



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Gospel According to St. Matthew

Chapter 23

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Introduction

Chapter Main Points:

- The Hypocrisy of the Scribes and the Pharisees
- Jesus' Grief over the Apostasy and Fall of Jerusalem



An Overview

- With the religious leaders silenced by their inability to entangle Jesus with their questions, Jesus proceeded to condemn the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees in a series of scorching rebukes (1-36)
- Despite His strong condemnation, His love for them was manifested by His lament for the people of Jerusalem (37-39)

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- The Pharisees and scribes had sought to discredit Jesus with the crowds
- Our Savior, after He had tried all possible solutions, after He had taught and confirmed His doctrines by countless miracles, after He had secretly by His parables condemned them for their wickedness, but without effect, now publicly rebukes them
- But before His reprehension of the Pharisees, He instructs the people, lest they should despise the authority of the priesthood
- The Scribes and Pharisees sat there formerly by Divine appointment
- The Scribes professed a great zeal for the law of Moses

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- They gloried in being the interpreters of it
- They succeeded to Moses authority of governing the people of God, of instructing them in His law, and of disclosing to them His will
- The Pharisees professed even something higher and separated themselves from the crowd
- They considered themselves better than the ordinary class of men and therefore, were called *Pharisees*, which signifies, separated

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- Christ does not tell them to observe every thing, without exception, that the Pharisees should say to them
- But only to what is not expressly contrary to the law of God
- The word "all" could not be taken without such a restriction, for Christ Himself accuses them of teaching many things contrary to that law, and of making it void by their traditions, Matthew 15:1-6
- The interpretation which they give to the law is in the main correct, but their lives do not correspond with their teaching
- It is not the duty of people to imitate their teachers
- They are to obey the law of God

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- They press upon the people a strictness in religion which they themselves will not be bound by, but secretly transgress their own traditions, which they publicly enforce
- They insisted upon the most minute circumstances of the ceremonial law, called a yoke, Acts 15:10
- They added to the Law and to God's word, and imposed their own inventions and traditions under the highest penalties
- Instead of touching the burdens with their little finger, by an effort to keep the law in its spirit, their whole object was to appear holy before men

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- Phylacteries, were the strips of parchment with passages of Scripture written upon them
- They were enclosed in small boxes and worn during prayer, some on the forehead, some on the left arm next the heart, Exodus 13:9,16; Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18
- They were intended to remind the wearer that it was his duty to fulfill the law with head and heart, and, at the same time, to serve the purpose of protecting him from the influence of evil spirits

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- The Pharisees seemed to wear broader than other men: so to seem more zealous for the law
- Fringes or tassels were to be worn on the four corners of the outer cloak (Num 15:37-39; Deut 22:12)
- They were to be worn to remind them of doing all the commandments
- To enlarge these would make them more noticeable and striking
- In obedience to the Law, Jesus wore the tassels on His outer garment (Mt 9:20; 14:36)

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- With religious pride and arrogance goes social vanity, love of the first place at feasts, and first seats in synagogues; an unquenchable hunger for prominence and status
- *The best seats in the synagogues*, These were at the upper end of the synagogue where was the ark, or chest that contained the Law
- These were given, either by common consent or by the elders of the synagogue, to those who were most noticeable for their devotion to the Law, and as such, were coveted as a mark of religious reputation

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- *greetings in the markets*, Being greeted by titles of honor in the public places
- *Rabbi*. A title like that of master or Doctor of Divinity now
- There were three degrees, Rab, Rabbi, and Rabboni
- The last is the greatest, and means, literally, My great teacher
- Judas gave it to our Savior, (Mt 26:49)
- The disciples of St. John the Baptist called him so, (Jn 3:26)
- Christ blames their pride, and vanity in affecting such titles, rather than the titles themselves

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- In verses 8-10 Jesus advised the people not to single out their religious leaders for excessive titles of honor and praise that would make them equal to God the Father and the Messiah
- He does not mean to literally call no one father or teacher
- Jesus referred to Abraham as "father Abraham" (Lk 16:24)
- But men who have those titles should not be held as equal in authority to God or the Messiah
- We are by the law of God to have a due respect both for our parents and spiritual fathers, (1 Cor 4:15)

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- Our Lord probably alludes to the father of the Sanhedrin, Matthew 20:21
- He wants His disciples to understand that He would have no second, after Himself, established in His Church, of which He alone was the head; and that perfect equality must exist among them
- It is a continuation of Jesus' teaching to His disciples on the practice of humility in serving God (Mt 18:1-5; 19:30; 20:16,25-28)
- Jesus is the sole teacher of righteousness
- The three titles which, in Matthew 23:7,10, our blessed Lord condemns; they were titles that the Jewish greatly affected

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- He who is really greatest will show his greatness, not in asserting it, but in a life of serving others
- The words may either imply
 - 1st, a promise that such should be accounted greatest, and stand highest in the favor of God, who should be most humble, submissive, and serviceable: or,
 - 2nd, a rule or a guide for the person who is advanced to any place of dignity, trust, or honor in the church, to consider himself a minister and not a lord, and to serve others in love

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- *Whosoever shall exalt himself, shall be humbled*, It is observable that no one sentence of our Lord's is so often repeated as this
- The echoes of it in James 4:10, 1 Peter 5:6, show that the impression had been made
- It was not a title, but the affectation of a title, which He blamed
- *Whosoever shall exalt himself*, A universal rule in the kingdom of God
- Humility is an essential element of progress in it

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- Eight woes are given
- They have been contrasted with the nine Beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-11
- *Woe unto you*, may not exclude entirely the element of sorrow, as well as righteous anger
- In this judgment Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees of hindering God's plan for humanity and shutting themselves and others out of heaven by rejecting Jesus' Gospel message of salvation
- *You shut the kingdom of heaven*, He calls himself the gate, (Jn 10:9)

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- *Devour widows' houses*, The word "houses" is used here to denote "property" or possessions of any kind
- The Pharisees, by every means in their power, endeavored to persuade the widows of the poor to make vows or offerings for the temple, by which they themselves became rich, and thus they *devoured the houses of widows*
- While by their "*long prayers*" they made them believe they were raised far above others
- So much "*the greater condemnation*" awaits them

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- In the first century AD many Pharisees conducted missionary efforts among the Gentiles
- The word *proselyte* is *proselytos* in Greek, which literally means "one who has come over;"
- *To make one proselyte*, Induce Gentiles to become circumcised and to keep the Jewish religion
- St. Chrysostom, "Because whilst a Gentile he sinned without a perfect knowledge of the evil, and was not then a two-fold child of hell; but after his conversion, seeing the vices of his masters, and perceiving that they acted in direct opposition to the doctrines they taught, he returns to the vomit, and renders himself a prevaricator, by adoring the idols he formerly left, and sells his soul doubly to the devil"

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- Our Lord condemns the subtle distinctions they made as to the holiness of oaths—distinctions invented only to promote their own greedy purposes
- They pretended to be "guides of the blind", Romans 2:19 but were themselves blind and so very unfit to be guides of others
- They were born ignorant of divine things, of God in Christ, of the true Messiah, of the true meaning of the Scriptures, of the spirituality of the law, of the Gospel of Christ; and the way of salvation by Him
- Their minds were blinded by the God of this world

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- *whosoever swears by the temple, it is nothing*; meaning either that it was no sin to use such an oath or it was not binding upon a man: he might choose whether he would abide by what he swore by the temple he would do; and thus they ignorantly, and wickedly encouraged vain swearing and perjury
- *But whosoever swears by the gold of the temple*, is bound to make good his oath and cannot be excused, but must be obliged to fulfill it
- If he does not, he is guilty of lying

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- This is to be understood not of the gold that covered any part of the temple; nor of the golden vessels in it; but of the gold, or money, or gifts which were offered for the service of the temple
- This showed the greedy character of these men, who made nothing of oaths that were sworn by the temple; but those that were made by the "Korban", or the gifts of it, were binding, because their interest was in it; it was for their gain
- In their foolish distinctions they regarded this as a binding oath
- If the gold had any holiness, it was because the temple, God's house, made it so

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- The altar of burnt-offerings was made of brass, about 20 feet in length and breadth, and 10 feet in height, 2 Chronicles 4:1
- On this altar were offered all the beasts and bloody oblations of the temple
- The gift upon this altar was always animals and birds
- It was usual with them to swear by the altar
- This was not considered a sin at all
- People may break such an oath

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- However, if one swears by the gift he is bound to perform it; whatever he swore should be a gift for the altar, he was fatefully obliged to bring it; for whatever he swore by "Korban", or the gift, could never be put to any other use
- In verse 19 our Lord repeats the unanswerable argument of verse 17
- The altar, dedicated to God, gave all the value or holiness to the offering, and must therefore be the greatest or of the most importance

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- If, therefore, either bound to the fulfillment of an oath, it must be the altar
- The gift, or offering, before it was devoted to sacred use, and brought, and laid upon the altar, was common and might be put to any use; but when it was brought, and laid upon the altar, it became holy; for, according to the law, whatever touched the altar, and indeed all, or any of the vessels of the sanctuary, was holy, Exodus 29:37
- Christ speaks the sense of the law, and their own traditions, and in their own language, and argues from the same

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- Now our Lord, though He did not allow of such swearing, yet justly argues, that he that swears by the temple, not only "swears by it", but he swear by the inhabitant of it, and by him that dwells in it; that is, God, for whom it was built, to whom it was dedicated; where He was worshipped, and who only could be the proper witness of the truth, or falsehood, of what was swore
- Therefore an oath, by the temple, ought to be looked upon as if made by God Himself, and so to be sacred and binding
- The essential thing in an oath is calling God to witness our sincerity
- If a real oath is taken, therefore, God is appealed to
- If not it is foolish and wicked to swear by anything else

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- The Pharisees are blamed by our Lord for their avarice, in scrupulously exacting tithes of the most trifling things, whilst they lived in a constant neglect of their duty, both to God and their neighbor, (St. Jerome)
- The Pharisee made a point of gathering the tenth sprig of every garden herb, and presenting it to the priest
- Our Lord does not blame it
- What He did criticize was the substitution of the lower for the higher
- With the three examples of the “infinitely little” He contrasts the three ethical obligations that were infinitely great, “judgment, mercy, and faith.”

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- It was the custom of the stricter Jews to strain their wine, vinegar, and other kind of drinks through linen or gauze, lest without realizing, they should drink down some little unclean insect therein and thus transgress
- A camel was an unclean animal (Lev 11:4; Deut 14:7) which the covenant people were forbidden to eat (Lev 11:8,46-47)
- Jesus is using exaggeration to make His point that the Pharisees and scribes, who claim to be the most religiously observant of the covenant people were failing in the adherence to the spirit of the Law

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- St. Luke represents our Savior as saying this to the Pharisees at dinner, (Lk: 11) so that Christ must either have repeated these things at different times; or, St. Matthew according to custom, must have added them to other words of our Savior, which, though spoken on another occasion, had some connection with the same subject
- Jesus condemns, in forcible language, these men as being more concerned with the appearance of religious purity than with interior holiness as prescribed by God in Leviticus 11:44; 19:2 and 20:7

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- The outside of the cup and dish is the external behavior and conduct of the Pharisee, the inside of the cup is his heart and real life
- Outward purity will not avail in the sight of God, where inward holiness is wanting
- “uncleanness” in its ethical sense was altogether distinct from the outward uncleanness with which the Pharisees identified

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- If the contents of the cup were pure in their source and in their use, they made the outside “clean,” regardless of any process of surface purification
- We have here a dreadful list of woes aimed against hypocrisy, greed, ambition, and all bitter zeal
- We should be careful not to suffer such rank weeds to grow up in our soil, to the ruin of all good

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- It was the custom for the Jews to whiten the tombs on the outside, in order to distinguish them lest they should be defiled and ritual impure with touching them (Num 5:2-3; 19:11-12)
- A whitewashed tomb may look "clean" on the outside, but inside the tomb there is corruption and death
- On the outside these men appear righteous, but their souls are corrupted by hypocrisy and sinful acts

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- But these men, says St. Gregory, can have no excuse before the severe judge at the last day; for, while they show to the view of mankind so beautiful an appearance of virtue, by their very hypocrisy they demonstrate that they are not ignorant how to live well
- “Tell me, you hypocrite, what pleasure there is in wickedness? why do you not wish to be what you wish to appear? What it is beautiful to appear, is beyond a doubt more beautiful to be. Be therefore what you appear, or appear what you really are”, (St. John Chrysostom)

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- By making broad their phylacteries, enlarging the borders of their garments, praying long prayers, traveling sea and land to make one proselyte, paying tithes of all manner of herbs, and cleansing the outside of the cup and dish, and doing all their works, prayers, fasting, and alms deeds, to be seen of men
- They looked like painted tombs, outwardly beautiful
- So, they appeared outwardly righteous, they looked like righteous persons, and were not

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- This is not blamed, as if it were in itself evil to build or adorn the monuments of the prophets; but the hypocrisy of the Pharisees is here accused; who, while they pretended to honor the memory of the prophets, were persecuting even unto death the Lord of the prophets
- Jesus actually challenges them to kill Him in verse 32
- They honored the prophets by building monuments to them, instead of following their teaching or imitating their lives
- This is the last time, in which these words are delivered in this exact form by our Lord, in this chapter and expresses the certainty, both of their sin and punishment

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- These words show the hypocrisy of these persons, and support the character given of them; as also give a sufficient reason why a woe is denounced upon them
- They probably publicly expressed their disapproval of the conduct of their fathers
- They imagined themselves much better than their ancestors; but our Lord, who knew what they would do, uncovers their hearts, and shows them that they are about to be more abundantly evil than all who had ever preceded them

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- They confessed that they were the children of those who murdered the prophets; and they are now going to murder Christ and His followers, to show that they have not gotten worse
- They were reproducing in their deeds the very feature of those fathers whom they condemned
- By killing Christ, they will fill up what is lacking of the iniquity of their fathers until the measure is full; until the national iniquity is complete; until as much has been committed as God can possibly bear, and then shall come upon them all this blood, and they shall be destroyed, Matthew 23:34-35

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- The measure - The full amount, so as to make it complete
- Jesus Christ predicts His own death, which they were about to carry out
- Their crime would greatly exceed that of their fathers: as He was the greatest, and even the Lord of all the other prophets, whom their fathers had put to death
- Both St. John the Baptist and Jesus have called these men a "brood of vipers," the wicked children of the big serpent, Satan (Mt 3:7; 12:34)

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- This name is given to them on account of their pretending to be religious, and very much devoted to God, but being secretly evil, at the heart, with all their deceit, they were filled with evil designs, as the serpent was, Genesis 3:1-5
- This refers, beyond all question, to future punishment
- So great was their wickedness and hypocrisy, that, if they persevered in this course, it was impossible to escape the condemnation that should come on the guilty

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- Jesus doubtless refers here to the disciples, apostles, and other teachers of the New Covenant faith
- Prophets, wise men, and scribes were the names by which the teachers of religion were known among the Jews, and He therefore used the same terms when speaking of the messengers which He would send. "*I send*" has the force of the future, I "will" send
- *and some of them you will kill*, as St. Stephen, the first "martyr", who was stoned to death by them; and St. James, the brother of John, whom Herod, to their good liking, killed with the sword; and the other James they threw headlong from off the pinnacle of the temple, and killed him

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- *And some of them you will scourge in your synagogues;* as Sts John, Peter, and Paul
- *and persecute them from city to city;* as they did Sts Paul and Barnabas, as the Acts of the Apostles testify
- The national punishment of all the innocent blood which had been shed in the land, shall speedily come upon them, from the blood of Abel the just, the first prophet and preacher of righteousness, Hebrews 11:4; 2 Peter 2:5, to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah
- As the Amorites were spared until their iniquity was full (Gen 15:16), so the iniquity of Israel was allowed to accumulate from age to age, till in that generation it came to the full, and the collected punishment of justice broke at once upon it

Woe to the Scribes and Pharisees (23:1-36)



- *Assuredly I say to you*, More severe punishments were inflicted on these Jews, on account of their more grievous and terrible transgressions; for nothing had been able to recall them from their wickedness
- They had the example of their ancestors before their eyes, continually irritating the wrath of God; yet all they had suffered for their crimes, could not motivate them to leave their sinful ways; but they proceeded further than their ancestors in sin and ought therefore to receive a more severe condemnation

Jesus Laments over Jerusalem (23:37-39)



- The image of a mother hen gathering her young under her wings brings to mind those passages that refer to God in Psalm 36:7; Deuteronomy 32:11; Ruth 2:12; Psalm 57:1; and Psalm 61:4
- *who kills*, The words are in the present tense, as embracing the past and the future
- *You were not willing*, No words could more emphatically state man's fatal gift of freedom, as shown in the power of his will to frustrate the love and pity, and therefore the will, even of the Almighty

Jesus Laments over Jerusalem (23:37-39)



- Three truths may be gathered from these words of our Savior
 1. They, who perish, perish by their own fault, because they refuse to listen to the voice of God calling them to salvation
 2. Man's will is free, and it is an error in man to lay all his wickedness to the charge of God
 3. How important it is for man to subject his will to that of the Almighty

Jesus Laments over Jerusalem (23:37-39)



- The words “*your house*” may refer either generally to the whole polity of Israel, or more specifically to the “house” in which they gloried, the Temple
- The Jerusalem Temple was destroyed in 70 AD and never rebuilt
- Jesus speaks of His "coming" to His people in verse 39
- It may also refer to that time, which occurred between the time of His speaking and His passion (St. John Chrysostom)
- This is in accordance with the history that after this time our Savior did not appear in the temple publicly any more
- It may also be understood of the Jews, who are to be converted to the faith of Jesus Christ towards the end of the world
- This is the second time Psalms 118:26 has been quoted in Matthew (Mt 21:9)



Conclusion

- Jesus upholds the authority of the people's religious leaders as the successors of Moses, but what warning does He give the people?
- What was the real problem of the Pharisees (v5) and what examples did Jesus give (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7)?
- What does Jesus mean when He tells His disciples and the crowds to “call no man your father on earth”? How does this passage compare with other New Testament passages where the title “father” is used of the apostles themselves?



Conclusion

- What three important things does Jesus list that the Pharisees have neglected in the spirit of the Law?
- What visual image does Jesus apply to His teaching on interior holiness compared to the lives of the Pharisees and scribes?
- How have these men come to bear witness against themselves that they will behave the same way as their ancestors?
- In verse 35 who are the prophets Jesus alludes to in this passage? How is Jesus comparing his fate to theirs?