

⁴⁷ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 3; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 292.

⁴⁸ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 582). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

“...the mere fact that the name of God is not mentioned in taking an oath counts for nothing.”⁴⁹

Woe 5, *The Spice Tithers*, 23:23-24

Matthew 23:23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

tithe.... “The scribes and the Pharisees were rigorists when it came to the easy features of the Jewish regulations. They demand that tithes be paid of even the small flavoring herbs of which a family might grow a few....”⁵⁰

mint and dill and cumin.... These were popular spices of the time.



Mint



⁴⁹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 3; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 292.

⁵⁰ Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (pp. 907–908). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

Dill



Cumin



Rue (Luke 11:42)

weightier matters of the law...justice and mercy and faithfulness....

“But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.” (Luke 11:42, ESV)

“The “weightier” matters do not refer to the “more difficult” or “harder” but to the “more central,” “most decisive” ... or (as in NIV) “more important” versus “peripheral” or trifling ones....”⁵¹

justice.... “*Judgment [justice] is taken for equity, or uprightness, the effect of which is, that we render to every man what belongs to him, and that no man deceives or injures others.*”⁵²

“...learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.” (Isaiah 1:17, ESV)

“Thus says the LORD: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.” (Jeremiah 22:3, ESV)

⁵¹ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 480). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁵² Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Vol. 3, p. 90). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

“Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.” (Matthew 12:18, ESV)

mercy or **compassion** “...to show kindness or concern for someone in serious need—‘to show mercy, to be merciful toward, to have mercy on, mercy.’”⁵³

*“Mercy proceeds farther, and leads a man to endeavor to assist his brethren with his property, to relieve the wretched by advice or by money, to protect those who are unjustly oppressed, and to employ liberally for the common good the means which God has put into his hands.”*⁵⁴

“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:6, ESV)

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.”
(Zechariah 7:9–10, ESV)

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” (Matthew 5:7, ESV)

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matthew 9:13, ESV)

faithfulness “Faith. Subjectively meaning firm persuasion, conviction, belief in the truth, veracity, reality or faithfulness (though rare). Objectively meaning that which is believed, doctrine, the received articles of faith.”⁵⁵ “...the state of being someone in whom complete confidence can be placed—‘trustworthiness, dependability, faithfulness.’”⁵⁶

*“Faith is nothing else than strict integrity; not to attempt anything by cunning, or malice, or deceit, but to cultivate towards all that mutual sincerity which every man wishes to be pursued towards himself. The sum of the Law, therefore, relates to charity.”*⁵⁷

“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.” (Habakkuk 2:4, ESV)

And in Micah we see all three mentioned.

⁵³ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁵⁴ Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Vol. 3, p. 90). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

⁵⁵ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

⁵⁶ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁵⁷ Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Vol. 3, p. 90). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice [justice], and to love kindness [mercy], and to walk humbly with your God [faithfulness]?” (Micah 6:8, ESV)

“All three refer to our relation to our fellow-men. All three are both virtues of the heart and acts that grow out of these virtues.”⁵⁸ As related to neighbors, **Justice**’ refers to righteous deeds in general; **mercy**’ denotes a loving attitude toward one’s neighbor; and **faithfulness**’ is to be a completely trustworthy neighbor.

“There is no suggestion that the scribes and Pharisees were opposed in principle to justice, mercy and faithfulness. The problem was that they did not devote the same care to working out the practical implications of these basic principles as they did to the minutiae of tithing herbs.”⁵⁹ There is a lesson here for Christianity in every age. We often set rules or guidelines for the expression of our faith that can reflect our modern-day counterpart to tithing herbs. And if one does them, then we have a positive view of their faith. And if not, we view them with suspicion. Consider hair lengths on men, going to movies, drinking wine, complete subscription to a denominational doctrine as a few examples. Like tithing, some of these may have merit, while at the same time missing the heart of true godly behavior. “There is nothing easier than to observe all the outward actions of religion and yet be completely irreligious.”⁶⁰

Calvin powerfully and insightfully sums up these ideas saying, “...men have, in most cases, endeavored to please God by observing with exactness some trivial matters. Finding that they cannot entirely release themselves from all obedience to God, they have recourse to this second remedy of expiating any heinous offences by satisfactions which are of no value.”⁶¹

In addition to **justice**, **mercy** and **faithfulness** as essential principles of a true application of the law, one should also consider two other passages.

“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7:12, ESV)

“And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”” (Matthew 22:37–40, ESV)

These three passages are powerful summaries on what true faith is and how it works.

These you ought to have done without neglecting the others.

⁵⁸ Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (p. 908). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

⁵⁹ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 873). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

⁶⁰ Barclay, W. (Ed.). (1976). *The Gospel of Matthew* (Vol. 2, p. 294). Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster John Knox Press.

⁶¹ Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Vol. 3, p. 89). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

“Tithing is not undone by the weightier matters of the law but subordinated to them.”⁶² With this statement, “Jesus accordingly sanctions the OT command to tithe, even the Pharisees’ extension of it to include garden herbs.”⁶³

Matthew 23:24 You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

Jesus was fond of these comical exaggerations and two others are recorded in Matthew.

“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” (Matthew 7:3–5, ESV)

“Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 19:24, ESV)

“It is interesting to note that the Aramaic words for “gnat” (*qalma*) and “camel” (*gamla*) are quite similar, so Jesus’ hyperbole was also a pun.”⁶⁴

straining out.... Not as the KJV—straining **at**.

“...while the scribes and Pharisees strain their wine and so do not swallow the tiniest bugs that defile, they overlook the larger things that defile, that is, they swallow the camel....”⁶⁵

Both gnats and camels were unclean and forbidden for consumption (Leviticus 11:4, 41). So, the comparison is not based on food laws. Although it was easy to avoid eating a camel, to avoid eating gnats took some effort. One must “strain” water or wine to do so. This is not criticized, as tithing was not criticized earlier. But how blind must one be to then turn and swallow a camel? The comparison is not based on the literal but on the hyperbolic and comical. It is similar to what we would call majoring on the minors and minoring on the majors. The majors are **justice, mercy** and **faithfulness**.

Woe 6, The Cup Cleaners, 23:25

Matthew 23:25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

⁶² W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 3; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 295.

⁶³ Hagner, D. A. (1998). *Matthew 14–28* (Vol. 33B, p. 670). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

⁶⁴ David Turner and Darrell L. Bock, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 11: Matthew and Mark* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 297.

⁶⁵ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 3; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 296.

“The text concerns not utensils but people who are clean on the outside (= righteous to all appearances) but impure on the inside (cf. the meaning of vv. 27–8).”⁶⁶

you clean the outside of the cup.... “They were very concerned with ceremonial cleanliness....”⁶⁷ And outward appearance as well.

This “woe contrasts the inward and the outward. The Pharisees were meticulous with outward things, things that people could notice and that would impress on observers just how pious the Pharisees were.”⁶⁸

“*They do all their deeds to be seen by others.*” (Matthew 23:5a, ESV)

full.... John uses this word *full* in the Book of Revelation in a similar way.

“*The woman [Jerusalem] was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality.*” (Revelation 17:4, ESV)

full of⁶⁹.... They were **stuffed** with greed and self-indulgence which came **out of** them in their evil behaviors.

greed⁷⁰.... Or extortion.

“*The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.*” (Luke 16:14, ESV)

“*who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.*” (Mark 12:40, ESV)

“...in all ages there have been people who were scrupulous about outward religious observances but who did not allow their profession of piety to hinder them from making unjust profits at the expense of other people.”⁷¹

self-indulgence⁷².... Or, lack of self-control.

⁶⁶ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 3; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 296.

⁶⁷ Robert James Utey, *The First Christian Primer: Matthew* (vol. Volume 9; Study Guide Commentary Series; Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2000), 191.

⁶⁸ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 583). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

⁶⁹ of *ἐκ* “If something is in something else, then the separation from it is expressed with *ek*, out of....” Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

⁷⁰ *greed ἀπαιγή* “...that which is taken by force or plundered—‘plunder, booty.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁷¹ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 584). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

⁷² *self-indulgence ἀκρασία* “...to fail to exercise self-control—‘lack of self-control, failure to control oneself.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

Matthew 23:26 You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

First clean the inside.... “The Pharisees ... debate about what must be cleansed for a cup to be clean, without seeing that they themselves need to become inwardly clean.”⁷³

that the outside also may be clean.... “...but when a person is made clean in his innermost being this is necessarily reflected in that person’s outward actions.”⁷⁴

Woe 7, The Tomb Washers, 23:27-28

Matthew 23:27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness.

whitewashed.... “The Jews, on the twenty–fifth day of the month Adar, whitewashed their sepulchers in accordance with an annual custom.”⁷⁵

tombs.... Adar is the last month of the Jewish year followed by Nisan the month of Passover. In our story it is now less than a week till Passover, only a few days past the twenty-fifth day of Adar. As a result, these tombs would be unusually bright at this time and a ready illustration for outward cleanliness with inward death.

outwardly appear beautiful....

“They do all their deeds to be seen by others. (Matthew 23:5, ESV)

within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness.... “Jesus is saying that the scribes and Pharisees are sources of uncleanness just as much as the whitewashed graves are.”⁷⁶ And all this notwithstanding the beauty of their “clerical robes.”

Matthew 23:28 So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

“In the context of Matthew 23, the point Jesus is making is not that the scribes and Pharisees were deliberate and self-conscious hypocrites, but that in their scrupulous regulations they appeared magnificently virtuous but were actually contaminating the people.”⁷⁷

⁷³ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 482). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁷⁴ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (p. 584). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

⁷⁵ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

⁷⁶ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 483). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁷⁷ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 483). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

lawlessness⁷⁸.... Jesus accuses those most jealous for the law of being the main rebels *against* it....

If there was any charge that the Pharisees would have found most startling it would be this one. They that tithed mint and dill and cumin in the pursuit of obeying the law would have found this charge of being lawless and therefore **full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness** to be most offensive. But, in the pretense in following God's law, they were in fact following the laws of their own creation. There is much religious minutia of our own day that is precariously close to this same behavior. In other words, legalism breeds lawlessness, a lawless indifference to God's law while making heroic efforts to keeps the laws of our own religious creation.

Woe 8, The Tomb Builders, 23:29-33

Matthew 23:29 *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous,*

“Against the background of the failure of the Jewish leaders of all categories to take with full seriousness the prophetic ministries of John the Baptist ... **questions must be raised about their honoring long-dead prophets. Perhaps it is quite safe to honor a prophet who is no longer able to challenge.**”⁷⁹

build ... and decorate.... Jesus said, **“you also outwardly appear righteous to others” (v 28);** building and decorating is another example in how they sought **outward** righteousness.

Matthew 23:30 *saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’*

shedding the blood of the prophets.... “The only OT prophets explicitly said to have been killed by their own people are Uriah (Jer 26:20–23) and Zechariah son of Jehoiada (2 Chr 24:20–22); ... later legend attributed martyrdom to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos and Micah (*Lives of the Prophets*); cf. Neh 9:26. A more recent example would be John the Baptist.”⁸⁰

“Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies.” (Nehemiah 9:26, ESV)

The Book of Hebrews gives a summary of several Old Testament martyrs.

“Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with

⁷⁸ *lawlessness* ἀνομία “...to behave with complete disregard for the laws or regulations of a society—to live lawlessly, lawlessness, lawless living.” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁷⁹ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. In *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (p. 942). Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁸⁰ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy....” (Hebrews 11:35–38, ESV)

The Book of Acts adds to the list.

“Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered,” (Acts 7:52, ESV)

“...by erecting monuments the religious leaders thought themselves morally and spiritually above their forebears who had persecuted the prophets whose monuments they were building (v. 29). They believed that they would not have joined their forebears in murdering the prophets....”⁸¹ **In fact, that is what they are about to do to Jesus and soon thereafter with his followers.**

Matthew 23:31 Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.

you are sons.... “The Jews think in terms of their physical descent. Jesus responds by saying in effect that they are sons all right—more than they realize. They show their paternity by resembling their fathers. **While piously claiming to be different, they are already plotting ways to put an end to Jesus (21:38–39, 46).**”⁸²

Matthew 23:32 Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. “...the sons, by their hostile rejection of Jesus and his disciples, are repeating what their fathers had done in rejecting the prophets. There is a certain bitter and ironic inevitability in this—hence the sharp exhortation ... “Fill up the measure of your fathers.” **What the fathers began will be completed by their sons....**”⁸³

Paul says something very similar, observing how Israel is increasingly moving to revolt against Rome with the concomitant judgment by God that Jesus has predicted. Notice how he uses these same phrases to the Thessalonian church.

“who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!” (1 Thessalonians 2:15–16, ESV)

Matthew 23:33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?

John the Baptist had earlier identified them as a “brood of vipers” in need of fleeing the wrath of God.

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Matthew 3:7, ESV)

⁸¹ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 483). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁸² Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 483). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁸³ Hagner, D. A. (1998). *Matthew 14–28* (Vol. 33B, p. 672). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

Jesus continues this theme but now laments the lateness of their condition and its inevitable result saying ***how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?***

“These Pharisees who have no difficulty in understanding that those who ill-treated the prophets in earlier days were destined for hell are invited to reflect on their own position. If those who opposed the prophets were so clearly *sentenced to hell*, then how are contemporary followers of the persecutors and executioners of the prophets to escape the same sentence?”⁸⁴

sentenced⁸⁵.... The use of “sentenced” here has a judicial element to it. They are not going to hell by accident, they are receiving the just judgment due for their sin. Their “end” is quite intentional.

hell⁸⁶.... “In the NT Gehenna is presented always as the final place of punishment into which the wicked are cast after the last judgment.”⁸⁷

The Pharisees are perfectly aware that Jesus has here sentenced them to eternal damnation.

Verse 34 now transitions from the current practices of the scribes and Pharisees and becomes noticeably prophetic. Now Jesus addresses what will soon happen to this generation and to Jerusalem.

Conclusion: The Future of the Ancient People of God - 23:34–39

“There is no glimmer of light at the end of the woes discourse. Jesus announces judgment not only on the scribes and Pharisees but also on all Jerusalem, and that probably means: on all Israel. God will leave his temple. Jesus thereby makes concrete what he had already announced earlier: “the kingdom of God will be taken from you” (21:43).”⁸⁸

“Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.” (Matthew 21:43, ESV)

But not simply “*taken from you*” but even more “*given to a people producing its fruits.*” But even this is not the full picture; chapter 24 will bring even more terrifying news.

⁸⁴ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (pp. 587–588). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

⁸⁵ *sentenced κρίσις* “...to judge a person to be guilty and liable to punishment—‘to judge as guilty, to condemn, condemnation.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁸⁶ *hell γέεννα* “...a place of punishment for the dead—‘Gehenna, hell.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁸⁷ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

⁸⁸ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005), 164.

Matthew 23:34 Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town,

“This section takes Israel’s rejection of God’s messengers one step further to the persecution of Jesus’ disciples after his death.”⁸⁹

Therefore.... ““Therefore”—that is, so *this will happen....*”⁹⁰

you.... Who are the **you**?

“Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,” (Matthew 23:1, ESV)

It is probably the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees, the leaders of the nation, that are the element that Jesus specifically has in mind here, yet, the crowds, the masses of Israel, are also a part of this coming judgment. “Thus the horizon begins to expand; in vv. 36 and 38–39 judgment is proclaimed not only to the Pharisees and scribes but to all Israel.”⁹¹

The **you** are the Jewish people and, especially, the leaders of Israel.

I send you prophets and wise men and scribes.... Notice that it is Jesus who is the “I”, the one who sends the prophets, wise men and scribes—not God the Father. From little comments like this we see what was Jesus’ opinion of himself, he was God and he acts like it. “The deity of Jesus peeks through this verse.”⁹²

“After Jesus commanded his church *not* to use the titles “teacher,” “father,” and “leader” (23:8–10), it is striking that he now uses the titles “prophets, sages, and Bible teachers.” But, don’t we have only *one* prophet, sage, and Bible teacher in the church? Yes! And a sign of the trustworthiness of those exercising gifts of prophecy, wisdom, and Bible teaching in the church will be their use of these gifts to teach *the exclusivity of Jesus Christ as our One Prophet, One Sage, and One Bible Teacher.*⁹³

Also, notice the absence of “apostles” in this list. “...the word “apostles” appears in this Gospel only in a list of names (10:2)—indicates that Matthew “does not think of the apostolate as a standing office” but as a once-for-all commission, as unique as Jesus himself.”⁹⁴ Yet, there are some who identify themselves as apostles even today.

⁸⁹ David Turner and Darrell L. Bock, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 11: Matthew and Mark* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 298.

⁹⁰ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005), 154.

⁹¹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005), 153.

⁹² Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 455.

⁹³ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 456.

⁹⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 455.

some of whom you will kill and crucify.... The Jews did not **crucify** people; this refers to the acts of Rome prompted by Jews enraged at Christianity.

“The Jews appear very frequently as leading spirits in the persecution of Christians. The persecution under Nero was doubtless due to their instigation....”⁹⁵ And in Nero’s persecution, thousands of Christians were crucified in AD 64, many to light up his garden for a party he was having.

Later around AD 155, “...when Polycarp was apprehended and brought before the Proconsul at Smyrna, the Jews were the most furious of all the multitude in demanding his condemnation. When the mob, after he was sentenced to death, set about gathering fuel to burn him, “the Jews, ... ran to procure the fuel.” And when, inasmuch as the burning failed, the blessed martyr had been transfixed with weapons, the *Jews* besought and urged the magistrate, that his body might not be given up to Christians.”⁹⁶ These were not uncommon events in the first two centuries.

some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town.... Jesus had already prophesied these very behaviors.

“When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.” (Matthew 21:34–39, ESV)

“and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come. Again he sent other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, “See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.”’ But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.” (Matthew 22:3–6, ESV)

Saul the Pharisee, who would one day be called Paul the Apostle, will fulfill some of these prophecies.

“And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you.’ (Acts 22:19, ESV)

“And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.” (Acts 26:11, ESV)

Now called Paul, he will himself receive those same punishments for his Savior.

⁹⁵ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine* (vol. 1; A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series; New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890).

⁹⁶ Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse* (vol. 2; Andover; New York: Allen, Morrill and Wardwell; M. H. Newman, 1845), 69.

“Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.” (2 Corinthians 11:24, ESV)

“The book of Acts bears testimony to this fact. The Jews were always on the heels of the Christian missionaries. They never tired of pursuing them: at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:45, 50), Iconium (14:2), Lystra (14:19), Thessalonica (17:5), Berea (17:13), Corinth (18:12; 20:3), Jerusalem (21:27; 23:12), and Caesarea (24:1–9).”⁹⁷

Matthew 23:35 so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

At this point we begin transitioning to teachings on the coming of Jesus in Judgment on his enemies.

on you.... The coming judgment is to be upon ***you*** or that current generation.

“And all the people answered, “His blood be on us and on our children!”
(Matthew 27:25, ESV)

the righteous blood.... Jeremiah said something similar when he was threatened with murder.

“Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the LORD sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears.” (Jeremiah 26:15, ESV)

shed⁹⁸.... This is a present participle; “...the present participle “which is being shed” shows that the process is not yet complete.”⁹⁹

Abel.... The first person murdered in the Bible.

“And the LORD said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.” (Genesis 4:10, ESV)

Zechariah the son of Barachiah.... There are over 30 Zechariahs in the Bible and there is confusion concerning the name ***Barachiah***. “Zechariah ben Barachiah has been the subject of discussion for as long as there has been biblical exegesis.”¹⁰⁰ The Old Testament tells us that the Zechariah of this event mentioned here in Matthew was the son of *Jehoiada* but here he is called the son of *Barachiah*.

“Then the Spirit of God clothed Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, and he stood above the people, and said to them, “Thus says God, ‘Why do you break

⁹⁷ Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953–2001). *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Vol. 9, p. 837). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

⁹⁸ *shed* ἐκχέω “... (an idiom, literally ‘to pour out blood’) to cause the death of someone by violent means—‘to murder, to kill.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

⁹⁹ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 880). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

¹⁰⁰ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005), 154.

the commandments of the LORD, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the LORD, he has forsaken you.’ ” But they conspired against him, and by command of the king they stoned him with stones in the court of the house of the LORD. Thus Joash the king did not remember the kindness that Jehoiada, Zechariah’s father, had shown him, but killed his son. And when he was dying, he said, “May the LORD see and avenge!”” (2 Chronicles 24:20–22, ESV)

Many explanations have been suggested explaining the conflict on these names, but no satisfying explanation has been generally embraced. Therefore, research continues on this text.

“The tradition of the murder of the righteous is traced from the first to the last such deaths recorded in the OT....”¹⁰¹ “... 2 Chronicles was placed last in the Hebrew Bible. The scope is mapped by the choice of the first and last pertinent murders in the Hebrew Bible.”¹⁰² In other words, all righteous martyrs in the Jewish Bible.

“The death of Zechariah in the late ninth century BC was of course not the last martyrdom in historical sequence, but because it is recorded toward the end of 2 Chronicles, the last book of the Hebrew canon, it suitably rounds off the biblical record of God’s servants killed for their loyalty.”¹⁰³ This way of speaking is similar to the way we speak of all that is in the Bible by saying “from Genesis to Revelation.”

whom you murdered.... Jesus identifies the scribes and Pharisees, as the sons of their murdering fathers, the ones upon which this judgment will fall. ***“Their own reaction to Jesus’ emissaries will demonstrate solidarity with their ancestors;*** and God’s judgment in relation to that whole history will fall on these ‘sons of their fathers’.”¹⁰⁴

A Coming Judgment on This Generation: Matthew 23:36-24:35 Introduction to the Olivet Discourse Matthew 23:36-24:1

Matthew 23:36 Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

The material in 23:34-36 is not only a conclusion to chapter 23, it is also an introduction to the material that follows in chapter 24. This is a writing style common to ancient and modern writers. Note how the seventh seal in the Book of Revelation is also an introduction to the seven trumpets (Revelation 8:1).

¹⁰¹ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 880). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

¹⁰² Nolland John. (2005). Preface. In *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (p. 947). Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

¹⁰³ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 880). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

¹⁰⁴ Nolland John. (2005). Preface. In *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (p. 947). Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

this¹⁰⁵ **generation**¹⁰⁶ Our current verse, Matthew 23:36, and one to follow later in Matthew 24:34, provide us an inclusio of exactly what will come upon **this generation**.

“Truly, I say to you, **this generation** will not pass away until **all these things** take place.” (Matthew 24:34, ESV)

All the material between these two verses, **all these things**, will come upon **this generation**. There is here both a chiasm¹⁰⁷ and an inclusio.¹⁰⁸ Give special attention to the material between these two verses.

““This generation” is the generation of Israel now alive; the meaning of the term is so fixed that one cannot limit it to the scribes and Pharisees. Thus the judgment is imminent, and it encompasses the entire present nation.”¹⁰⁹

“...the clear time-scale expressed in this complex of texts indicates that “this generation” is to be taken literally: “all these things” will happen to those who are alive when Jesus is speaking. The same phrase “all these things” will be used again in 24:34 to make the same point. “This generation,” which Jesus has already condemned repeatedly in 11:16; 12:39; 41–42; 45; 16:7; 17:17, is the generation which is about to reject the Messiah, God’s final messenger. God’s judgment on his rebellious people can no longer be delayed.”¹¹⁰

“...a fearful judgment of God did in fact fall upon precisely that generation in the awful razing of Jerusalem in AD 70....”¹¹¹

Matthew 23:37 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

¹⁰⁵ *this οὗτος* “Οὗτος designates that which the one speaking or writing sees before him or her. In contrast, (the much less frequent) → ἐκεῖνος points to that which is further away....” Balz, H. R., & Schneider, G. (1990–). *Exegetical dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans.

¹⁰⁶ *generation γενεά* “...people living at the same time and belonging to the same reproductive age-class—“those of the same time, those of the same generation.” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

¹⁰⁷ *chiasm* “A chiasm (also called a chiasmus) is a literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated *in reverse order*. The term *chiasm* comes from the Greek letter *chi*, which looks like our letter X. Chiastic pattern is also called “ring structure.””

<https://www.gotquestions.org/chiasm-chiastic.html>

¹⁰⁸ *inclusio* “In biblical studies, inclusio is a literary device based on a concentric principle, also known as bracketing or an envelope structure, which consists of creating a frame by placing similar material at the beginning and end of a section, although whether this material should consist of a word or a phrase, or whether greater amounts of text also qualify, and of what length the frames section should be, are matters of some debate. Inclusio is found in various sources, both antique and new. The purpose of an inclusio may be structural - to alert the reader to a particularly important theme....”

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inclusio>

¹⁰⁹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005), 155.

¹¹⁰ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 882). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

¹¹¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 456.

kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it.... “Jerusalem, the city of David, the city where God revealed himself in his temple, had become known as the city that killed the prophets and stoned those sent to her.”¹¹² Several Scriptural passages point this out.

“But they conspired against him, and by command of the king they stoned him with stones in the court of the house of the LORD.” (2 Chronicles 24:21, ESV)

“And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.” (Matthew 21:35, ESV)

“Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”” (Acts 7:58–59, ESV)

How often.... ““How often”—not just once but with utmost persistence did Jesus seek to save his nation until it actually stilled his voice by death.”¹¹³

as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.... “The hen’s wings were protective against dangers to her chicks; Jesus’ teaching had been protective against dangers to Israel. All Jesus’ warnings sought to rescue Israel....”¹¹⁴

you were not willing.... “As Jesus contemplates what lies ahead of the people he came to save, it gives him no pleasure. He had “wanted” to gather them, not to condemn them.”¹¹⁵

“These final public words of Jesus to his contemporaries strike a note of unspeakable sadness at their unwillingness to respond to his motherly concern....”¹¹⁶

Matthew 23:38 See, your house is left to you desolate.

your house.... “***Your house,***” especially when spoken in the temple courtyard, naturally refers to the temple building which would be visible from there, and the more explicit prediction of 24:2 confirms this reference.¹¹⁷

*“Jesus left **the temple** and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of **the temple**. But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”* (Matthew 24:1–2, ESV)

¹¹² Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, pp. 486–487). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

¹¹³ Lenski, R. C. H. (1961). *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (p. 922). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

¹¹⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 459.

¹¹⁵ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 883). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

¹¹⁶ David Turner and Darrell L. Bock, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol 11: Matthew and Mark* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 303.

¹¹⁷ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 883). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

Earlier Jesus called the temple “my house.”

“He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.”” (Matthew 21:13, ESV)

“The abandoned temple is now “***your house***” instead of “God’s house.””¹¹⁸

desolate.... Jeremiah spoke in much the same way right before the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem.

“I have forsaken my house; I have abandoned my heritage; I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of her enemies.” (Jeremiah 12:7, ESV)

And again:

“But if you will not obey these words, I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation.” (Jeremiah 22:5, ESV)

Ezekiel prophesied the event in these terms.

“Then the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubim. And the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, with the wheels beside them. And they stood at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the LORD, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them.” (Ezekiel 10:18–19, ESV)

Josephus, describing the destruction of Jerusalem, says this: “Besides these, a few days after that feast, on the twenty-first day of the month Artemisius [Jyar], (297) a certain prodigious and incredible phenomenon appeared; I suppose the account of it would seem to be a fable, were it not related by those that saw it, (298) and were not the events that followed it of so considerable a nature as to deserve such signals; for, before sunsetting, chariots and troops of soldiers in their armor were seen (299) running about among the clouds, and surrounding of cities. Moreover at that feast which we call Pentecost, as the priests were going by night into the inner [court of the] temple, as their custom was, to perform their sacred ministrations, they said that, in the first place, they felt a quaking, and heard a great noise, (300) and after that they heard a sound as of a great multitude, saying, “Let us remove hence.””¹¹⁹

“The immediate consequence is the destruction of the temple now deprived of its divine protection. Naturally that is a divine signal for all Israel.”¹²⁰

“Even when the temple functioned for forty more years, it was desolate, for “the LORD had come to his temple” (Mal 3:1) and “you didn’t want me.” Jesus’ verdict of “desolate” was concretized in history by the military desolation of Jerusalem in AD 70.... Ever since Jesus, whenever a house of God does not center in God’s Christ and his

¹¹⁸ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005), 162.

¹¹⁹ Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 742.

¹²⁰ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005), 162.

teaching, it is desolate.”¹²¹ Even as early as the first century, the danger of a church becoming desolate was ever present.

“Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.” (Revelation 2:5, ESV)

Matthew 23:39 *For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’ ”*

“Jesus will leave the temple immediately, will never again turn to the entire nation, and will live only two more days.”¹²² This would put these events on Wednesday.

see εἶδον root: ὁράω “...‘to see, sight, seeing.’”¹²³ Soon Jesus will make this point about seeing him again.

“Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see [ὁράω] the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” (Matthew 26:64, ESV)

“Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see [ὁράω] him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.” (Revelation 1:7, ESV)

me.... Notice that for Jesus, seeing **me** is the same thing as seeing **the Lord**. “...for Matthew the presence of Jesus *is* the presence of God.”¹²⁴

“Because of the context in which Matthew has set it, the final verse of the chapter is to be taken as referring to judgment, not to evangelism.”¹²⁵

comes¹²⁶....

“Blessed is he who comes [ἔρχομαι] in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD.” (Psalm 118:26, ESV)

“And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”” (Matthew 21:9, ESV)

¹²¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 460.

¹²² Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005), 162.

¹²³ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

¹²⁴ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 884). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

¹²⁵ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 272.

¹²⁶ *comes ἔρχομαι* “...to move toward or up to the reference point of the viewpoint character or event—‘to come, coming.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

This coming is a judgment coming of Jesus in AD 70. It is not the final coming of Jesus at the end of time.

There are two possible responses of people at this judgment coming. One blesses, the other wails. One delights in his coming, the other is terrified. There are Jews who suffer the judgment of God for their rejection of the Messiah and only bow the knee with great reluctance, and there are also Jews who by faith in the Messiah cry “*blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD.*”

“Behold, he is coming [ἔρχομαι] with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.” (Revelation 1:7, ESV)

“When the Son of Man comes in judgment, the people of Jerusalem (representing the Israel that has rejected Jesus) will “cry out in fear ... at the sight of his terrible Majesty, ‘truly He is the Son of God.’”¹²⁷

“Following this final word of condemnation, the Messiah literally abandons the temple and prophesies its destruction (24:1–2).”¹²⁸

Conclusion

“What is the intention of the bitter polemic of Matthew 23? It seeks to provide a theological explanation for the unhappy fact of history that the one whom Christians honor as Israel’s Messiah was rejected by Israel, and those who subsequently announced his resurrection were violently rebuffed. The passage attempts to come to terms with this challenge to the church’s faith by explaining, first, that the people had been misled by false teachers and, second, that the rejection of Jesus and his messengers was simply the final instance in a long history of Israel’s mistreatment of God’s prophets. The passage portrays Israel as bereft of God’s healing presence.”¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary* (ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005), 164.

¹²⁸ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 272.

¹²⁹ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 272.