

# THE DENOUNCING PROPHET

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

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

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Matthew 23

**+** **SETTING:**

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.

# DAY 1

## READ:

**Matthew 23:1-12**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Matthew 23:1-7**

## NOTES

Matthew 23 is a great warning for us not to lead lives that Jesus denounces. In verses 1-7, Jesus denounced the Pharisees for their hypocritical religion. They didn't practice the things that they preached. They were a hindrance to other people wanting to follow God. They weren't helpful. And they desired the praise and honor of people for their religious activity more than they desired God.

We must be careful not to make the same mistakes that they made. We must make sure that we are pursuing God and not something else in this world. Everything that this world has to offer—praise, possessions, and power—will ultimately leave you wanting if you pursue those things as if they were ultimate and provided life.

Jesus is the only One who can satisfy every longing in our hearts. We weren't made to find ultimate satisfaction in the world the way it is. But one day Jesus is going to return and restore all things. As long as we keep our gaze and attention on Him, there is nothing that this world can do to separate us from the kingdom He is bringing.

**What is something that you find yourself desiring more than God, and how can you realign your heart to ensure that you are pursuing God above everything else?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

**Matthew 23:13-22**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Matthew 23:13-15**

## NOTES

First Corinthians 1:18 says that the word of the cross is the power of God to those who are being saved. The gospel is a powerful message. On the other hand, it seems foolish to those standing condemned because of their lack of acceptance.

To the Pharisees, the message that Jesus preached seemed foolish because they preferred their version of salvation, a version that was based on their work and the praise they received from people for their false piety. Unfortunately, their version of the gospel was not only the reason they stood condemned, but they were driving other people who wanted to pursue the kingdom of heaven further into condemnation by misleading them with their man-made religious practices.

It is very easy for us to stand back and see their hypocrisy from our vantage point. But it may be hard for us to see hypocrisy that may exist in our own hearts because of our proximity to our preferences and beliefs. Therefore, we must make sure that we are pursuing the message of the cross and not our own message, which could lead us and those around us into condemnation.

**What are some ways we can ensure that the message of the cross is the foundation of our beliefs?**

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Faith isn't the ability to believe long and far into the misty future. It's simply taking God at His Word and taking the next step."<sup>1</sup>

—Joni Eareckson Tada

# DAY 3

## READ:

**Matthew 23:23-36**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Matthew 23:23-28**

## NOTES



### **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 (Romans 8:33-34). This act of declaration takes place through faith in Christ and not as a result of human works or effort (Ephesians 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.

Smokescreens have been used all throughout history to cover up real scandals. Politicians use them, lawyers use them, and even kids use them. A smokescreen is a tactic that a person might employ to distract anyone from seeing what's really going on. It comes from the example of what a thief might use to escape a heist. He would set off a smoke bomb to cover up his escape route out of a bank. The security guards are focused on the smoke, so the thief can escape with the stolen money without being noticed. The smoke serves as a distraction and cover to help the thief get away with what's really going on.

The scribes and Pharisees employed smokescreens through their adherence to the law. They worked hard to look good on the outside to receive the praise of people; however, on the inside, they were cold, dead, and headed for condemnation. They thought their works justified them instead of seeing that faith in the Messiah is what justifies.

Jesus's "woes" to the scribes and Pharisees serve as a great warning for us to pursue a real and honest relationship with Jesus. We may serve and obey certain rules in an attempt to hide what's really going on in our hearts, but just like Jesus did with the scribes and Pharisees, He can see right through the smokescreen to our hearts.

**How do you pursue authentic and genuine faith rather than one based on appearances?**

# DAY 4

## READ:

**Matthew 23:37-39**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Matthew 23:37-39**

## NOTES

The end of Matthew 23 was the last time that Jesus would be in the temple. Jesus's lament over Jerusalem was a very sad moment in the last days of His life before the crucifixion. Jesus lamented over Jerusalem because of Israel's rejection of Him. Though He loved His people, they rejected Him by worshiping their religious practices. Thus, the temple became empty and devoid of life. The presence of God was not there.

This was not the only time in Israel's history that they had rejected God. Time and time again in the Old Testament, the Israelites forgot and abandoned God and worshiped and served created things over the Creator. But God promised to send a Savior through Israel, so He protected Israel to fulfill His promise. By the time we get to Matthew 23, the promise was present and being fulfilled through Jesus.

Lamenting over Jerusalem, Jesus did give them hope that one day they would return to say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord," from Psalm 118, which the people shouted when He entered Jerusalem at the beginning of the week. Jesus's lament over Jerusalem is a solemn reminder of our need to turn away from our sin, trust in His finished work, and pursue His kingdom. He is coming back one day, but when He returns, He'll be returning to judge.

**What can you do not to repeat the Pharisees' mistakes that blinded them to the Messiah?**

# DAY 5

## READ:

**Matthew 24:1-51**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Matthew 24:45-51**

NOTES

Imagine a farmer who is waiting for his crops to be ready for harvest. He knows harvest time is coming soon, but he doesn't know exactly when. The farmer wakes up early every day and works hard all day long. The farmer does everything needed to make sure that the harvest will be as bountiful as possible. He knows that his hard work will pay off, but he doesn't know exactly when the harvest will come. He just keeps working diligently, day after day, knowing that when the time comes, his hard work will be rewarded.

The picture of the farmer in that scenario is like the picture that Jesus painted in Matthew 24. The goal of Jesus's words was not to cause you to live in fear or even for you to develop a robust eschatology (view of the end times). The purpose was to let you know that after He ascended into heaven, He will one day return to restore all things. The purpose was to make sure that you know to be ready, striving for gospel advancement, and pursuing your relationship with the Lord in all aspects of your life. The desire of Jesus is not to punish but to save. And His salvation is coming. So be on guard and pursue Jesus with all that you have and all that you are so that you are ready when He returns.

**What kingdom work has Christ appointed you to do as you wait for His return?**

# GROUP

NOTES

## 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."<sup>2</sup>

—David Platt

### **POINT 1: Jesus denounces hypocritical religion** (Matthew 23:1-7).

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

**?** What are some things that we can do to help us avoid hypocritical religion?

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.

**?** From Day 3: How do you pursue authentic and genuine faith rather than one based on appearances?

### **POINT 2: Jesus denounces misleading religion** (Matthew 23:13,15).

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

**?** What are some possible modern-day pharisaical beliefs within the church?

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

**?** How can we guard against leading others astray as well as guard against being led astray by others?

### **POINT 3: Jesus denounces superficial religion** (Matthew 23:23-28).

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.

**?** How do we avoid superficial and shallow religion?

## 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 (Romans 8:33-34). This act of declaration takes place through faith in Christ and not as a result of human works or effort (Ephesians 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.

**?** How can a belief that righteousness is attained through our effort lead to spiritual pride or a lack of understanding the grace of God?

## MY RESPONSE

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:** Why is hypocritical, misleading, and superficial religion dangerous?
- **HEART:** In quiet reflection, what are some hypocrisies in your life that you can confess to God?
- **HANDS:** How can we demonstrate true religion in our daily lives so that others may see and hear the good news of Jesus?



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

## 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."<sup>3</sup>

—Gregory Brown