

THE DENOUNCING PROPHET

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. Jesus denounces hypocritical religion (Matt. 23:1-7).
2. Jesus denounces misleading religion (Matt. 23:13,15).
3. Jesus denounces superficial religion (Matt. 23:23-28).

Background Passage: Matthew 23

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

Jesus denounces religion that does not express the heart of God.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Jesus denounced the religious leaders for practicing heartless religion and for believing that their external conduct made them right with God. When we trust in Jesus, we are made right with God, and He changes our hearts so that we can love and obey Him.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

Because we now, in Christ, have the capacity to love God, we seek to demonstrate our love for Him through obedience, demonstrating true religion before a watching world.

GROUP TIME

Group content found in the Daily Discipleship Guide is included in the shaded areas throughout the session.



SCRIPTURE HANDOUT

Scan this QR code for a reproducible handout of this session's Scripture passages.

INTRODUCTION

ASK: As participants arrive, ask: **What are some examples of ways we might try to obtain righteousness through our effort rather than faith in Jesus?** (fighting for our preferences instead of loving people; creating rules to stop us from getting close to sin and then treating those rules as if they come from God; doing good things in an attempt to make our good outweigh something that we did that was bad)

TRANSITION: Jesus came to save; He didn't come to condemn. But as He denounced the religious leaders for their hypocrisy, He communicated that they stood condemned because of their failure to believe in the Messiah for salvation. They put all their hope and faith in their adherence to the law, and when the One to whom the law pointed came, they missed Him. They created an entirely new religion—one that had zero ability to save. And not only were they misled, but they also were misleading the people following them.

SUMMARIZE: Help your group understand the **setting** for this session.

- As Jesus continued to get closer to the crucifixion, He strove for His people to understand that eternal life could only be obtained through faith in Him. For so long the religious leaders taught a works-based righteousness. They taught that you had to do good enough, be good enough, and look a certain way to truly belong in the household of God. But in their teaching and hypocrisy, all they did was lead the people of God astray, and they missed the Messiah because of it. In Matthew 23, Jesus denounced their hypocritical, misleading, and superficial religion to help them see the error of their ways.



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POINT 1

JESUS DENOUNCES HYPOCRITICAL RELIGION (MATT. 23:1-7).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Matthew 23:1-7** from his or her own Bible.

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, **2** “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, **3** so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. **4** They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. **5** They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, **6** and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues **7** and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.”

INTERACT: Bring in a 5 lb. weight. Invite a group of 5-7 volunteers to stand in a circle and pass around the weight as fast as they can 2 or 3 times. Stand in the circle yourself, but when it comes to you, point to the next person and continue having the group pass the weight. Ask the group or the person who passed it to you, “How did you feel when I skipped my turn and made you continue passing the weight?”

HIGHLIGHT: Using the content below, explain from **verses 1-4** the following application (Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG] p. 38):

As we follow Jesus, we must make sure that we practice what we teach.

- After dismissing the Pharisees with a question that had an inescapable truth, Jesus addressed the crowd and His disciples by denouncing the scribes and Pharisees’ hypocritical religious practices. Jesus’s address in Matthew 23:1-36 is known by many as the “Seven Woes to the Pharisees.”
- Jesus addressed two ways the Pharisees and scribes were hypocritical. First, they were not practicing what they preached. They sat in the seat of Moses to teach, which Jesus commended them for, but what they did wrong was they didn’t practice what they taught.
- The Pharisees built a fence around the Law of Moses to prevent them from getting anywhere near breaking it. What they ended up doing, however, was following their own version of the law, which had nothing to do with pursuing holiness. They also demanded that the people hold to the oral tradition as they did. There are a total of 613 laws in the Old Testament. The difficulty of keeping the law doesn’t just come from the sheer number of laws but also from the fact that just breaking one meant you’ve broken the entire law (Jas. 2:10). Therefore, attempting to keep the law in itself would have been quite the burden. Adding laws to the laws would have been an unbearable weight. The law was never meant to save but to show the people of God their need for a Savior (Gal. 3:19-26).

MOSES’S SEAT

This seat was an actual seat that the Pharisees would sit in when they would teach in the synagogue, and it also represented the authority to teach the law like Moses in the synagogue.¹

VOICES from THE CHURCH

“It is a deadly thing to desire the applause of men, for once you receive it your flesh enjoys it, and you want it more and more. As a result, you become less and less content with the approval of God.”²

—David Platt

DISCUSS: It is sometimes difficult to avoid hypocritical living. Ask (DDG p. 38):

What are some things that we can do to help us avoid hypocritical religion? (follow our personal convictions without presenting them as the divine Word of God; ask God to show us the difference between what He requires versus our personal preferences; continue believing the gospel by trusting the Word; living out our lives like Jesus would)

EXPLAIN: Using the content below, explain from **verses 5-7** (DDG p. 38):

The Pharisees were blinded by their religion because of their love of people's praise. Because of it, they completely missed the presence of the Son of God.

- Jesus then addressed the Pharisees' false piety. The Pharisees displayed an attitude that looked very religious through their supposed strict adherence to the law. And they did so bowing down at the altar of people's praise. Everything they did, they did to be seen. Jesus addressed this in part in Matthew 6:5 when He said that the hypocrites who pray publicly and loudly have received their reward (e.g., the praise of people).
- They wore enlarged phylacteries to show how serious they were about keeping God's commands. They wore their tassels unnecessarily long as a sign of their piety (Num. 15:38-41; Deut. 22:12). They always wanted to sit in the place of honor, where they could be seen by everyone, including the seat of Moses, making the seat of Moses less a place to teach the Word of God and more a position of prominence. They desired to be greeted in the marketplace with honor, and they loved being called rabbi because it set them apart from everyone else.
- God never designed the law to be used the way the Pharisees used the law. The purpose of the law was to point to Jesus. But because the Pharisees weren't really following the law, they missed Jesus altogether.

DISCUSS: It's easy to let pride take hold and want to be praised by men. Though we cannot judge others' hearts, discuss in groups of 3-4 (DDG pp. 35,38):

From Day 3 in the DDG: **How do you pursue authentic and genuine faith rather than one based on appearances?** (pray for Holy Spirit guidance and conviction; check your own motives; obey and serve out of a response to God's love and grace; have a good friend keep you accountable)

TRANSITION: The devil tries to tempt us to desire the praise of men. When we fall for it, we find that we have strayed from God's calling for us to pursue Him only. The Pharisees not only didn't practice what they preached and desired the praise of men, but they misled people into their way of religion.

PHYLACTERIES

Objects, also called frontlets, worn on the forehead or upper arm, containing Scripture passages, taking Deuteronomy 6:8 literally. Jews wore them during prayer time, except on Sabbath and feast days.



Scan this QR code for a deeper understanding of the significance of phylacteries.

POINT 2

JESUS DENOUNCES MISLEADING RELIGION (MATT. 23:13,15).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Matthew 23:13,15** from his or her Bible.

13 “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. **15** Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”

EXPLAIN: Using the content below, explain from **verse 13** (DDG p. 38):

The Pharisees taught a man-made religion masked as God’s law, preventing themselves and others from truly entering the kingdom of God.

- “Woe” is an expression of grief or an expression of condemnation. Jesus used this word as He denounced the hypocritical religion of the Pharisees as both an expression of grief and as a warning of the coming condemnation for their hypocrisy. The word *hypocrite* comes from a Greek word that was originally used for actors in plays who switched masks to play multiple roles in the same play.³ The scribes and Pharisees were following and teaching a man-made religion masked as God’s law.
- Jesus, calling the Pharisees hypocrites, denounced their actions, saying they shut the door of the kingdom to themselves and didn’t let others enter the kingdom either. They were so focused on entering through their own efforts of pursuing holiness in following the law and teaching others to do the same that they didn’t realize they could not be successful. The man-made laws, the oral tradition, of the Pharisees only stopped them from seeing their need for a Savior. They desired to keep the law so intently that they basically created a new religion that brought them nothing but condemnation.
- John 3:18 says, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” Jesus came not to condemn but to save, but many, like some of the Pharisees, who do not listen have chosen to remain in their condemnation for their sin.

BRAINSTORM: Many of us can be modern-day Pharisees without knowing it. In pairs, discuss this application bridge point (DDG p. 38):

What are some possible modern-day pharisaical beliefs within the church? (Christians must dress nicely in shirt and tie to go to church; worship music should only be hymns; worship music should only be modern and uplifting; you must get your act together before you can become a Christian)

MATTHEW 23:14

Omitted from modern-day Bible translations because its prior inclusion and translation were based on manuscripts that were late and inconsistent with earlier manuscripts that did not have this verse. It was most likely added by scribes, not by Matthew himself.

EXPLAIN: Jesus spoke woe to the Pharisees not only for preventing people from entering the kingdom of God but also for spreading that news to others. Using the content below and **verse 15**, explain (DDG p. 38):

The Pharisees, through their works-based religion, inadvertently were growing the kingdom of hell instead of the kingdom of God.

- The second way that the scribes and Pharisees were misleading people was through their making proselytes, or converts. The Pharisees spared no expense to travel over land and sea to make one convert—a Gentile, or someone outside of Israel. The problem was they converted people to their form of holiness based on man-made laws. Through their oral tradition, they were driving people further into condemnation by unknowingly leading them into Satan's trap. A few times in the Gospels, Jesus called them children of Satan (Matt. 12:44; 23:33; John 8:44). They thought they were bringing people into the family of God, but they were giving the people the kind of false salvation that would send them straight to hell.
- Jesus's tone was unmistakably harsh as He denounced the scribes and the Pharisees in front of the crowd, and understandably so. Their oral tradition didn't just condemn them, it also condemned the people who followed them. In Revelation 22:18-19, God warned against adding to or taking away from the Word of God. For people who don't heed that warning, God promised plagues and death.
- Even though it is possible we can be led astray by other people's hypocrisy, this doesn't absolve us from the guilt that comes from not following Jesus. We must make sure that the Jesus we are following is the Jesus of the Bible. Jesus's denouncement of the Pharisees should push us to take advantage of the access that we have to the Word, prayer, the church, and the Holy Spirit.
- God takes seriously the way we can mislead or misinform people. If through our ignorance or disbelief we lead others astray, then we are like the Pharisees, who will be judged. Let's make sure we point people to Jesus, and nothing else, as the only way to salvation.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 38)

How can we guard against leading others astray as well as guard against being led astray by others? (know Scripture well; know God and His heart; prioritize the relationship we have with Jesus as we live in obedience; serve with humility and joy)

TRANSITION: Hypocritical and misleading religion on the outside seems deep because it typically involves a lot of pious activity. In reality, hypocritical and misleading religion barely scratches the surface of the gospel because it relies on something that is not Christ for salvation. To address this, Jesus continued in denouncing the Pharisees' false and superficial religion.

POINT 3

JESUS DENOUNCES SUPERFICIAL RELIGION (MATT. 23:23-28).

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Matthew 23:23-28** from his or her Bible.

23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. **24** You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! **25** Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. **26** You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. **27** Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. **28** So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

INTERACT: Call attention to the statement below (DDG pp. 38-39). Then divide the group into two groups, having one list and support the Pharisees’ “good deeds” from **Matthew 23:23-28** and having the other group list and refute their actions.

The scribes and Pharisees obeyed some laws to seem righteous and holy but disobeyed bigger matters of the law, not realizing righteousness is found in Jesus alone.

- The intensity of the scribes and Pharisees’ oral tradition made the depth of their piety look honorable. As we said in Point 1, the honor of people was what they strove for. Their pious practices were no more than a superficial, hypocritical religion that led to nothing but death.
- Jesus’s illustration in verse 24 was a wordplay that many in the crowd would have recognized. The words “gnat” and “camel” are very similar in Aramaic. Gnat was the Aramaic word *galma*, and camel was the word *gamla*.⁴ Gnats and camels were both unclean according to the law (Lev. 11:4,23,41). Gnats were common pests that would often find their way into wine bottles, making the wine unclean. Jews screen over their wine. The Pharisees would cover their wine to stop the smallest unclean thing from spoiling it, but their efforts at holiness still allowed them to eat a camel, an unclean animal.

ASK: The Pharisees’ hypocrisy created a shallow religion. Ask (DDG p. 39):

How do we avoid superficial and shallow religion? (know that Jesus saves us not by our efforts; live in humility, growing in obedience, but knowing we’re sinners; follow Christ not to be honored by men but by God alone)

READ: Invite someone to read the following key doctrine (DDG p. 39):

Key Doctrine #71: Justification by Faith: Justification refers to the moment when a person is objectively declared righteous before God based on the righteousness of Christ's atoning death (Rom. 8:33-34). This act of declaration takes place through faith in Christ and not as a result of human works or effort (Eph. 2:8-9). Through justification, a person is made to be in right standing before God, changing what was once an estranged and hostile relationship to one of adoption into the family of God.

READ AND DISCUSS: Reread **verses 25-28** out loud and ask, "How do you explain the analogy of the cup and the tomb in terms of how they relate to justification by faith?"

EXPLAIN: Using the content below and the key doctrine above, explain from **verses 25-28** how, unlike the Pharisees' understanding, justification is by faith.

- Another smokescreen that the Pharisees employed was that of life and righteousness. They were like cups and plates that were clean on the outside but dirty on the inside. The problem with a cup and a plate that were dirty on the inside is that everything they contained became dirty. Jesus told the Pharisees that they needed to clean the inside first. Dirty cups and plates are useless if they are only clean on the outside. Inwardly the scribes and Pharisees were greedy and self-indulgent. They wanted honor, money, and respect, and they didn't care who they had to take down to get them.
- Jesus also likened them to whitewashed tombs. He meant that their man-made religion covered up their impurities and gave them the appearance of life, while on the inside they were dead. The scribes and Pharisees were like whitewashed graves because they seemed to be helping people avoid uncleanness but were making the people unclean as they masked death behind the appearance of life and righteousness.
- Salvation based on works is dead. It gives the appearance of life (everything looks good on the outside), but there is no life whatsoever within. The scribes and the Pharisees sought to be justified based on their works. But justification can only happen through faith in Jesus. The scribes and the Pharisees completely missed the reality that they couldn't do or be good enough to get to God by themselves.

DISCUSS: (DDG p. 39)

How can a belief that righteousness is attained through our effort lead to spiritual pride or a lack of understanding the grace of God? (we think we can be good enough on our own; we don't rely on God; we don't humble ourselves; we don't think we need a Savior; we don't see how undeserving we are and thus won't be truly grateful to Jesus)

WHITEWASH

Whitewash was a plaster-like substance made with lime that was used to both hide impurities and mark graves.⁵ Whitewash was used to mark tombs so that Jews who didn't know where graves were could easily spot them and preserve themselves from becoming ceremonially unclean.

MY RESPONSE

SAY: Jesus denounced the religious leaders for practicing heartless religion and for believing that their external conduct made them right with God. When we trust in Jesus, we are made right with God, and He changes our hearts so that we can love and obey Him. Because we now, in Christ, have the capacity to love God, we seek to demonstrate our love for Him through obedience, demonstrating true religion before a watching world.

HEAD:

Jesus doesn't like religion that doesn't express the heart of God. It's hypocritical, misleading, and superficial. Jesus denounced this type of religion because it caused the people who followed it to stand condemned before God. The gospel isn't a call to do better and look better. The gospel is the good news that even though you can't do enough to save yourself, Jesus could, and He did. We stand condemned if we trust in our own effort, but if we place our faith in Jesus, we stand before God justified.

Why is hypocritical, misleading, and superficial religion dangerous?

HEART:

Jesus denounced the Pharisees because He wanted the people to stop following their practices. God takes it seriously when we add to and take away from His Word. If we choose to follow a hollow religion, we are responsible, not the person who led us astray. Jesus desires that we pursue true religion because it leads to Him. Jesus's denunciations shouldn't cause us to live in fear; they should cause us to be more confident in His salvation.

In quiet reflection, what are some hypocrisies in your life that you can confess to God?

HANDS:

Christians can love God with all that we have and all that we are. Before a watching world, we can demonstrate obedience to Jesus and submission to His authority, not because it saves us but because He saves us. We are called to share the gospel with our words and our actions, taking care not to mislead anyone with our preferences. Jesus loved us by meeting us where we are; we now get to do the same for others.

How can we demonstrate true religion in our daily lives so that others may see and hear the good news of Jesus?

PRAY: Jesus, You make the way easy for us to know You and enter Your kingdom. Help us not to make it harder by making works righteousness our priority. Help us be obedient to You out of love and joy. We love You. Amen.

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Righteous deeds are not the root of salvation, as taught by all other religions; they are the fruit of true salvation—of already being made righteous before God."⁶

—Gregory Brown

POINT 1: JESUS DENOUNCES HYPOCRITICAL RELIGION

(MATT. 23:1-7).

+ COMMENTARY

“To the Pharisee, righteousness meant outward conformity to the Law of God. They ignored the inward condition of the heart. Religion consisted in obeying numerous rules that governed every detail of life, including what you did with the spices in your cupboard (Matt. 23:23-24). The Pharisees were careful to say the right words and follow the right ceremonies, but they did not inwardly obey the Law. God desired truth in the inward parts (Ps. 51:6). To preach one thing and practice another is only hypocrisy.”⁷

POINT 2: JESUS DENOUNCES MISLEADING RELIGION

(MATT. 23:13,15).

+ ILLUSTRATION

Jack was an amazing chef who went to culinary school, studied hard, and graduated at the top of his class. After graduation though, he realized he didn't have the connections and experience that many of his classmates had to find a job. Discouraged, he decided to open his own small restaurant. But without the necessary finances, his food couldn't compete with other restaurants. Despite all his work and dedication, his restaurant struggled and closed down. Jack learned that achieving great things often requires more than just work, dedication, and desire.

This story illustrates the reality that hard work and dedication, while good, aren't everything. When the object of our faith is us and our own work, we will never be able to receive the eternal life that Jesus promises. If, however, Jesus is the object of our faith, we will receive eternal life because His achievements successfully made a way for us to get that which sin stole.

References

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2. David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, eds. Daniel L. Akin, David Platt, and Tony Merida, *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2013), Mt 23:1-28.
3. Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004), 751.
4. Craig Blomberg, 346.
5. Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 1055.
6. Gregory Brown, *Sermon on the Mount: Experiencing God's Kingdom on Earth*, *The Bible Teacher's Guide* (WORDsearch, 2019), 48-49.
7. Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 83.