

Matthew 23a

Who did Jesus warn the crowds and His disciples about in this chapter? The teachers of the law (scribes) and the Pharisees (a theological party within Judaism). They occupied very much the same position that church leaders occupy today. People looked to them for the interpretation of the truth. Generally, their teachings were dependable, but their practice was not. Their creed was better than their conduct, i.e., they were guilty of High Talk and Low Walk.¹

How did Jesus describe the “location” of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees (v. 2)? They “*sit in Moses’ seat.*”

What does that mean? Their *authority* was to be recognized....they sit in Moses’ seat, i.e., they teach the Law. They viewed themselves as Moses’ legal successors.

What did Jesus tell His listeners to do/not do (v. 3)? Obey them and do what they *tell* you, (He affirmed their authority) but do not *do* what they *do* because they do not practice what they preach, i.e., they are hypocrites.

What were the specific practices of the teachers and Pharisees that Jesus warned about in vv. 4-12?

23:4 The warning is against placing heavy burdens on the people. Such burdens would probably include excessive rules, regulations, and extreme interpretations of the letter of the law. But they were not righteous themselves and they would not help the people in dealing with these intolerable loads.

The early church rejected this legalism when it insisted that obedience to the Mosaic Law is not a foundation for the Christian life. Peter told the legalists in Acts 15:10: “*Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?*”

23:5 The warning is against performing works in order to be seen by men. Their phylacteries (small leather pouches (Exodus 13:9, 16; Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18)), containing Old Testament verses tied to their left arms and foreheads, were wide and thus conspicuous. They weren’t concerned about obeying the law as long as, by wearing ridiculously large phylacteries, they appeared to be super-spiritual.

And the tassels of their prayer shawls (Numbers 15:38-39) were long and noticeable. These distinctive trimmings were intended to remind them that they were a distinct people, and that they should walk in separation from the nations. The Pharisees overlooked the spiritual lesson and satisfied themselves with making longer fringes.²

23:6-7 The warning is against focusing on self-importance by scrambling for the places of honor at feasts and in the synagogues. They also nourished their egos on greetings in the marketplaces and especially enjoyed being called rabbi (meaning “my great one,” or “teacher”) implying they were scholars. The respect of people was very important to them.

The leaders in Jesus’ day wanted the title because it set them off as distinctive and superior to others. Modern people who take this view of an advanced academic degree or a title fall into the same error.³

23:8-10 The warning is against seeking titles of honor that foster pride. In the kingdom of heaven, all believers form an equal brotherhood with no place for distinctive titles setting one above another.⁴ Jesus is speaking to the heart that loves, collects, and cherishes such titles.

“In the Church of Christ, all titles and honors which exalt men and give occasion for pride are here forbidden.” (Spurgeon)

23:11-12 The warning is against self-exaltation. Leadership positions should never be a goal in and of themselves, but should always be viewed as opportunities to serve others. The Pharisees, who exalted themselves, would be humbled; and Jesus' followers, by humbling themselves in service, would someday be exalted.⁵

Jesus next pronounces eight woes on the proud, religious, hypocrites of His day. They are not a curse that calls down calamity but a calm, true judgment and verdict rendered by the Supreme Judge himself.

What were the eight woes?

23:13 The first woe concerned the fact that the Pharisees were preventing others from entering the kingdom, when it was God's will for His people to enter it. Many Jews were looking to their leaders for direction and the leaders' antagonism toward Jesus had caused many to turn away from Him. The leaders' failure to accept Jesus as Messiah had placed a stumbling block in the paths of their countrymen. For this they stood condemned.⁶

23:14 The second woe (*Omitted in NIV, ESV and others*) lambastes their taking of widow's houses and covering it up by making long prayers. This "woe" demonstrated the inconsistency of the religious leaders for they made long "prayers" to impress people with their spirituality, but also took financial advantage of widows, whom they should have helped.⁷ Such pretenders to piety will receive greater condemnation.

23:15 The third woe against them is misdirected zeal. The religious leaders went to unimaginable lengths to make one convert. The problem with this was that after he was won they made him twice as wicked as themselves. that is, he became more pharisaic than the Pharisees themselves. By imposing external restrictions of Rabbinic traditions on their converts, they were preventing these people from seeing the truth!⁸

Their chief offense was bringing Jews under their corrupt theology. He criticized them because of what they taught their converts and the effect that this "conversion" had on them.⁹

23:16-22 The fourth woe addressed them as blind guides and blind fools, the Lord denouncing them for their deliberate, dishonest reasoning. They had built up an elaborate, false system of reasoning to evade the payment of vows. For instance, they taught that if you swore by the temple, you were not obligated to pay the vow, but if you swore by the gold of the temple, then you must perform the vow. They said that swearing by the gift on the altar was binding, whereas swearing by the empty altar was not, etc.

Their elaborate system of oaths, some of which were binding and some were not, was a way of making a promise while keeping their fingers crossed behind their back.

Whenever a Jew took a vow/oath, he connected it in some way with God. All their oaths were therefore binding. Jesus disallowed all evasive oaths and viewed them as untruthful speech.

¹ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 1288.

² *Ibid.*

³ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Matthew*, 2025 Edition (published by Sonic Light), 579.

⁴ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 1289.

⁵ Louis A. Barbieri Jr., "Matthew," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Victor Books, 1985), 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Louis A. Barbieri Jr., "Matthew," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Victor Books, 1985), 74.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Matthew*, 2025 Edition (published by Sonic Light), 584.