

BaptistWay Bible Series for Feb. 20: Christians are to be obedient, not religious_22105

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Christians are to be obedient, not religious

Matthew 23:1-30

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The fifth and final discourse of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is typically thought to range from 24:1-25:46. For whatever combination of reasons, our curriculum does not devote much attention to this so-called eschatological ("end times") discourse.

Rather, this week's lesson examines Jesus' denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees in 23:1-30 (which happens to continue through verse 36), and next week's study focuses exclusively upon Jesus' picturesque description of the final judgment (25:31-46). Since our responsibility is teaching and not designing the lesson, we will treat the texts identified in our curriculum and not so much the fifth discourse itself.

From the place where the last lesson ended (18:35) and this lesson begins

(23:1), much transpires in Matthew. Not only does Jesus engage in teaching and in healing en route to Jerusalem (19:1-20:34), he also arrives in Jerusalem, judges the temple and enters into dialogue and dispute with various Jewish religious leaders (21:1-23:39). It is in 23:1-36, however, where Jesus' criticism of the Jewish religious establishment, particularly the scribes and the Pharisees, reaches a crescendo.



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At the outset of this study, it may be necessary to remind ourselves who the scribes and Pharisees were. The former were writing bureaucrats and scholars, whereas the latter were one of the three major sects within Judaism in Jesus' day (the other two being the Sadducees and Essenes) which rigorously applied the Jewish law, be it written or oral, to everyday life.

While not all Pharisees were scribes, not a few scribes were Pharisees. Matthew consistently links the two groups together. In fact, in the First Gospel they often are portrayed as Jesus' arch opponents.

While four of the five discourses are directed toward the disciples, Jesus addresses both the crowds and his disciples in 23:1-36 (note verse 1). Jesus commences his excoriation of the scribes and the Pharisees by enjoining his audience to observe what they say but to not do as they do (v. 3).

Parents sometimes encourage their children to do as they say but not as

they do. All too often, however, they fail to offer an explanation for such an admonition. The reason Jesus gives his listeners for following the instruction of the scribes and the Pharisees is that they “sit on Moses’ seat”; that is, they stand in his authoritative train of teaching (v. 2). He tells his listeners not to act like them, however, because “they do not practice what they teach” (v. 3). In a word, Jesus calls them “hypocrites” (vv. 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29).

Specifically, Jesus levels three charges against the scribes and Pharisees in verses 4-7. First, Jesus declares they place the burden of the Jewish law upon the people and do not even lift a finger to lighten their load (v. 4). Additionally, he accuses them of being spiritual “grandstanders.” Their Scripture boxes strapped to their foreheads and left arms overflow while the tassels on their long, flowing robes hang down low (v. 5). Jesus also criticizes them for loving special seating and for enjoying reverential greeting (vv. 6-7).

This prompts Jesus to inform his followers that they are not to call one another “rabbi” or “father” or “instructor,” for they have one Father in heaven and the Messiah as their instructor (vv. 8-10). Rather, they are to call one another “brothers” and “sisters” and are to outstrip one another in service, not status. In the kingdom economy, humility is the leading economic indicator (vv. 11-12).

With these three incriminations still ringing in their ears, Jesus adds no less than seven woes of prophetic condemnation. Talk about adding insult to injury!

It seems more than coincidental that there are three examples of hypocrisy set forth in verses 4-7 and seven woes recorded in verses 13-36. In Scripture, the numbers “three,” “seven,” and “10” all signal completion. Indeed, it appears one purpose of this chapter is to question the spiritual credibility of those who condoned Jesus’ death.

Woes one and two may be taken together (vv. 13-15). Calamity is pronounced upon the scribes and Pharisees for opposing Jesus and his message on the one hand (v. 13) while going to great extremes to promulgate their commitments on the other (v. 15).

The third woe centers upon these so-called “blind guides” proclivity to set up for themselves legal loopholes with respect to making various oaths (vv. 16-22). Jesus points out the intellectual and spiritual folly of thinking lesser oaths are binding while greater oaths are non-binding.

It reminds one of children who make up the rules of a game on the fly and for their own advantage. Although wise in their own eyes, Jesus regards these spiritual directors as “blind.”

The fourth woe is in regard to tithing (vv. 23-24). While Jesus does not oppose their giving a tenth of their agricultural produce, including the small herbs mint, dill and cummin, to the temple and its priests, he maintains they have strained out a gnat, a small unclean insect, only to swallow a camel, a large unclean land animal, by neglecting the godly virtues of justice, mercy and faith.

Woes five and six have to do with putting on airs (vv. 25-28). With respect to the proper washing of the cup and plate, Jesus' misgiving is that external actions have eclipsed internal attitudes. First things must be kept first (vv. 25-26). Similarly, Jesus' unflattering depiction of the scribes and Pharisees as white-washed tombs revolves around his belief that there should always be a congruity between what appears to be and what actually is. The old adage “pretty is as pretty does” is appropriate here.

Last, Jesus points out the inconsistency between the scribes and Pharisees memorializing former prophets while rejecting the prophets, sages and scribes now in their midst. This reality, which Jesus came to know all too well, prompts him to denounce them as a “brood of vipers” and to question

how they can escape being consigned to eternal damnation (vv. 29-36).

I, for one, do not need the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day to alert me to the deleterious spiritual tendencies and patterns that exist in my own life. May God have mercy on us all for our feigned piety and superficial spirituality. We can only hope and pray that Jesus laments over the messes we are and that we make, even as he did over Jerusalem (vv. 37-39).

Discussion question

- ◆ What similarities can be found between the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day and Christians of today?

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.