

## JESUS REBUKES THE PHARISEES

Matthew 23:1-39

Key Verse: 23:37

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."

As each nation has her pride and sense of superiority over other nations, so did the Jews, because they had the Law of God while other nations did not. The Jews never thought of being a world power politically. They had been conquered by the Assyrians, the Babylonians and the Persians, and Jerusalem had been left desolate several times. Nonetheless, they never lost their sense of superiority over other nations because they possessed the Law of God. Yet they could be superior to other nations, not simply because they possessed the Law of God, but when they had the spirit of the Law and practiced what the Law said. When they lost the spirit of the Law, they became like salt that has lost its saltiness (Mt 5:13). The Pharisees were once chosen people and once great people, but when they lost the spirit of the Law they became an organized group of hypocrites. In chapter 23, Jesus rebukes them and laments because of their hypocrisy. This rebuke applies to all who live before men's eyes, not in the sight of God.

First, they burden people with many laws and regulations (1-4). As we have studied, Bible teachings consist of faith, hope and love. The Pharisees must plant faith in people's hearts. They must labor in love for God's people until they come to know the love of God. They must plant in people's hearts a living hope in the [kingdom of God](#). But the Pharisees did not teach the word of God to the people. They made many impracticable regulations and laws, and demanded that people keep them thoroughly, while they themselves were too lazy to lift a finger (4). They abused their establishment authority until people felt burdened to the [degree](#) of being condemned.

Second, they sought their own glory (5-12). Look at verse 5. "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long." They decorated themselves too beautifully, like Russian orthodox priests. Phylacteries were leather boxes that contained Scripture verses. The Pharisees strapped one on the wrist and one on the forehead so that they might look like sincere, Bible-believing leaders. God commanded his people to make fringes on the borders of their garments in order to help them remember [the Ten Commandments](#) whenever they looked at them (Dt 22:12). These fringes looked like tassels. The Pharisees did not wear these tassels to remember the Ten Commandments, but to show themselves off ostentatiously so that they might draw people's attention to themselves. They sought their own honor (6) by demanding that people call them "Rabbi" (7). They did not want to be called "pastor" or "shepherd," but "most honorable teacher, sir."

Jesus told them not to call themselves "Rabbi" because they were all equal as incorrigible sinners who needed God's grace of forgiveness (8). Look at verse 11. "The greatest among you will be your servant."

Jesus also told them that they should serve one another in God. They must humble themselves in order to be exalted by God, not by men. So Jesus said in verse 12, "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." As the chosen people, they should have had a great desire to be great in the sight of God. But they did not; they only wanted to be great before men's eyes. As a result, they were not great, but very popular, like rock stars.

Third, they shut the door of the kingdom of God (13-15). Look at verse 13. "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to." These days there are many preachers who never teach the Bible but only something about the Bible or skills in getting welfare benefits from the Bible. These holy rollers do not lead people to God but to hell. Likewise, the Pharisees only taught people many rules, regulations, traditions and laws until people were utterly confused and condemned. People really wanted to hear the good news of the kingdom of God. But the Pharisees never preached the good news of the kingdom of God. In this way, the Pharisees shut the door of the kingdom of God on his people (13).

They also shut the door of the kingdom of God on the Gentiles who came to them. Look at verse 15. "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are." Many Gentiles liked the strict Jewish moral standards and monotheism. So there were many Gentiles who came to the Pharisees to learn of God. But the Pharisees did not teach them the hope of the kingdom of God. Instead, they taught them Jewish traditions and all of their regulations and laws so as to convert them to Judaism. They treated the Gentiles like sinners when they did not wear a yarmulke. In this way, the Pharisees blocked the Gentiles' way to the kingdom of God.

Fourth, they used vows falsely (16-22). Look at verse 16. "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath." The Jews had a custom of making vows. When Jacob was in a desperate situation, he made a vow to God to give 10% of his income (Ge 28:20-22). When he made the vow, he employed the name of God. But the Pharisees used vows falsely. They said, "If you make a vow to the temple, it is not binding; but if you make a vow to the temple gold, it is binding. You must keep it no matter what the cost involved" (16). In this way, they urged people to make vows to the gold of the temple. Probably they made them vow to give money to the temple. They were deceitful and greedy for money. Man cannot serve both God and money at the same time (Mt 6:24). The Pharisees served money.

Fifth, they were ritualistic but merciless people (23-24). Look at verse 23. "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former." The teachers of the law and the Pharisees kept all kinds of ritualistic ceremonies and religious obligations. But they neglected the more important matters--justice, mercy and faithfulness.

They were not just, because they exploited helpless people through their system. When they had to be eyes to the blind and friends to the tax collectors and counselors to the prostitutes, they weren't merciful as Jesus was. They only condemned them instead of caring for them with the mercy of God. Above all, they were not faithful to God. They should be like pure virgin brides to God. But their hearts were filled with political intrigue. They should live in the sight of God. But they lived before men's eyes. They were sensitive to public opinion, but they were insensitive to God's will. They should have been spiritual men; but they were ungodly and merciless.

So Jesus said to them in verse 24, "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." The Pharisees were very careful in keeping petty rules and regulations. For example, they strained out a gnat, which was known as an unclean insect in order to avoid drinking it. But they did not care to keep the truth of God. Verse 24 says, "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." They were like foolish dieters who eat an extra-large pizza and then drink Diet Coke. This kind of person lives an adulterous and perverse life during the weekdays. But on Sunday he goes to church and pretends to be a devoted Christian.

Sixth, Jesus rebuked their corruption (25-28). Look at verses 25,26. "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean." They were like whitewashed tombs. They appeared to people as highly religious people, but on the inside they were full of corruption and emitted an offensive odor (27,28).

Seventh, the Pharisees persecuted the prophets (29-36). Look at verse 29. "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous." The Pharisees and teachers of the law were hypocrites who were the cause of all bad influence. When the prophets delivered the messages of God telling them to repent of their sins and turn to God, they did not hear the voice of God through the prophets. Rather, they thought that their pride was offended by those who had no preaching licenses. Their pride was even more hurt when their consciences were pricked by the prophets' messages of repentance. When their religious establishment, which was based on traditions, formalities, mannerisms and rituals, was challenged by God's message from the prophets, they became wild and blindly persecuted them.

In terms of human emphasis, they were more political than religious. But what they did shows that they were enemies of God. They killed the prophets because of their pride and wickedness. So they did not have to decorate the prophets' tombs. But after killing the prophets the Pharisees beautifully decorated their tombs in honor of their righteous lives. What a strange hypocrisy! What was worse, they blamed their persecution of the prophets on the world situation. They said, "If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets" (30).

Look at verse 32. "Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your

forefathers!" This means, "You want to kill me, so kill as your forefathers did!" Look at verse 33. "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" Jesus' heart was broken because they condemned themselves to hell by committing the sin of persecuting and killing God's servants. Jesus really wanted them to be God's servants and shepherds of God's flock. But they became the members of the kingdom of Satan, hell. Jesus was sorry when he thought about their eternal condemnation in hell. Look at verse 35. "And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar." Jesus' heart was broken because his chosen people became the agents of the devil and shed the blood of the prophets throughout history. They would suffer eternal condemnation (36). It is not a light matter to persecute the servants of God.

Eighth, the chosen people rejected God's love (37b). Verse 37b says, "...how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing." God chose Israel as his firstborn son and gave them all his love and all his blessings. But they did not realize it. They rejected God's love blindly. Historically, God, like a mother hen, wanted to gather his chicks under his wings of grace. But his chosen people rejected his love again and again. When Jesus cried, saying, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he was like King David, who had heard the report of his son Absalom's death in the war of rebellion and cried, saying, "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you--" (2 Sam 18:33). Whoever he may be, when a person's love is betrayed, he experiences the greatest pain. Jesus experienced great pain when he was crucified on the cross. He experienced great pain when the sharp nails pierced his sensitive hands and feet. But Jesus experienced the most pain when his people rejected the love of God. Let's not incur God's wrath and condemnation by rejecting the love of God. Instead, let's accept the love of God, whatever situation we are in.

Ninth, Jesus laments because the chosen people abandoned God's holy mission (37-39). Look at verse 37. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing." In this verse, Jerusalem refers to the chosen people. Jerusalem represents the nation Israel or the people of Israel. When we study the Bible, Israel is God's covenant people through Abraham. Israel is the firstborn son of God (Ex 4:22). As much as God loved his people Israel, God blessed them. But they did not maintain God's blessing and did not keep God's words. Then God disciplined them by sending them into captivity or through harassment by surrounding enemies.

Jerusalem was the holy city where the temple of God was. God had a hope of making this holy city the headquarters of the Bible centers of the whole world. Isaiah prophesied concerning this. Isaiah 2:1-3 says, "This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem: In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." When we ponder this passage we learn God's broken shepherd heart toward the peoples of all nations. God wanted to raise the people of Israel as Bible teachers and shepherds and missionaries and send them out to the whole world so that they might teach the word of God. But his chosen people abandoned God's holy mission. They did not make Jerusalem the Bible center for the whole world, but a den of robbers (Mt 21:13). They made it a stronghold of Satan, in which many prophets were persecuted and killed.

Look at verse 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.'" The day will come when the children of God will welcome the Second Coming of Jesus, saying, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" as the crowds did at Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. It is the day when the new heavens and new earth will come. It is the day when our Lord will admire those who endured all the sufferings of the saints. On the other hand, it is the day of judgment to those who rejected the love of God.

In this chapter we learn that we should not live before men's eyes like the Pharisees, but live in the sight of God, though it is costly. We also learn that we must know that we did not choose God; but God chose us to obey his world mission command. Most importantly, we must learn the shepherd heart of God for the world.