

Matthew 23C

- Let's return to the seven woes of Chapter 23...Jesus is condemning the Pharisees for their part in denying Israel their Messiah
 - Jesus issues seven woes in total in this chapter, seven being the complete number indicating their judgment is assured
 - Each woe addresses a specific aspect of the Pharisees' corruption and hypocrisy
 - And as we study them in depth, we'll see clearly why (at least in human terms) Jesus ended up on a cross instead of a throne
 - But our study of these seven woes will also offer us valuable insight into the methods used by all false teachers
 - Remember, the same spiritual enemy lurks behind every deception in the church
 - So it should come as no surprise that the Pharisees' methods to deceive and manipulate are similar to those in use today
 - So as we study this chapter, let's learn how to recognize and avoid the false teachers of our day
- Last week we studied the first two of the woes, and they were closely related to each other
 - In the first woe, Jesus condemned the Pharisees for shutting off the Kingdom from themselves and from others
 - These men were barred from the Kingdom because they were not devoted to following God
 - Instead, they followed Pharisaic Judaism, a complex system of rules built on top of the Mosaic Law
 - They expected God to approve them first on the basis of their heritage as Jews and secondly for their zealousness in law keeping
 - They did this despite the Scriptures clearly teaching that the righteous man shall live by faith, not by his works of law
 - Since they trusted in their system of works rather than in the Messiah, they couldn't enter the Kingdom

- And they kept others from entering too, since these men were the blind guides that taught generations of Jews
- In the second woe, Jesus condemned them for being advocates for their religious system rather than for God and His word and His Messiah
 - Israel was supposed to be a light among the nations, Moses said
 - So the Pharisees should have made their goal seeking converts to the Living God from among the nations
 - Instead, they championed Pharisaic Judaism, traveling far and wide to find one person to adopt their strict lifestyle
 - And when they found that one, they made him even more zealous than they were for their system
 - Think of how many souls they might have brought to faith in Messiah had these men served God instead of their own system
 - As we studied these woes last week, we noticed how these same two errors are present in false teachers today and in every age
 - The Bible tells us that false teachers are unbelievers who do not possess the spiritual insight they claim to offer others
 - Like the Pharisees, they don't possess faith themselves, nor do they understand the Scripture, nor do they convert people to Jesus
 - Instead, they are advocates for something other than God and His word
 - Usually, false teachers are advocates for their own interests: usually for donations to their "ministry" or to purchase some book or video series
 - They appear to be serving God but in reality they are serving themselves at our expense
- So let's continue our study of the woes and learn more about the false teachers of Jesus' time and of our day

[Matt. 23:16](#) "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.'

[Matt. 23:17](#) "You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold?"

[Matt. 23:18](#) “And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.’

[Matt. 23:19](#) “You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering?

[Matt. 23:20](#) “Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it.

[Matt. 23:21](#) “And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it.

[Matt. 23:22](#) “And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.

- In the third woe, Jesus focuses on a particular behavior of the Pharisees concerning how a man swore an oath and which oaths were enforced
 - Swearing an oath involves making a promise by placing oneself at the mercy of a higher authority should you fail to keep it
 - Swearing an oath not only places us under penalty of law but also under penalties from God
 - For example, we may may swear an oath to tell the truth by saying “so help me God”
 - When we do, we are making a vow before God placing ourselves under His judgment should we fail to do as we promised
 - According to the law of Moses, a Jew was not to make oaths he could not keep, and in Matthew 5 Jesus told us not to make oaths at all
 - Since we cannot know what will happen or how things will turn out for us in the future, we can’t make guarantees
 - And if we cannot guarantee our future behavior, then we shouldn’t place ourselves under God’s judgment so foolishly
 - But Pharisaic Judaism permitted oaths, and even though the Scriptures said every vow must be kept, the Pharisees made many exceptions
 - Under Pharisaic rules, if a man swore an oath, he was obligated to keep his promise only if he swore the oath a certain way
 - A man who swore by the temple wasn’t accountable to keep his oath according to Pharisaic rules because his oath was invalid

- Why? Pharisees interpreted the third commandment to not take the Lord's name in vain as preventing swearing by God's name
 - They also said that swearing by the temple was equivalent to swearing by the name of God, so such an oath was invalid
 - And therefore enforcing such a vow would violate the 3rd commandment, so it was not required to be kept
 - But they would enforce an oath sworn on gold used to build the temple, since it was once removed from God and not blasphemy
 - Likewise, they would disavow pledges made on the altar but they would enforce pledges made by the sacrifice on the altar
 - These distinctions may appear pointless to us, but there was a method to the Pharisees' madness
 - The Pharisees used this system to help dishonest businessmen escape their commitments...for a price
 - A person needed to invoke the authority of God in their vow if it was to be accepted as credible and likely to be kept
 - But they couldn't swear on the name of God or else they broke the third commandment
 - So they would swear upon something close to God – like the temple or the altar – which allowed them to invoke His authority safely
 - And at the same time, this arbitrary distinction offered plausible deniability when they wanted to break their vow
 - Later if the person wanted to break their vow, they went to a Pharisee, a judge of the law, asking to be excused from the vow
 - And for a price, the Pharisees would rule that the vow was invalid because it wasn't sworn properly
 - They ruled the vow should have been sworn by the sacrifice on the altar, not the altar itself, or by the gold in the temple, not the temple itself
 - The rules were always changing, so no matter how the oath was sworn, the Pharisees always had a loophole if one was needed
 - Jesus is condemning these men for perverting justice and the truth merely to enrich themselves...it's corrupting

- In vs.19-22 Jesus says these distinctions weren't fooling God or men for that matter, because everyone knew what was going in here
 - First, in v.19 Jesus points out that their rules were contrived, because they didn't even make logical sense
 - Why should the gold used in constructing the temple be more binding than the temple itself?
 - Or why should the sacrifice on the altar be more valuable than the altar itself?
 - Their backward logic simply proved that these rules were nothing more than excuses to break a vow
 - So Jesus says in vs.20-22 if you swear by anything in the temple, you swear by God Himself
 - Because everything in the temple is equally associated with God, and after all that was the point of the vow
 - The person intended to invoke the authority of God in this vow to emphasize his commitment to keeping it
 - They were trying to have their cake and eat it to...to appear to be bound by their words without being accountable in the end
 - Since the Pharisees were always looking for ways to use their position of authority for financial gain, they were willing to play these games
 - They perverted justice and gave license for the people to break their promises and shame the name of God
 - In the end their greed brought condemnation upon themselves
- This pattern of behavior is perhaps *the* defining characteristic among all false teachers in every age
 - False teachers universally share a love for money and an insatiable drive to gain it through corrupt religious practices
 - To quote from Paul, they see godliness as a means of gain
 - Peter calls it the way of Balaam, referring to the corrupt prophet

2Pet. 2:14 having eyes full of adultery that never cease from sin, enticing unstable souls, having a heart trained in greed, accursed children;

[2Pet. 2:15](#) forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness;

- Peter says false teachers love the wages of unrighteousness, referring to the wealth of this world gained at any cost
 - They have hearts trained in greed, meaning they have learned from others the most efficient ways to fleece the flock
 - The Pharisees fit this profile certainly, and Luke 16:14 says the Pharisees were money-loving men
- And we see plenty of false teachers today who are following in the way of Balaam
 - They live lavish, worldly lifestyles made possible by ministries that see religion as a money-making enterprise
 - In fact, the love of money is such a consistent feature of false teachers, it allows us to see these people coming from a distance
- Before you follow someone's teaching, take a look at the lifestyle choices of that man or woman
 - Are they living a worldly, lavish lifestyle? Are they clearly pursuing this world above pursuing eternal rewards in the next?
 - And is the pursuit of wealth a constant topic in their teaching, and do they encourage their audience to desire for the same?
 - The love of money by itself doesn't make someone a false teacher automatically, of course
 - But it is a warning sign, and at the very least, it may indicate the person is a carnal or immature believer
 - And we should no more want to follow the teaching of a carnal, immature believer than we should follow false teachers
 - Just look at what happened to Israel when they followed after false teachers in the Pharisees?
 - They were so deceived that when Jesus came, Israel rejected Him because the Pharisees told them to do so
 - And why did the Pharisees tell them to reject Jesus? Because He threatened their wealth and power

- So because of the greed of false teachers, a generation of Israel was shut off from the Kingdom
- So imagine what damage a greedy, false teacher can do to your walk if you follow them over a cliff?
 - They may rob you blind of your money today and your eternal reward later
 - At the very least, they will distract you away from eternal concerns while stunting your spiritual growth
- So Jesus pronounces a third woe against these men for perverting oaths in the pursuit of selfish interests, so now we move to the fourth woe

Matt. 23:23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.

Matt. 23:24 “You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

- For the third time, Jesus introduces the woe by calling these men hypocrites, because once again they are acting in ways contrary to their words
 - In this example the topic is tithing, and the Law required that Jews tithe in three ways, resulting in a total giving of between 20-30% annually
 - One tithe was on the produce of their crops, which became food for the priests or for the poor
 - But the Pharisees went the next step of tithing even on herbs produced in their garden
 - They would count out one tenth of the leaves off an herb tree or seeds from a spice plant to give to the temple priests
 - The Law of Moses never required tithing on the herbs in a household garden...that was a rule invented by the rabbis
 - But that rule wasn't necessarily wrong...even Jesus says in v.23 they should have continued tithing in that way if they desired
 - The problem was that they adopted this extreme measure hypocritically

- It was part of their continuing effort to appear pious and scrupulous in keeping the law
- But they did it only for the attention it gained them, and they were willing to do it because it cost them very little personally
 - Meanwhile, Jesus says they ignored weightier provisions of the law which demanded much greater personal sacrifice
 - In particular, the Pharisees tossed aside commands of the Law demanding justice, mercy and faithfulness Jesus says
- Jesus is speaking about situations in which the Pharisees used their power to pervert the Law rather to enforce it properly
 - They might deny someone freedom or fail to convict a guilty criminal when it suited them or yielded a personal advantage
 - Perhaps they wanted a bribe, or a political favor with Rome
- The point here is the Pharisees selectively obeying the word of God...picking and choosing to suit them
 - And typically, they chose to obey the most minor provisions but disregarded the weightier provisions
 - Jesus sums up the behavior in v.24 using a figure of speech...He says they strain out a gnat and swallow a camel
 - It's a comical and vivid illustration of their hypocrisy...going to great lengths to remove the smallest insect from their drink
 - Yet when the time comes to swallow, they make no effort to stop the occasional camel from finding its way down their throat
 - And that's the sin in view in the fourth woe: selective obedience to the word of God done in hypocrisy and manipulation
 - And it's a classic practice of false teachers, because it allows them to appear righteous without making a true effort
 - False teachers will obey the easy, minor things commanded in the Bible, and make quite a show of it to impress us
 - They want us to see their obedience and to praise them for it
 - But then false teachers ignore the major tenants of the Bible because they get in the way of what they desire

- Of course, we can play these games with God as well, when we want
 - Have you encountered Christians who say they are committed to the Bible and believe we should do what it says...
 - But then they decide some part of it doesn't apply to them? They ignore some rule concerning marriage or sexuality or speech?
 - They make excuses for why the Bible's standards of conduct commanded for all believers doesn't apply to them?
- That's selective obedience to the word of God, and Jesus says it's not fooling God
 - Whatever reasons a person may have for why a rule doesn't apply is merely hypocrisy and disobedience
 - In other words, what do you call 99% obedience? It's called disobedience
 - We cannot allow our obedience to the word of God to vary based on what suits us
 - Because if that's how we approach the Bible, then we've never truly been obedient to God at all...we were just playing a game
- So how do false teachers of our day repeat this pattern of selective obedience?
 - Well, today the pattern of emphasizing minor things while ignoring the main teaching of Scripture takes a very specific form
 - False teachers today quote minor, often obscure verses of the Bible taken out of context and use them to prop up false claims
 - And then at the same time, they will ignore the primary teaching of the Bible on that topic, because it undermines their argument
 - Let's look at an example of a teaching commonly repeated by false teachers today that follows this pattern
 - False teachers will commonly tell us that giving money to God (to their ministry) will result in a return on our investment
 - They describe a pyramid scheme in which a little invested with their ministry will result in much more returned to us somehow
 - Typically they run to a handful of well-known verses taken out of context to support these false claims

- One of their favorite verses used to support this notion is a quote from Luke:

[Luke 6:38](#) “Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure – pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.”

- False teachers today interpret this verse in a selective way while contradicting the major teaching of the Bible
 - First, they presume that the “it” Jesus mentions in this verse is wealth or money, but notice Jesus doesn’t name the “it” here
 - “It” refers to something Jesus named in an earlier verse, but notice the false teachers don’t quote the earlier verse
 - They intentionally isolate this verse so they can use it to manipulate you into thinking it means something it doesn’t
 - If we look two verses earlier, we discover what “it” is about

[Luke 6:36](#) “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

[Luke 6:37](#) “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned.

[Luke 6:38](#) “Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure – pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.”

- In this passage, Jesus is talking about forgiveness and mercy...show forgiveness and mercy to others, and the Lord will give you the same
 - By the same standard you measure mercy and forgiveness is the same measure God uses in showing you mercy
 - We discussed this principle when it appeared in Matthew 6, so you can go there for the full explanation
 - For this morning, just take note that these verses are not about money at all
 - Yet the false teachers will quote this verse repeatedly to suggest that God is asking us to give more and more money
 - And the more we give, the more God will grant to us in return

- They are describing a Ponzi scheme where every investment goes up and everyone gets a huge return but it's all a lie
- That's not what Jesus said, so it's not what the Bible promises us
- This is an example of a single verse, a minor moment in the larger conversation of the Gospel, being over-emphasized to support a lie
 - The topic of forgiveness is not minor, of course, but this verse is of no importance on the topic of money because it's not talking about money
 - It's simply a verse that can be easily manipulated to create a desired belief
 - In fact, the false teachers love to preach a whole sermon on this one verse, which is selectively attending to the word of God
 - And then they lie about what it says so they can move our thinking to a place that benefits them personally
 - Once you believe what they tell you about this verse, you will be willing to send them your last dime and many do
 - As Jesus said about the Pharisees, they will take a widow's home if they can
 - In the end, they get rich and we're left holding the bag and thinking that God's word can't be trusted
- But it's not God's word we can't trust...it's the hypocritical, lying conmen who deceive us with their myopic misinterpretations of the Bible
 - They over-emphasize a minor point taken out of context so they can deceive you – and then they ignore the larger teaching of the Bible
 - And what does the Bible say about wealth and money generally?
 - The Bible's principle thrust on the topic of money is that we shouldn't seek for wealth for ourselves
 - Instead, use your effort to obey Jesus and seek for reward in the Kingdom
 - Consider the following statements from the Bible concerning wealth:

Matt. 6:24 "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

[Luke 12:15](#) Then He said to them, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."

[Heb. 13:5](#) Make sure that your character is free from the love of **money**, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU,"

[1Tim. 6:9](#) But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.

[1Tim. 6:10](#) For the love of **money** is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

- The Bible says be content with whatever you have from God, and meanwhile don't make your life a pursuit of riches
 - If you desire money too much, you are likely to fall into a snare set by false teachers who tell you God can make you rich
 - Moreover, the godly character we should all desire is associated with a freedom from a love of money
 - So even if you are blessed to receive much from God, don't become dependent on it or too attached to it
 - Because Jesus says wealth is not the measure of one's life...that measure will be taken in Heaven at the Judgment Seat of Jesus
- Finally, never does the Bible promise that if we give our money to God it will result in a return of more money to us while on earth
 - Generally speaking, the math on this question is very simple
 - When you give your money away – whether to the church or elsewhere – you will have less money afterward
 - And that's OK, because by being generous with what you have, you're building up treasure in Heaven Jesus tells us
 - Perhaps the Lord will bring you more in return...we know He's going to provide for us...but there's no promise you will be rich

- This is a good illustration of how false teachers selectively emphasize minor verses of the Bible to craft a lie designed to fleece the flock
 - Meanwhile, they won't tell you the whole story of what's given in the Bible, because that whole story would expose their lie
 - So Jesus condemned the Pharisees for this hypocrisy, and we need to steer clear of anyone who repeats this pattern today
 - If someone majors on minor things while ignoring the major things, they are not fit to guide us into righteousness
 - They are blind guides, Jesus says
 - That's why we work to teach the whole counsel of God's word...Paul made that claim about his own ministry

[Acts 20:27](#) "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.

- In Ephesus, Paul told the elders he did not fail to share with them the whole counsel of God's word
- Perhaps that's the greatest thing that could be said about any teacher of the word...we were not selective in what we taught
- Teaching verse-by-verse is my way of showing my work when I teach
 - Remember when your school math teacher said you had to show your work when you did a math problem?
 - It wasn't good enough to merely show the final answer...the teacher wanted to know *how* you arrived at that answer
 - That's how all good Bible teaching should be done too...
 - The teacher shouldn't just tell you what the Bible says about some topic, they should show their work
 - They should be prepared to show you the whole counsel of God's word on the topic to validate their conclusions
 - If they can't – or won't – do that for you, then perhaps there's a problem and you should be suspicious
 - Either they don't know what they are talking about, or they are trying to deceive you

- Either way, you should seek better teaching, because time is short and your own sanctification and reward is on the line
- Next week we finish the woes as we prepare to enter into one of the most important chapters in all of Matthew's Gospel