

Matthew 23A

- Today we move into Chapter 23 of Matthew's Gospel, and as we do, we come to the end of Jesus' public ministry
 - Three years earlier at another Passover, Jesus launched his public ministry with the baptism of John by the Jordan
 - From that moment, Jesus set out to fulfill all Scripture concerning the Messiah's first coming to Israel
 - He recruited His disciples, appointed His apostles and began teaching the crowds
 - He healed countless sick and demon possessed, performing amazing miracles and walking the length and breadth of Judea
 - And as He went, He preached repentance for the Kingdom of God was at hand, calling upon Israel to receive Him as their King
 - But Israel failed to heed that call, because apart from a handful of disciples, most have rejected Jesus' claims to be Messiah
 - Six months earlier the nation committed the unforgivable sin
 - Their religious leaders declared that Jesus wasn't the Messiah... He was merely working miracles with the power of Satan
 - The crowds accepted this explanation over the proof they saw with their own eyes
 - So as a result of Israel's willful unbelief, Jesus withdrew His offer of the Kingdom from that generation
 - Jesus told Israel their house was being left to them desolate and they would not see Him again until they called on His name
 - And from that point, Jesus transitioned to preparing His disciples privately for the Kingdom Program after His departure
- Now we're barely 48 hours away from His death, and Jesus uses His final public statement to declare woe upon that generation of Israel and their leaders
 - His statement comes at the end of long day in the temple, where Jesus has defended Himself repeatedly before those religious leaders

- He has endured four challenges by Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians and each time He vindicated Himself
- He's proven He is Israel's spotless Lamb, a worthy sacrifice to be made on our behalf
- In the next 24 hours He will be arrested and in about 36 hours He will be nailed to a cross
 - So after this discourse in Chapter 23, Jesus will make no further public statements
 - He goes quietly to the cross as a sheep goes to slaughter, silent before its shearers and He will not open His mouth again
 - He speaks only to the disciples privately during the Olivet Discourse and the Last Supper, which we study in coming weeks
- And now in His last teaching to the crowds, Jesus' focus is Israel's religious leaders and the role they played in bringing Israel to this moment

[Matt. 23:1](#) Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples,

[Matt. 23:2](#) saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses;

[Matt. 23:3](#) therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them.

[Matt. 23:4](#) "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger.

[Matt. 23:5](#) "But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments.

[Matt. 23:6](#) "They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues,

[Matt. 23:7](#) and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men.

- As the chapter opens, Matthew says that Jesus spoke to both the crowd and His disciples, but His message was focused squarely on Israel's religious leaders
 - They were wolves in sheep's clothing, as Jesus described them in an earlier chapter, and now Jesus is ready to unmask them
 - Up to this moment, Jesus has been cautious in His public criticism of these men

- He knew if He provoked them, they could interfere in His plans, so Jesus bided His time waiting for the right moment
- And now with less than 2 days remaining before His death, Jesus takes the gloves off and pronounces judgment against these men
 - But as He does so, Jesus exposes their motives and methods
 - And today we open with a lesson on how corrupt men (and women) use godliness as a means of personal gain
- Israel has a long history of corrupt leaders leading their people astray: kings, priests and elders who encouraged Israel to engage in idolatry
 - This pattern of poor leaders traces back to Aaron who failed the people while Moses was on the mountain
 - And that tradition of corrupt leadership continued in the time of Judges and throughout the kings north and south
 - At one point shortly before Israel was conquered by Babylon, the Lord told Israel's leaders they had failed to shepherd the people

Ezek. 34:1 Then the word of the LORD came to me saying,

Ezek. 34:2 "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?"

Ezek. 34:3 "You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock.

Ezek. 34:4 "Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them.

Ezek. 34:5 "They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered.

Ezek. 34:6 "My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek for them."""

- Ezekiel told the leaders of his generation they had taken advantage of God's flock rather than caring for them

- Speaking metaphorically, the Lord says these leaders slaughtered the sheep they were supposed to guard and feed
- And they ate the fat and clothed themselves with the wool
- Instead of sacrificing themselves for the sake of the people as good shepherds do, they sacrificed the people for their desires
- In Jesus' day, sects like Pharisees and Sadducees continued the tradition of corrupt leadership in Israel, turning religious corruption into a science
 - They took advantage of those under their charge at every turn, using their positions for personal gain
 - Their corrupt ways was ultimately the cause of Israel turning against their own Messiah
 - So history repeats itself for Israel, as yet another generation of bad leaders yields another generation sent into exile
 - In v.2 Jesus starts His explanation of their corrupt ways saying they seat themselves in the chair of Moses, but they say one thing yet do another
 - The seat of Moses was a literal chair found at the local synagogue in Jewish towns of that day
 - In that chair would sit a judge who presided over court cases concerning violations of the Law of Moses
 - Under the system of Pharisaic Judaism in that day, the Pharisees were the self-appointed judges of the law
 - So Pharisees sat in this chair as they performed their duty, and Jesus said Israel should respect their judgments
 - Because they were the judges of the law, they should be obeyed in what they said from that chair
 - When seated in the chair of Moses, the Pharisees were not bad judges of the law...the problem was their actions didn't match their words
 - These men judged others strictly for violating the Law yet they themselves circumvented it whenever it suited them
 - And to understand where Jesus is going in His condemnation of these men, we need to revisit how they lived

- The Pharisees were known for their scrupulous lifestyle, observing elaborate daily rituals on a scale that's hard for us to imagine today
 - They observed rules for fasting, washing, praying, studying, clothing, hair, etc....from waking until they went to bed
 - They lived by a rabbinical code they helped invent, which made life like a prison without bars; every moment controlled by rules
 - As they complied with these rules, they appeared to others as men who had achieved religious perfection
 - Everyone looked up to them for their religious fervor and uncompromising devotion to piety
 - But Jesus says in reality they weren't the upstanding, pious, God-fearing men they portrayed themselves to be before the crowds
 - Their whole life was an act, an illusion to impress the people
 - When no one was watching, these men wouldn't bother doing the things they told everyone that God demanded
 - Jesus said they were saying one thing and doing another, which is the definition of hypocrisy
 - The fact they set aside their rules whenever it suited them proved their public devotion was just an act
 - Why did these men engage in such an elaborate act? It was their means to earthly gain...it brought them influence, honor, power and money
 - And in this chapter Jesus lays out that case against these corrupt leaders of Israel
 - He exposes how they played this game to their advantage through a series of maneuvers
 - The first step of their strategy was placing burdens on the people
- In v.4 Jesus says these men were like a merchant who loads up a beast of burden with a bundle of goods
 - A merchant going to the market to sell merchandise would commonly lay out a square section of linen cloth on the ground
 - Then he filled that sheet with his merchandise and pulled the corners of the cloth together and tied the bundle with ropes

- Then that bundle was set on the back or shoulders of an animal, like a donkey
- So the donkey would bear the weight of those goods for the merchant, carrying the load to market for the merchant
- Jesus says that's how Pharisees began their deception, placing burdens on the backs of the people
 - For a Pharisee, every rule and restriction they incorporated into their precious Mishnah was a prized possession to them
 - When a rabbi succeeded in adding a new rule to the *mitzvot*, the Jewish canon of religious practices, it was a career achievement
 - So Pharisees cherished their rules like children, much in the same way that a merchant cherished his valuable merchandise
- But just like a merchant going to market with his inventory, the Pharisees didn't want to bear the burden of those rules themselves
 - Instead, they placed their rules on the Jewish people, who labored under the restrictions like an overloaded donkey
 - Remember, we're not talking about the Law of Moses...we're talking about the Pharisees' manmade rules in the Mishnah
 - Nevertheless, the Jewish people still obeyed these rules because they were told they were part of the Law given by God Himself
- Now following rules has the appearance of piety and religious devotion, but it cannot produce righteousness or holiness
 - Paul says in Romans that no one ever came to righteousness by means of following the Law
 - Trying to follow rules merely reminds us over and over again that we're sinful because we can't keep rules
- Nevertheless, the Pharisees were determined rule-followers thinking it makes them righteous before God, but even they had their limits
 - So when they began to strain under the burden of their own system, that's when they began to cheat the system
 - They were hypocrites who kept the rules only when observed by others and ignored them when it suited them

- Jesus says in v.4 that they were unwilling to lift even their smallest finger...meaning they ignored even the smallest rules
- The rules of Pharisaic Judaism were oppressive and virtually impossible to keep...and that was the point
 - As the people tried to follow the rules, they soon found themselves failing and falling further and further behind
 - And as they struggled under the burden, they would grow discouraged and hopeless and desperate for help
 - Imagine the despair and emptiness that Israel felt as they struggled to live under the Pharisees' vision of the law
 - And that's the way it works with legalism...legalism is substituting rules for the joy of a true relationship with the Lord
- In the case of God's Law, the Lord expected Israel to appreciate the futility of following law and look to the grace of God in the Messiah
 - When Jesus came to Israel offering that freedom, the Pharisees sought to undermine Him because He was threatening their system
 - They had portrayed themselves as the solution to the difficulties of keeping the Mishnah's rules so the people would seek them
- Which brings us to Step 2 of their strategy...cultivating a reputation for piety and obedience
 - In v.5 Jesus says the Pharisee did religious deeds only to be noticed by men, not by God
 - Jesus cites two examples of such behavior: broadening phylacteries and lengthening tassels on the garments
 - Both of these behaviors are uniquely Jewish traditions that the Pharisees manipulated to serve their own purposes
 - First, phylacteries are small wooden boxes that Jews tie to their hair and to their left arms
 - Inside these boxes they place small scraps of paper containing three passages of Scripture from the Law
 - Nowhere in the Law does God specifically tell Israel to make these boxes much less which Scriptures to place inside them

- The rabbis came to this practice from a wooden interpretation of Deuteronomy 6

[Deut. 6:7](#) “You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.

[Deut. 6:8](#) “You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead.

- In Deuteronomy 6:7 God told Israel to teach and observe the Law at all times whether at home or away, when going to bed and when rising
 - Then in v.8 He says euphemistically to bind the Law on your hands, meaning they should follow the Law in every work and deed
 - And He says have the law on your forehead, meaning keep His commandments foremost on your mind at all times
- But the Pharisees didn’t interpret this passage in the obvious and common-sense fashion, but instead choose to interpret it a hyper-literal and absurd way
 - Because keeping Law on your mind at all times isn’t something you can show off to others and gain attention for
 - So rabbis chose a self-serving, hyper-literally interpretation of Deuteronomy 6:8 leading to the practice of wearing phylacteries
 - Wearing a box on your face is sure to catch someone’s attention, and attention was what these men were seeking, Jesus said
 - And if there was ever any doubt about the rabbis’ motives, Jesus offers proof in v.5
 - Jesus says these men like to broaden their phylacteries, which means they made their boxes larger and larger
 - Once everyone was wearing little boxes on their heads, it became harder to stand out in the crowd and gain attention
 - So the Pharisees took the next step of enlarging their boxes a little more than everyone else
 - In that way, the people would marvel at the Pharisees’ piety at being willing to bear the weight of those larger boxes

- That practice exposed their true reason for wearing them in the first place...it wasn't an exercise in honoring God or remembering His word
 - As Jesus says, they did these deeds to be noticed by men, and they did a similar thing with the tassels on their garments
 - Jews sewed tassels around the hem of their outer garment in obedience to Deuteronomy 22:12

Deut. 22:12 “You shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of your garment with which you cover yourself.

- In this case, the Law did specifically require tassels but again the Pharisees found a way to play the rule to their advantage
- They made their tassels longer than others, so it caught everyone's attention and suggested they were more holy
- So Step 2 of their strategy was portraying themselves before the people as experts in keeping the Law to set themselves apart
 - But in reality, they couldn't keep their own rules either and didn't even bother trying
 - What deeds they did were calculated to gain attention and create the illusion of piety, but in secret they were hypocrites
- Which brings us to Step 3, turning religious power into economic and political power...by relying on a classic technique of marketing
 - Marketing is fundamentally creating a need in the mind of the consumer so then you may offer your product as the solution
 - Perhaps the best example today is the pharmaceutical industry
 - They invent new syndromes and conditions you never knew existed so they can sell drugs to cure the disease
 - In a nutshell, that was the Pharisees' game...create a disease among the people that only they could cure
 - They established so many religious rules that no one could possibly keep them leading the people to fear God's judgment
 - When the people became desperate for someone to help them meet God's standard, they naturally turn to the experts

- That's when Step 3 of the Pharisees' strategy kicked in...they took advantage of those in need for personal gain
- People who fear the judgment of God were willing to do anything to gain the Pharisees' seal of approval
 - So it became a quid pro quo arrangement, in which the Pharisees demanded certain favors and honor from the people
 - And in return, they would offer to overlook their sins, absolve them of their guilt and assure them that God was on their side
- In vs.6-7, Jesus refers to Step 3 saying these men coveted honor, power and ultimately wealth
 - Jesus lists four specific areas of Jewish life where these men sought honor
 - First, they loved honor at banquets which probably refers to Jewish feast meals or other important occasions
 - Seating for these events was according to honor, and the seat of greatest honor was next to the host
 - Pharisees always expected that seat, meaning they expected to be at the top of the social pecking order in Jewish society
 - Secondly, they wanted the chief seats in the synagogue, which were the seats closest to the Torah scrolls at the front of the room
 - Here again, this was a sign of honor, meaning the Pharisees sought to be recognized as the highest religious authorities
 - They wanted to be at the top of religious pecking order in Israel with no one to challenge their view of God and Law
 - Thirdly, they sought respectful greetings in the marketplaces, which were the commercial centers of Jewish towns
 - Every merchant and businessman had a shop in the marketplace
 - And spending time in the marketplace meant spending time around wealthy and influential men
 - Pharisees sought respectful greetings from these men but more than that...they sought for their money

- The implication is they sought financial favors from wealthy merchants working in their shops as a show of honor
- Then fourthly, at the end of v.7, Jesus says these men loved being called rabbi, which means teacher. But why would Pharisees love to be called teacher?
 - Jewish religious training took place in small groups of students or disciples under the instruction of a single man who ruled their lives
 - From the moment the relationship was established, a rabbi became the most important person in a disciple's life
 - A disciple was expected to fully submit to the rabbi's authority and follow his instructions without questioning
 - A rabbi's authority took precedence over every other authority, including even a natural parent
 - In fact, the disciples would often call their rabbi "father" and even "master"
 - And that's why the Pharisees were attracted to the title rabbi, because it gave them the power and control they needed to make their system work
 - Israel was under Roman rule at the time, and Romans had no respect for Israel's law or religious leaders
 - They allowed the Pharisees to practice their religion, but they kept the leaders on a short leash
 - So the Pharisaic system of control only worked if the Jewish people conceded to follow it
 - They needed control if their system was going to provide the social, religious, economic and political power they wanted
 - And the title rabbi was key to that system, because Jewish society believed a rabbi was worthy of such devotion
- So that's how Pharisees corrupted their position for personal gain...
 - Make religion impossibly hard, pretend to be experts at it and milk the people when they come calling for your help
 - Now obviously, we would never look to the Pharisees as role models for Christian ministry, but Jesus warns us none the less

- Take note of how Jesus warns His disciples against following in these men's footsteps

[Matt. 23:8](#) "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers.

[Matt. 23:9](#) "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven.

[Matt. 23:10](#) "Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ.

[Matt. 23:11](#) "But the greatest among you shall be your servant.

[Matt. 23:12](#) "Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.

- Notice that Jesus doesn't warn us not to be hypocrites like the Pharisees, though certainly we shouldn't be hypocrites
 - And He doesn't warn us about being greedy or manipulative, though we shouldn't of course
 - What warning does Jesus give us? He says don't seek for titles the way Pharisees did
- Jesus says don't seek to be called rabbi or father or leader (or master), but why did Jesus warn the Church about seeking titles?
 - Because it's an early sign of corruption in religious service and it's often the key to taking advantage of the flock
 - First, titles in the Church aren't wrong in themselves, and even Jesus assigned titles to people within the Church
 - Jesus granted the title "apostle" to some of His disciples and He even gave Peter the title "rock"
- So having a title isn't necessarily wrong...but seeking for a title can be a step toward corruption
 - And that's the issue here...Jesus says *do not be called* rabbi, and the Greek word for called is *kaleo*, meaning to summon or invite
 - So a better translation would be do not *invite* people to call you teacher
- Inviting such attention and authority is the starting point to becoming a Pharisee

- Once pride gains a perch in a minister's heart, it's only a matter of time before that person will follow the Pharisees' formula
- Soon, you're craving attention and compliments, hungry for power and willing to abuse others to enrich yourself
- It's happened a million times, and it starts with something as simple as seeking for a title
- Jesus tells the Church, do not seek to be called teacher in the rabbinical sense of a person who claims to have a corner on religious truth
 - Rabbis in Jesus' day were considered the sole custodians of truth about God
 - Whatever a rabbi said could not be challenged, and Pharisees manipulated that power to control the minds of Israel
 - We are not to look to anyone as our sole source of spiritual truth in that way, because Jesus says we are all brothers and sisters
 - Jesus is reminding us that none of us bring any inherent value to the process of teaching or learning
 - I wasn't born knowing the Bible, and neither were you...so how does anyone teach another what it means?
 - Where did all our knowledge about God come from?
 - It could only come from the Spirit, because only the Spirit knows the mind of Christ
 - So Jesus says the Spirit is our Teacher, and just because the Spirit uses one of us to teach another doesn't mean we get any credit
 - You're not gaining knowledge from me...I received it myself...so we all learned it from the same Teacher, the Spirit
 - You might call me *a* teacher, but I cannot be *the* teacher, because I am not your source of spiritual knowledge
- Likewise, don't call someone your spiritual father in the way a rabbi was called father, meaning a person who gives us our spiritual life
 - The disciples of rabbis saw each other as rivals and opponents competing to have the best rabbi

- And they found their personal spiritual worth by association with the best rabbi, as if his spiritual achievement rubbed off on them
- In that sense, they called him father, but Jesus says that's not how His Church will work...that's how a cult works
- We have only one spiritual source in our life and He is the Father seated on the throne in Heaven
- We may call someone father in the familial sense, certainly, but no one on earth is your spiritual father
- Finally, don't call anyone leader, which is actually the word for master referring to the way rabbis were masters of a student's life
 - In our walk with Jesus, we should give no one that level of spiritual control because Jesus is our Master
 - Again, we can use the term leader or master in a nonspiritual sense, but we have only One Shepherd, and we follow His voice
- Pastors, elders, teachers, and other church leaders have their place, and we should respect their roles certainly
 - But they are not single points of authority in our lives, because they are fallible, sinful men and women stumbling through this life just like us
 - And if they offer us anything of spiritual value, it's only because God showed up and accomplished a work through them
 - So even when these people help us, we acknowledge that what we received was a blessing sent by God
 - The Spirit taught us, the Son led us, and the Father empowered us
 - And if we maintain this point of view for ourselves and for others in the church, we can protect against the prideful abuses of the Pharisees
 - If you have come to this church from earlier experiences under men and women who lorded over you, then I'm pleased the Lord freed you from that oppression
 - Forgive them and learn from the experience...keep your eyes on God and not on people
 - People will let you down, and even abuse you, but God never will

- And as we move deeper into this chapter we will learn more about how abuse in ministry takes place, how we can avoid it and how God views it