

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE OUTLINES

SECTION 59

JESUS ATTACKS THE SIN OF THE "RIGHTEOUS" (23:1-39)

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SECTION 59

JESUS ATTACKS THE SIN OF THE "RIGHTEOUS"

(Parallels: Mark 12:38-40; Luke 20:45-47)

TEXT: 23:1-4

1 Then spake Jesus to the multitudes and to his disciples, 2 saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat: 3 all things therefore whatsoever they bid you, *these* do and observe: but do not ye after their works; for they say, and do not. 4 Yea, they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Although much of this sermon is directed to the "scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites," Matthew affirms that the message is initially spoken to "the multitudes and to His disciples." What do you think is Jesus' purpose for this kind of approach? Do you think that there were some scribes and Pharisees present among the crowds to hear Him say this? If His purpose is largely to criticize the scribes and Pharisees, why does Jesus bring the multitudes and His disciples into a question that directly involves others?
- b. What do you think is the crucial importance of mentioning Moses in this context?
- c. After all that Jesus has suffered at the hands of the scribes and Pharisees, and in view of how He condemns them, how can He possibly recommend that the nation do and observe all things that they bid? Is not this a self-contradiction? Do you think He approves the traditions of the elders as taught by these religious leaders?
- d. What arguments do you believe the religious leaders could have used to justify their creation of their "heavy burdens, grievous to

be born"? What do you think they were trying to accomplish this way?

- e. What arguments could these same religious leaders have offered for steadfast refusal to help people struggling under these religious burdens? In fact, how were they being perfectly consistent with their system by refusing to lighten these burdens?
- f. If the burdens placed upon people represented the conscientious thinking of the theologians, what motives should have convinced the latter that their own conscience had been wrongly educated or formed? Jesus thinks that they SHOULD have been ready to help people. What over-riding considerations could Jesus have cited to sustain this conclusion?
- g. What fundamental principle(s) are at the base of Jesus' argumentation in this section?
- h. When is it ever right to follow hypocrites? Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees "hypocrites," yet He pointed out one area in which it was absolutely obligatory service to God to follow their lead. What was this area? Do you agree with Jesus?

PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

In the hearing of all the people Jesus then addressed His disciples, "Beware of the theologians. They and the Pharisees represent the legitimate authority of Moses, sitting as teachers of his Law. So practice and observe what they tell you, but stop being guided by their lives. They do not practice what they preach. They enslave men's conscience with unbearable moral responsibilities. They themselves, however, make no exceptions for the hardship cases to which their casuistry leads.

SUMMARY

Whereinsofar the theologians speak God's Word, follow them. However, beware of the hypocritical example that betrays their inconsistency and unfaithfulness to His Word. They make God's Word harder to practice than God Himself made it! Yet they do not help people to keep it.

NOTES

I. CONTRAST BETWEEN SPIRITUAL LEADERS

Is Matthew Collecting Again, or Is This One Sermon?

23:1 **Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to his disciples.** Admittedly, Matthew definitely signals the beginning of a new discourse. However, these words do not necessarily disavow all connection with the controversies of the preceding chapter. They may simply suggest that Jesus' resounding victory over the enemies had prompted a murmur of enthusiastic approval that swept the gathered throng. Many listeners, loyal to popular leaders and parties, may have muttered tense disagreement. Others perhaps created an informal intermission by turning His answers over in their mind or by discussing them aloud with people nearby. Jesus, however, was not through with the Pharisean leadership of the nation. He must expose their hypocrisy and disabuse the public regarding its false heroes and effect their disaffection. So, He formally begins again to speak.

Some commentators confidently assert that Matthew has merely collected together here as one discourse some declarations Jesus made on various occasions. (Cf. Plummer, *Matthew*, 313.) Evidence offered for this conclusion involves the supposition that Matthew has done so elsewhere (i.e. chaps. 5-7, 10 and 13) and the fact that much of Matthew's material is also found in Luke 11:39-52; 13:34f.; 14:11; 18:14. Ironically, Plummer undermines his own theory by surmising (*ibid.*, 315), "It is not impossible that Christ may have made the charge on two separate occasions, and in both places the context is suitable," a true observation that may also be applied to the other supposed collections!

Further, the absence of any notice of change in the scene of Jesus' activities, beginning from the moment He entered the temple (21:23) until He left (24:1), argues that there is an uninterrupted connection between the wide-ranging debates with the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, chief priests and elders (Matt. 21, 22) and this divine counter-attack so very relevant and opportune under the circumstances. Additional corroboration comes from Mark (12:37f.) and Luke (20:45) who report the presence of a great, eager throng in whose presence Jesus spoke the words quoted by Matthew.

Another connection is the substance of Jesus' sermon put succinctly by Mark and Luke: "Beware of the scribes!" (Mark 12:38 = Luke 20:46). It was to the assembled crowds who had just witnessed the

scribes' inability to answer a plain question that they, of all people, *must* know (Mark 12:35), to whom Jesus directed this warning. The crowds had already begun to sense their leaders' theological incompetence. They must now also learn of their hypocrisy and wickedness, all of which had long been hidden under a veneer of pious respectability and idle, disputatious speculation that passed for serious reflection on God's Word. Matthew 23 is the sort of message to be expected in this context. Jesus' timely repetition of accusations here that He had made earlier (i.e. Luke 11:39-52; 13:34f.) should not surprise anyone, since the hypocrisy and presumption He targeted were widespread and needed repeated condemnation. The surprise, rather, is that Jesus should have repeated this discourse so seldom!

So, this verse is not merely literary device, but the necessary historical framework which introduces the sermon following. Those who doubt this must furnish valid textual or historical criteria for distinguishing what is here offered as the factual beginning of a single message, from any other objectively historical fact that Matthew records, like the resurrection.

Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to his disciples. Shocking, indeed, at first glance is the fact that our Lord should publicize the weaknesses of the religious leaders rather than discuss them with them privately (cf. 18:15). After all, what need did the multitudes and his disciples have, or what good could be served, that others' sins should be paraded this way and then criticized?

1. *The multitudes and his disciples*, most of whom were not from Jerusalem, but from Galilee and foreign countries, all too often followed these bigoted leaders, hence needed warning. His frank denunciations of the scribes aim at undermining the undeserved confidence that people placed in them. So long as others naively herded together behind "those saintly men," they would be torn between Jesus' revelations of truth and the slavery of conscience proclaimed by the Pharisees.
2. *The multitudes and his disciples* would be sorely tempted to imitate the human bibles their teachers so notoriously displayed. By setting His criticisms in a neutral setting, i.e. by condemning the scribes' conduct, Jesus did not attack the sins of His potentially savable audience directly. Rather, He objectified truth by applying it to others first, furnishing clear examples of what not to be or do. The prevalence of Judaizing tendencies in the early Church renders this major position statement imperative (Acts 15:5; Gal. 2:1-5).

3. The conscience of the nation was at stake. Must the Righteous One be silent while "the wicked freely strut about" and "when what is vile is honored among men" (Ps. 12:8)? The moral order is turned upside down, when men call evil Pharisees "good," but call humble, repentant publicans and harlots "bad"! Should not God's Prophet cry out against it?!
4. Just as the world needed to hear the Sermon on the Mount describe the ideal citizen of God's Kingdom, so it must now face the Christian's perfect opposite, the hypocrite. Jesus must decisively pronounce sentence upon the deadliest type of wickedness any age can produce: religious pretense. Disciples must learn not to confuse for Christianity a merely up-to-date copy of the same theological system or mentality that Jesus Himself unsparingly refused to tolerate. The inability of the modern Christian unflinchingly to identify with Jesus' anti-Pharisaic polemic gauges his own degree of sympathy more with those who murdered Him, than with Christ Himself. (Cf. Bruce's eloquent defense of this discourse against those who criticize Jesus. *Training*, 318ff.)
5. This sermon is no mere exposé of uniquely Pharisean sins. Jesus is hammering at real, universally human problems produced by self-righteousness, sectarianism, evasion of responsibility, indifference to social justice, exaggerated emphasis on religious trivia, self-glorification, etc. in short, by selfishness and sin in any age. To conceive of Matthew's major concern behind his inclusion of this major anti-Pharisaic polemic in his gospel as mainly to meet the danger of the Pharisean sect's influence in his local area or congregation(s), is to miss the far broader human temptation Pharisaism represents for every century and culture. Although the SECT of Pharisees has no appreciable influence on the Church of Jesus Christ today, the SPIRIT behind Pharisaism, its attitudes and poisonous fruits are anything but dead and gone!
6. Because this was to be Jesus' last public address, it was His final opportunity to admonish the Jewish leadership personally. They had just demonstrated themselves incorrigibly closed to His truth (chap. 22). There was no winning them right now. So, as a class, their leadership is in question and on trial. Should not the Judge of all earth do right?! Jesus is JUDGE (John 5:22, 27, 30; I Cor. 4:3ff.; II Cor. 5:10). Not only can He infallibly expose the thoughts of men's hearts (John 2:25; Rev. 2:18, 23), but also His sense of right timing for exposing hypocrites to others' gaze is unquestionable.

7. Those who allege that Jesus failed to be true to His own ethic by failing to love His enemies and by exposing the Pharisees and scribes to this scathing denunciation, forget that this exposure of hypocrisy and adulteration of godliness is no evidence of *personal*; enmity or *personal* bitterness. Rather, what stirred Jesus' righteous indignation was the monstrous debasement of true religion and the gross misrepresentation of His Father's Word. His wrath is not motivated by personal bitterness gone amok. This is godly anger against evil. Had our Lord NOT been deeply stirred by the evils He uncovered here, or had He toned down their seriousness, His would have been a faithless, courageless betrayal of God's truth! Because Christians too are sometimes called to this painful task (cf. Acts 20:29; II Cor. 11:13; Gal. 2:14; Phil. 3:2; I Tim. 5:20), we would do well to study His motives and His methods.

The multitudes, by contrast, who had already gravitated to Jesus' side and eagerly drank in His message (Mark 12:37), unlike His critics, had heard His commendation of the wise Pharisee (Mark 12:34) and they would hear His sad lament over Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37ff.), and so were in a better position to sense that He loved people as dearly as He loved truth and hated iniquity and what it did to both. There is no evidence that these multitudes were disappointed by Jesus' attitude, no suspicion that He withheld love from the Pharisees or were treating them with inhumanity.

For months Jesus' enemies had attempted without success to expose Him as unfit to lead the nation. Now, with a few swift strokes that sketch typical Jewish scholarship at its best as hypocritical, Jesus masterfully unseated His opposition. Mingled with indignation and heartbreak, His charges warned Israel that its apparently most pious men were fakes, and that truth and godliness must be found elsewhere—in Himself alone.

Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to his disciples. Luke has: "in the hearing of all the people, He said to His disciples. . . ." All heard, but His specific objective was to instruct His own followers. Were the scribes present to hear Jesus' introduction?

1. How could they escape and return for the second part (cf. 23:13ff.).
2. Jesus' addressing the disciples and crowds does not exclude the scribes' being present to face Jesus' disapprobation implied in the first part (23:1-12). Just because He did not address them directly does not prove they were not there.

3. By addressing the crowds, rather than the scribes first, Jesus achieved a precious, psychological advantage. The crowds would press in to hear teaching addressed specifically to them, and, by their massive interest in what He had to say, would stymie any counterplanning the muttering scribes still present might attempt.

23:2 The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat. *Moses' seat* is his cathedra, his "Bible Chair" from which his doctrine is read and expounded. In Malachi's day it was the priests who had the magisterial responsibility (Mal. 2:7ff.), a duty as old as the priesthood itself (Lev. 10:17; Deut. 17:9-13). But with "Ezra the priest and scribe" (Neh. 12:26) the function began shifting onto professional *scribes* (Neh. 8:4, 7-9, 13, 18; cf. Ezra 7:1-6, 10). Many such scribes were still within the priesthood, a phenomenon still reflected in the New Testament where "scribes of the Pharisees" are mentioned (Mark 2:16; Luke 5:30; Acts 23:9), a fact that implies there were also "scribes of the Sadducees," the priestly party. The scribes, because of their familiarity with Moses' Law, were recognized as the authorized theologians and seminary professors in Israel. *Moses' seat*, in Jesus' day, could be found throughout Israel, wherever "from early generations Moses has in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues" (Acts 15:21). *The Pharisees* come under Jesus' fire, because their party zeal strenuously applied the theologians' legalistic conclusions to everyday life with a rigor that required everyone to fall in lock-step behind them. In this sense, the Pharisees, too, were Israel's teachers, even if unofficially. As a reform movement in Judaism, they aimed to keep the nation pure, truly a people of God, obedient to the Law, living out its requirements in everyday life. Personally determined to root out laxness and restore God's Word, Pharisees won Israel's praise and respect for their diligence and conscientiousness. Where they went wrong Jesus will point out. But here He must mention them, because, despite their faults, they uphold Moses, as opposed to the paganizing leadership of the Sadducean priesthood. So, although the *scribes* were really the official teachers, the addition of *Pharisees* here is not a mistaken embellishment by Matthew.

Moses' Law was yet in force, therefore to be obeyed by those subject to it. At Christ's death, the Mosaic dispensation officially expired. But until it did, that Law was God's Word to Israel, and, for most people in Israel, the scribes remained the chief, if not the only, accessible source of information regarding the Law. His implication

is clear: whatever comes from Moses is from God and to be received with full confidence and submission. Merely because Jesus must undercut the unjustified pretensions of the Jewish magisterium does not mean that Moses must go too. So, before beginning His condemnation of the unfaithfulness and sinful conduct of the religious leaders, He calls for sincere reverence for God's Law.

So, by saying, *the scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat*, Jesus merely states the fact, without necessarily praising or blaming them. The question now, however, is where do we go from here? This He answers next.

Lack of Sincere Earnestness and Personal Consistency

23:3 **All things therefore whatsoever they bid you, these do and observe.** Therefore (*oûn*) introduces, not a justification of Pharisean occupation of the teaching chair, but information: "Given the present situation, you should act as follows." And yet, when this apparently unqualified statement is weighed in the light of the general New Testament picture of these scholars' unrelenting opposition to Jesus, His words are shocking and appear quite mistaken. How could He justify this encouragement to follow those whom He must characterize elsewhere as "thieves and robbers" and against whose deadly, insidious influence He had warned His followers (John 10:1; Matt. 16:12)? Several reasons for this admonition might be:

1. He does not intend their human traditions. Because Jesus publicly and resolutely repudiated all that is inconsistent with God's Law (Matt. 15:1-20), it is clear that He means *all that they bid you* that is in strict harmony with Moses' Law, not their multitudinous technicalities, frivolous traditions and other rules that are contrary both to its letter and its spirit. It is rather when *they sit on Moses' seat* that they are to be heard, i.e. when they teach the Law itself. His criticism is that *they say* (what is recognized as divine truth) *and do not*. Jesus' present accusation is not that they do not preach Moses at all, but that they do not practice what Moses demands. So, He draws a sharp distinction between the office and the men who hold it. The office is to be respected for its lawful teaching and exposition of the Law, because it carries out Moses' function in Israel, i.e. that of teacher of God's will.

We must not abolish authority structures in the Church merely because some office holders abuse their powers. Rather, we must raise up better men who will do honor to their position and thereby honor God, not self. Jesus did not eliminate *Moses' seat* merely because it was temporarily occupied by hypocrites. Rather, He sent Israel some NEW "prophets, wisemen and scribes" filled with God's spirit and message (23:34).

What a time for Jesus to express Himself like this! On the very day when these hard-nosed legalists and scholars had shown no reluctance to question His authority, our Lord shows no reluctance to uphold what is legitimate in theirs! No sooner had they most severely brought their high position into disrepute by attacking Him, than He holds their position in highest repute! When they were cocksure, He defeated them. Now that they have crumbled, He sustains their right to teach!

2. This order to listen to the scholars as they taught Moses' Law is absolutely essential in Jesus' thought, because Moses' teaching was intended to prepare men for Christ (Gal. 3:24; John 5:45ff.). Jesus could not undermine the authority of Moses without destroying the basis upon which He intended to establish His own. (See notes on 5:17.)
3. Further, He refused to throw out the precious with the worthless, the Old Testament along with the traditions. With even-handed moderation He could distinguish between the true message of the Old Testament and the corrupt and corrupting interpretations and practice by these scholars. Unfortunately, those who admire Jesus have not always followed His lead. They reject not only a corrupt Church but also the Church's Bible which could yet lead them back to truth.
4. Nor would Jesus have these Hebrews reject conscience. Since early childhood they had been led to believe that their leaders' traditional interpretations and public practice were as much a part of the truth of God as His very revelations. Until the majority of Jesus' followers grew into greater maturity through an increased knowledge of God's new revelation, they would not be in an adequate position to distinguish the true gold of the Old Testament from the "fool's gold" of human tradition. (Consider Acts 11:1-3 as illustrating how slowly traditions were overcome.) However wrong their present habits might have been in the light of the Old Testament, these convictions had been arrived at more or less conscientiously.

Jesus would re-educate their conscience through the Gospel, but until then, He would not for an instant encourage unconscientiousness, even though this behavior represented enthusiasm for His movement. (Cf. Rom. 14:14, 23; I Cor. 8:7.)

These do and observe (polésate kai terête). If Jesus intends to distinguish doing and observing, perhaps the tenses (aorist and present imperative, respectively) indicate the difference:

1. *Do*: "perform each duty as the opportunity presents itself."
2. *Observe*: "Make habitual observance your regular manner of life and practice."

For the Hebrews before the cross, to obey the scribes is to obey Moses, and to submit to Moses is to please Jesus. Jesus could have agreed with much of the Pharisean exposition of Moses' Law. In fact, in general, many of His own views were mirrored in Pharisean tenets (cf. Acts 23:6, 8). He only opposed what in their system contradicted God's intentions in the Old Testament. But, in the main, Pharisees were extremely conservative. So, when they preached what Moses said and meant, Israel was to pay attention.

But do not ye after their works. The rest of this chapter will amply illustrate which Pharisean works Jesus rejects and are not to be considered normative for God's people. *Their works* are the natural outgrowth of a broad, fundamental failure:

1. *They say and do not*: i.e. lack of personal consistency. Although they preach Moses' truth, they vitiate it by their habit of not obeying its plain import themselves. They either flagrantly violated what he taught or by their twisted interpretations that broke the force of God's commands, they excused their not doing what was required by the plain force of Moses' precepts.

The painful truth is that not even the practice of the most orthodox and conscientious of preachers today is absolutely consistent with all the truth they know and believe. Therefore, Jesus warns, the revealed will of God remains the standard under whose judgment everyone stands—teachers and taught alike. None can excuse himself for failure to practice what he knows of God's will, merely because he never saw anyone doing it. Each is to be judged on his own grasp of the Word, not on the malpractice of others, be they leaders or not. This makes everyone responsible, not for his teachers' practice, but for his own and for whether or not it mirrors

God's will correctly stated by even the worst of preachers. We must not misjudge or fail to receive and practice God's truth, merely because it is preached by bad men!

2. *They say and do not.* Although the Pharisees actually observed hundreds of things commanded by Moses, they did not do them with the motives, in the spirit and for the purpose God intended. Rather, they acted for human applause and to put God in debt to them. Again, they scrupulously followed the external regulations rather than develop the inward character that would fulfill their moral duty to be just, merciful and trustworthy. So, regardless of how many works they did, their motives kept erasing them from God's record. So, God counted none of their works as ever having been done.
3. *They say and do not.* Though they are most demanding that others bend their will to obey God, they reserve to themselves a freedom to disobey which they deny to others. The fact that *they say* proves that they do know. Otherwise, how could they repeat God's will for others? *They do not*, then, means that they are substituting knowledge for practice. Often this overemphasis on the intellectual part of Christian knowledge is paired with a corresponding deficiency in morally lax conduct. (Study I Cor. 8.) This kind of hypocrisy tempts believers in any age, because God's will is easier to talk about than to do.
4. *They say and do not.* Lenski (*Matthew*, 895) is right to remind us of the broad, fundamental principles of Old Testament religion that Pharisaism generally garbed in their transmitting it and bungled in their practice. God's plan of salvation has always been the same: consciousness of sin, repentance, faith in His grace and obedience to whatever He commands, all out of love and gratitude toward God. (See notes on 7:21-23; 21:30; 23:23.) Unquestionably, Pharisean doctors read and commented upon the Old Testament texts that uplift these grand concepts, but, by a slavish system of self-justification, they muddled and consequently did not practice what God intended to save them. Remember Paul's commentary in Romans 2! (Cf. Rom. 9:30—10:3; 11:6f.)

But who is Jesus to pass sentence on Israel's leaders' failure to measure up, unless He too says and does God's will perfectly (John 5:19-47; 6:45-51, 68f.; 7:16-18; 8:26, 29, 46f.; 10:25, 37f.; 12:44-50; 14:6). Is this censure merely another manifestation of superficial holiness and greater pride, or, rather, an expression of His true

moral perfection that is the highest imaginable qualification for judging? (Study Luke's sentence: "Jesus began (1) to do and (2) teach," Acts 1:1.)

Harshness and Lack of Human Sympathy

23:4 **Yea, they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger.** Freely reworked by Jesus, this rabbinic allusion to the binding of doctrines on people's conscience (see notes on 16:19, "binding and loosing") pictures someone tying loads to be carried by a bearer. Although he makes them too heavy for the man to carry, the indifferent leader offers no assistance, but stolidly continues to insist that the load be borne as is. But what are the *heavy burdens*?

1. The Law merely? Because the Jewish scholars are scored for saying but not doing (v. 3), Alford (226) and Plummer (*Luke*, 312) argue that the *heavy burdens* cannot be human rules, but the rigorousness of Moses' Law, because they would not neglect their own traditions. Lenski (*Luke*, 664) adds that these lawyers force others to carry the Old Testament requirements but would not themselves even pretend to observe them. These views, however, fail to grasp the spirit of Pharisaism that could cheat both on the rabbinical traditions and on Mosaic legislation whenever convenient or supposedly "necessary."
2. The Law and its interpretations? Although Jesus says, *they bind*, he does not necessarily limit the *heavy burdens* to traditions in antithesis to the Law, because Pharisees considered both as binding. In fact, to the Pharisean mind, the Law and its traditional interpretations, taken together, became one divine entity, one divine Law, from which nothing could be omitted.
 - a. *Heavy burdens* is decidedly the right word! Their earnest legalism produced one dismal result: they turned the piety expressed in the Mosaic ordinances into the observance of a myriad of minute traditions and rabbinical decisions that touch all of life. So doing, they turned what was intended to be a joyous help to bring man to God, into an unbearable, depressing deadweight that must be borne without any hope of succeeding perfectly.
 - b. The Law itself was heavy enough (Acts 15:10), without innumerable additions besides, not to mention those subterfuges whereby a Pharisee could excuse himself for any lack of strictness in keeping what he did not want to. (Cf. the "Corban"

rule, 15:4-6 = Mark 7:9-13; special ways of hand-washing, Mark 7:3; and oath formulas, Matt. 23:16ff.)

How, then, did their system lead to the evil results Jesus denounces? Beginning from Moses' Law, the scholastics in Judaism had created a total legal system that closed up all the loopholes God intentionally left open in His system. By creating laws where God made none, they took away human freedom to think responsibly and to make free decisions where God intended to develop this very maturity. (See "How to Avoid Becoming a Pharisee" in my Vol. III, 375ff. where this problem is discussed at length.) Generally interpreting the unclear issues on the side of greater rigor, they tended to make the Law severer than originally intended by God. They only succeeded in producing a sterner, more impossible law that must necessarily condemn all those who lived under it, but could not observe it perfectly. They had never learned "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." (See on 9:13; 12:7.) Not understanding grace, they turned everything else into more LAW. How closely do modern legalists follow this pattern?

But they themselves will not move them with their finger. It misunderstands the main thrust of legalism to suppose that Pharisees could have seen the need to get these exasperating restrictions abolished. For the legalistic mentality can have no such intention, because it aims at inventing even more rules to cover every imaginable exigency. So, naturally, they could never think of removing them! Their sin lies elsewhere, but how did Jesus intend His criticism? Does He mean (1) *move them* (the burdensome laws) by obeying them personally, or (2) *move them* by assisting the burdened people to bear them by taking their life situation into account or by mercifully coming to the aid of unprosperous, adversely affected people?

1. Is it that they are severe with others, but indulgent toward themselves? If so, they do not even try to observe the very rules they themselves make, while justifying their own real evasions of duty. If so, then Jesus means they must be consistent with their teaching. The fact that "they say but do not do" (v. 3) seems to support this conclusion. However, by supposing that Jesus meant they never kept their own rules, Bruce (*Expositor's Greek Testament*, 279) must take this verse with reservations, since "teachers who absolutely disregarded their own laws would soon forfeit all respect."
2. The leaders callously offered no help to the burdened people of God, mercilessly demanding that each bear his own load without

any help from them. Edersheim (*Life*, I,101) taught that "these burdens could be laid on, or moved away, according to the varying judgment or severity of a Rabbinic College," decided by whether or not a "majority of the congregation is able to bear it." So, the precedent had already been established for deciding issues in line with humane considerations, but Pharisees tended to make the requirements as rigorous as possible! Their interpretations led to impossible legal demands so time-consuming that only people of means and free time really hope to observe them all. The net result of this policy was to produce a proud elite, capable of doing these exceptional, difficult rules, an exclusive group of insiders who alone were "the pure and holy."

Contrast their attitude with the yoke and burden of Jesus (11:28-30), or with the attitude of the early Christians (Acts 15:28; I Cor. 7:28; 9:12) and the burdens laid upon believers by their leaders! Here, then, is one striking difference between Jesus and legalists and between their respective approaches to human problems. Pharisees care more about their rules than they do about people, but Jesus keeps God and people at the center of His concern. Programs and procedures, laws and institutions are made to help people obey God. But when they become more important than people, or when they damage or harrass them, then they have become an obstacle to God and people. According to Jesus, then, men may and must remove these burdensome accretions to God's Word, lightening the load on people's conscience and restoring their moral energy to do the things that bless.

Criterion of False Religion

When irrational, inhumane demands that God did not make are multiplied supposedly to render possible total legalistic obedience to God, this is not the Christianity Jesus has in mind. When people submit to authority God did not authorize and obey anything else in addition to His Word, this is not true religion, but an indiscriminating slavery to human opinions. Mere proclamation of God's truth, unaccompanied by practical submission to its ethical demands, is also false religion.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. To whom is the message of this chapter addressed, according to Matthew?

2. What is "Moses' seat"? Where was this "seat" located? How could so many people sit on it?
3. What unusual order did Jesus give His disciples with reference to the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees? Why did He require this?
4. What is meant by the expression, "whatever they tell you": the law of God? the traditions of the scribes and Pharisees? or both?
5. What, according to Jesus, is the reason for not learning proper conduct from the religious leaders' example?
6. What are the "heavy burdens, grievous to be borne" laid upon men's shoulders?
7. In what way are the religious leaders particularly guilty for "not moving them with their finger"? That is, how SHOULD these leaders "move (the burdens) with their finger"?
8. In what way does Jesus defend the high importance of the Old Testament in this section?
9. In what way does the teaching of this section compare with the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount?

TEXT: 23:5-12

5 But all their works they do to be seen of men: for they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of *their garments*, 6 and love the chief place at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 and the salutations in the marketplaces, and to be called of men, Rabbi. 8 But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your teacher, and all ye are brethren. 9 And call no man your father on the earth: for one is your Father, *even* he who is in heaven. 10 Neither be ye called masters: for one is your master, *even* the Christ. 11 But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant: 12 And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be humbled; and whosoever shall humble himself shall be exalted.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. What is the difference between the Pharisees' sin of doing "all their works to be seen of men" and Jesus' exhortation to Christians to be "the light of the world . . . the salt of the earth . . . a city set on a hill" with the objective of "letting your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works"? How can Jesus promote the one and condemn the other?

- b. On the basis of Jesus' warnings here, do you think it is wrong
 - (1) for people to be specially noticed by the type of "religious clothes" they wear? How do you feel about robes and stoles for preachers or choir members who represent God in sermon and song?
 - (2) for certain men to be referred to as "Doctor Jones," "Brother Jones" or by some other distinguishing title given them because of their religious or scholarly distinctions above their brethren?
 - (3) for anyone to be honored by special notice, special placement or seating or special greetings?
- c. By what right does Jesus in the same context associate Christ, as the one master of all, with "your Father" as their only true Father? Is this not implying something about the identity and position of the Christ?
- d. How did Jesus prove Himself worthy of our highest praise as the greatest of all?
- e. How did this section show that the Pharisees transgressed the first commandment to love God and the second commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself?

PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

"Everything they do is calculated to attract the attention and approval of others. In fact, they enlarge the Scripture-text boxes they wear on their foreheads and arms, and on their robes they lengthen the tassels that remind them of the Law. They enjoy walking around in their long robes, symbols of their scholarly rank. They love to be greeted respectfully in public places, to sit in the most important seats in the synagogues, the places of honor at banquets, and to be addressed as 'doctor.' They grow fat on widows' houses and, to hide the true state of things, pray long prayers. They will receive the more severe punishment!

"But you must not allow yourselves to be called 'doctor,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers in relation to each other. Address no man on earth as your 'spiritual father,' for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Further, you must not allow yourselves to be considered 'leader,' since you have one Leader, the Messiah. The true 'superior' among you is the one who serves others best. The person who proudly promotes his own interests shall be humiliated,

but the one who humbly puts himself at the service of others shall be honored.”

SUMMARY

All ambition for distinction above other common disciples of Jesus is condemned, whether this expresses itself by ostentation in dress, by prestigious titles or by positions of public honor. Such ambition despises the common brotherhood of all believers, ignores Him who is truly Father, and abases the Christ as unique leader. True superiority in God's Kingdom is decided on the superiority of one's humble service. Humiliation and punishment await those who crush others to promote their own interests.

NOTES

The Exhibitionism of Arrogant Pretenders

23:5 But all their works they do to be seen of men. While the Pharisees may have often violated their understanding of the Torah and its interpretations privately, that they NEVER kept them is proven untrue by this verse. Jesus affirms that they showed their great earnestness by keeping them publicly. So, He censures their base motive: they advertize their piety! He is not criticizing mere public notice, as if all kind helpfulness and generosity must be done in absolute secrecy. (See notes on 6:3, 4.) The Lord had already urged His followers to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the city set on a hill, “so that men may see your good works and glorify your Father” (5:13ff.). But this laudable goal for doing good in public did not satisfy the hypocrites' ambition, since their aim is to divert glory from God to themselves. (See notes on 6:1, 2, 5, 16.)

To long to be more really righteous than others is an appropriate aspiration. However, to long for the reputation and praise for it is evidence of an ambitious pride. Exceeding others in genuine goodness is Christian (Rom. 12:10), but this cannot be gained by a self-advertising ostentation. Jesus' disciples are not to be dazzled by the pious pomp others paraded in awesome ceremony. And there before Jesus in the audience sat living object lessons, Pharisees with their enlarged fringes dangling and their conspicuous phylacteries on their foreheads like a spot of leprosy. Others may have been intimidated by such display. Jesus sees right through it.

They make broad their phylacteries. Taking passages like Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18; cf. Exodus 13:9, 16, literally, the stricter Hebrews created a small leather box to be strapped (hence called *tephillin* "straps" in Hebrew) either on the left arm or on the forehead between the eyes or both, naturally with the proper prescription for tying it on "correctly." (See *I.S.B.E.*, 2393.) In exactly four compartments (no more nor less!) the box contained scraps of Scripture such as Exodus 13:3-21; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21. God had not intended such gross literalism. That He spoke figuratively is evident from other figurative expressions in these texts that are not taken literally by those formalists. He meant, rather, "Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds, making them the object of your meditation (bind them on your forehead), make them the motive of your daily actions (tie them on your hands)."

Beyond the unthinking literalism involved in wearing the phylacteries, their Greek name comes from *phylàssō* which means "to guard or protect" and refers to something that preserves or defends, hence a "fort or military station; preservative or defense; amulet or talisman" (Rocci, cf. Arndt-Gingrich, 876). This latter definition points to a superstitious use of these boxes as protection against harm or demons, an evidence of less than total trust in a living God.

They enlarge the borders of their garments. These *borders* are the tassels with the blue cord to remind the wearer to remember the Lord's ownership and obey all His commands (Num. 15:37-41; Deut. 22:12). However, the Law had not prescribed the length. So, to make them exceptionally long was popularly thought to distinguish the wearer as specially pious.

Note that Jesus does not condemn the wearing of phylacteries per se nor does He forbid the fringes. In fact, even He wore these tassels (Matt. 9:21f.; 14:36). Rather, He denounces the wearing of king-sized phylacteries and extra-long tassels that aimed at rendering the wearer more conspicuous to others as more conscientious and holy. But the scribes' public strolling in long, flowing robes (*stolé*: Mark 12:38 = Luke 20:46) intentionally sets them apart as persons of distinction. Broad fringes on their flowing robes combined to make their elegance also holy! Even if phylacteries were only worn during prayer, Pharisees loved to pray publicly! (Cf. 6:5; Edersheim, *Life*, I, 624f., esp. note 1, p. 625.)

Does this criticism of Pharisees' distinctive dress bear on our approach to clothing? Jesus rejects external signs flashing the wearer's

piety. What of modern Christians who wear gaudy crosses “for a Christian testimony”? Contrast the unexceptional simplicity with which Jesus garbed Himself. How strikingly unlike the grand garments worn by the Pope and his imitators and colleagues!

Love of Power

23:6 They love the chief place at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues. (Cf. Luke 11:43; contrast John 13:4f, 12-17.) The *chief place* signified prominence at those meals where guests would be invited. So, to be ushered to the best place meant recognition as someone of importance. (Cf. Josephus, *Ant.*, XV,2,4; XX,3,2.) The custom of reclining on the left elbow on couches organized fan-like around three sides of a table, led people to consider the place farthest to the left as the most desirable. This position permitted the one reclining there to view the whole banquet table without having to lean back or turn his head. (Cf. John 13:25; see *I.S.B.E.*, 2015.)

The chief seats in the synagogues were located near the end of the building where the scrolls of the Law were kept in a chest called the holy ark. These seats faced the congregation and were occupied by its leadership. These places of honor represented power in the congregation, the equivalent of being ushered to a place on the speaker’s platform front and center in today’s churches. There none could miss their sanctimonious pose. But they did not love such prominence merely for the psychological satisfaction of sitting “up front.” It was rather for the POWER that their ambition demanded to wield. Thus, their seeking precedence and prominence was all calculated to promote their own self-advancement. Such vain persons could have retorted, “Well, SOMEONE has to sit in the chief seats! This honor is rightly mine: I earned it and I shall enjoy it!”

According to Jesus, their mistake lies not in claiming what is their rightful privilege, but in their taking puerile delight in it, loving it, expecting it. Their resentment, when others were honored above them, accurately gauged how real and deep this self-worship was. This is no harmless pastime, because Jesus must expose this love of eminence and foolish pride of those whose ego-feeding depended on it (Luke 14:7-11). Note even James and John were immune to this ambition (20:20-28). This kind of self-love is an effective barrier to faith (John 5:44)! John attacked this sin, naming the offender: “Diotrephes, who loves to be first” (III John 9f.). Sadly, the very disciples themselves

who heard this warning, forgot it and squabbled over the best seats at the Last Supper (Luke 22:24 as background for John 13:2-17)!

Drive for Recognition

23:7 (They love) the salutations in the marketplace, and to be called of men, Rabbi. The *marketplace* (= *agorà* is Greek for the Latin *forum*) is not only the place where commerce was carried on, but was also a place of public concourse where public meetings assembled. Hence, to receive these ceremonious *salutations in the marketplaces* meant to be recognized as somebody important. *To be called of men, Rabbi*, meant a recognition of one's superior culture and grasp of the Law. This sin lies in loving these pompous titles and obsequious greetings and basking in the blighted glory of human praise. (John 5:44; 12:43; Rom. 2:29; contrast I Cor. 4:1-5; I Thess. 2:6.) To seek to be called *Rabbi* is to pretend higher respect than that granted to one's earthly parents, because these only communicated ordinary physical life to the child, but the rabbi confers on him spiritual life. *Rabbi* is Hebrew: "my Great One," but with the coloring of "Master" (*kùrios*) and not merely "teacher" (*didaskalos*). (Kittel, T.W.N.T., VI, 962). From this point of view, the rabbi is higher than king, because, theoretically, he teaches the counsel and sound judgment, the understanding and moral strength by which kings reign and judges make laws. No wonder status-seekers in a religious state would seek to be publicly honored by this title! Nevertheless, Matthew Henry (V,331) exposed the disqualification involved in turning into religious self-admiration what should have never been more than an example of good manners.

For him that is taught in the word to give respect to him that teaches is commendable enough in him that gives it; but for him that teaches to love it, and demand it, and affect it, to be puffed up with it and to be displeased if it be omitted, is sinful and abominable; and, instead of teaching, he has need to learn the first lesson in the school of Christ, which is humility.

The Essence of True Religion and the Character of Its Teachers

23:8 **But be not ye called Rabbi.** This section (vv. 8-12) is particularly addressed to His disciples. Note the emphatic pronoun, *YOU, however (humèis dè)*, as opposed to the scribes. Those destined to become

His official spokesmen would certainly feel the allure of this temptation, and even His followers with less spectacular gifts would be just as drawn to seek those gifts that led to the titles and honors too (I Cor. 12-14). This enticement would have been keenly felt by Jewish elders or those few doctors of the Law who became Christians, as they might not wish to discard the titles and the authority they previously knew. (Contrast Phil. 3:4-11.) Nevertheless, most disciples feel tempted to confer such honors and titles on others, particularly their own deeply respected teachers (cf. 23:9f.). This looks to the time when Jesus would be gone, as it would have been less likely for the disciples to call themselves "Rabbi" while the Master Himself was yet on earth with them.

But how could the disciples stop others from calling him *Rabbi*? The point is more probably the condemnation of expecting deference or demanding to be addressed this way.

Jesus gives two reasons for this injunction:

1. *One is your teacher.*

- a. Anyone who has sensed the high holiness and divine origin of Jesus Christ cannot help but sense the chasmic distance that separates Him from every other human teacher, however holy or wise they may be. He is the final Word of God; they are but men "to whom the word of God came," not its originators. (Cf. John 10:35f.) He is the absolutely perfect Revealer; they are but relatively imperfect expounders. His Word is God's—infalible, authoritative, unmediated; theirs is a human interpretation, more or less correct, but possessing no more authority than the persuasion it carries in the mind of others as approximating the true sense of His word. Feel the majesty of Jesus' deity as He widens the distance between Himself and every other human teacher, by claiming to be our only teacher, without the slightest embarrassment or apology (23:10; John 13:13).
- b. Avant-garde theologians and proud scholars must submit to this dictum as surely and as humbly as their less erudite brethren. In the absolute sense we must have only ONE THEOLOGIAN, Jesus Christ! In the academic world of Biblical and theological studies there will always be Christians with an intellectual grasp of the overall plan of God, broader than that of their brethren, or with specialized information in certain spheres of Christian knowledge of which others are uninformed. Scholarship per se is not in question here. Otherwise, there could be no distinctly

Christian scribes (13:52; 23:34) who love God with all their mind (22:37) and no Christian teachers (28:19; Eph. 4:11; I Cor. 12:29; II Tim. 1:11; 2:2; Acts 13:1). But these latter must be people who never cease to be DISCIPLES of Jesus who aim to clarify and correctly apply the message of our *one teacher*.

- c. Where, then, does the Apostolic ministry enter in? Are these not our official teachers to reveal the mind of Christ (I Cor. 2:6-16)? Indeed, there is no discipleship, not faithfulness to Jesus, that does not humbly submit to and faithfully continue in the Apostles' doctrine (Acts 2:42; Gal. 4:14; I Thess. 2:13). To receive Jesus' authorized messengers is to receive the Lord Himself (Matt. 10:40; John 13:20; Luke 10:16). However, to welcome the Apostles is only possible by believing and responding positively to their Spirit-given message; to do otherwise is to reject them, and, consequently, Jesus who sent them. This explains why "the apostles' doctrine" is not really or merely theirs, but is "the gospel of Christ, the doctrine of Christ" (Gal. 1:6-11; II Cor. 4:5-7).
 - d. How well Matthew himself learned this lesson of Jesus' unique lordship! Although other Evangelists correctly refer to Jesus as *rabbi* (cf. Mark 9:5; 10:51; 11:21; John 1:38, 49; 3:2; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8; 20:16), Matthew uses *kùrie*, "Lord" (Matt. 17:4 where Luke uses *epistàta*, "Master, Teacher, Doctor," Luke 9:33; cf. Matt. 20:33 = Luke 18:41, but Mark uses *rabbouni*. None of John's uses are parallel to Matthew.). Although these words may be considered synonymous, Matthew's constant substitution of "Lord" for "rabbi" or "teacher" in the mouth of disciples, evidences an intention to teach that Jesus is no mere teacher in the standard Jewish sense of the word. Rather, He is the LORD of His disciples. The only disciple to use "rabbi," in *Matthew's Gospel*, is Judas Iscariot (Matt. 26:25, 49)!
2. *All ye are brethren.*
- a. In this context, *brethren* implies a certain equality under the one Teacher. The uncomplicated simplicity of Christ's Kingdom must not be spoiled by titles that mistakenly repeat the same aggressive awareness of rank and status that characterizes the very worldly society Jesus came to transform. Not only does titling certain brethren foster pride and a feeling of earned importance among those who are thus distinguished, but it also spawns jealousy and a sensation of lesser worth in those who

do not. This splits God's family into two categories: the worthy and the less worthy. It restructures God's community along old pagan lines; violating the nature of Christ's body (I Cor. 12; Rom. 12:3-8).

b. Alford (228) commented:

Brethren: all substantially equal—none by office or precedence nearer to God than another; none standing between his brother and God. "And the duty of all Christian teachers is to bring their hearers to the confession of the Samaritans in John 4:42."

Splendid! However, even in the family from which this rich metaphor is taken, there are older and younger brothers whose judgment, information and experience differ from that of the others. Elders and deacons must still be qualified, teachers must still do their homework. Jesus is not sentencing the brilliant minds among His followers to plodding along a dull plateau of development or trudging along at the pace set by slower students of the Word. Nor is He damning the intellectual curiosity of the conscientious researcher. Rather, He is saying, "No matter how much information you may acquire, your degrees and scholastic attainments do not lift you above your responsibility to be a BROTHER to all your brethren." He also devastates that bumptiousness and pride in personal achievements and worldly recognition that crows, "We scholars . . .," "Leading scholars teach that . . .," or "The most advanced scholarships has proven that . . .," especially where the state of the questions involved is quite unsettled.

c. So, how SHOULD Christians relate to their professors, teachers and preachers who are their psychological authority figures in the Kingdom? Distinguishing titles can be dropped without any loss, first and especially because, if these teachers intend to help people mature, they must be humble enough to see themselves as members of the larger family of God, not superior to it nor to its several members, including their own students. Second, because even the best of these titles smack of partiality, they may be dropped. Even to call one professor or preacher, "Brother Fowler," while at the same time first-naming everyone else outside the professional chair or pulpit, immediately implies that, while everyone is theoretically equally a "brother in Christ," some

brothers are more equal than others, merely because of their expertise, experience or erudition!

This insidious partiality forces all of us to walk a tightrope between our "respect for those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, . . . esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (I Thess. 5:12; Heb. 13:7, 17), while, contemporaneously, not addressing them by ecclesiastical titles like "rabbi . . . father . . . master" (Matt. 23:8-10).

Jesus could have argued: "Do not be called Rabbi, because one is your teacher and you are all simply disciples," which would have shown that no one, however erudite, can ever surpass our common Teacher and must always learn from Him as an humble disciple. Nevertheless, He chose here to insist upon that common bond of brotherhood and belonging to each other that renders these stratifying titles absurd by comparison. So as to lay even more stress on our sense of family, Jesus passed from naming us *brethren* to naming our *Father*:

23:9 And call no man your father on the earth. *Father*, here, cannot refer to one's own physical parent, since Jesus and the Apostles regularly spoke of this relationship positively, (15:4-6; 21:31; Luke 15:11-32; Heb. 12:7-11; Eph. 6:1-4, etc.). Rather, it is this precious association with our earthly fathers that Jesus uses to shape our initial concept of the heavenly Father (7:9ff.). **For one is your Father, even he who is in heaven.** The full criterion, by which our earthly parent is judged, is set by Him whose fatherhood furnishes the exalted standard of all fatherhood (Eph. 3:14f.). Others may be our human fathers, but only God is rightly "the Father of our spirits" (Heb. 12:7-10). From this standpoint, why would anyone WANT to venerate an ultimately disappointing human being, when he belongs to the family of *your heavenly Father*? Who needs a mediating priest—a "father," Jewish, Latin, Greek or Protestant,—when the King of the Universe is OUR FATHER?

Nevertheless, just as Jewish disciples tended to honor promised teachers of an earlier age as "the Fathers" because these giants were thought to have brought moral life to their spiritual children, begetting them, as it were, by their wise, life-giving doctrine (cf. *Aboth* 4:15; *Sirach* 44:1; 8:9, the prologue and chaps. 44:50), so Jesus' disciples, too, would be tempted to perpetuate whatever misguided and misleading views "the Fathers" had taught. (15:2, 12f.; cf. *Pirke Aboth*, "Sayings of the Fathers," a Pharisean treatise, and Roman

Catholic dependence upon Church Tradition as one source of its present doctrine. *Documents of The Second Vatican Council*, § 880-888.) No amount of ecumenical wishful thinking can eliminate the fact that, because the modern Roman Catholic faith upholds the pope as "the Holy Father," not merely as Peter's successor, but as the true and legitimate, universal father and moderator of the universal Church, we must object to these claims of authority that rightly belong to God alone.

Contrary to Catholic use of Paul's reference to himself as "father" of the Corinthian Christians (I Cor. 4:14f.) or his calling Timothy his "son in the faith" (I Tim. 1:2) or Peter's similar reference to Mark (I Peter 5:13), it should be noticed that these are *figurative* expressions, not the creation of an honorary title to be taken literally. In Paul's case, he had literally converted these people personally, and so was, in a figurative way, their "father," (cf. Phile. 10) just as he was the figurative "mother" of the Galatian Christians (Gal. 4:19). He was not making of this figurative relationship a badge of honor to exalt himself or even that they should exalt him above themselves. Rather, he urged that they remember this when tempted to exalt other ecclesiastical leaders who, by Catholic standards, should have been considered spiritual "father" (i.e. priests and popes) too. (See context of I Cor. 1-3.)

How should we understand the fact that both Stephen (Acts 7:2) and Paul (Acts 22:1) addressed Sanhedrin members as "fathers"? Does not this violate Jesus' express prohibition? Lenski (*Acts*, 899) answers: "'Brethren and Fathers' is thus not to be understood from the Christian and spiritual but from the national standpoint . . . any wrong them who are in authority are honored by him as fathers should be honored." Their form of address is respectful and conciliatory, spoken as one under the authority of these national leaders as a member of the Jewish nation. It was a cultural carry-over, rather than a spiritual judgment of the concilors' true fitness to lead the nation.

But this raises the question of our own cultural context: is it possible to "honor all men" (I Peter 2:17), especially where they deserve it because of particularly noble, worthwhile achievements, without resorting to some expression of this fact stated in a name or title? Various commentaries conceive it possible to use titles and grant honors where especially deserved, truthful

and modest. Further, even such titles as grandiose as "Rabbi" ("my great One") or "Pope" ("Father") have now become mere conventionalisms that denote the office without necessarily indicating respect and subservience on the part of the user. It would be less clear to modern hearers to speak of Mr. Karl Wojtyla rather than by his title, Pope John Paul II, and less clear to speak of a Jewish clergyman as Mr. Fishbein rather than as Rabbi Fishbein. Further, the user not only does not necessarily intend, but rather actually rejects, the original immodesty and presumption these titles originally communicated. Nevertheless, the continued wide-spread use of such titles, even though de-classed to common designations, is unfortunate, because it perpetuates that gray area of confusion among those who really, however wrongly, accept the full significance of the titles, as well as among those who, while rejecting the spiritual implications of those pretentious designations, yet need a conventional word to refer to those figures who demand the titles.

23:10 Neither be ye called master. Jesus says it both ways: "Do not call others by pompous ecclesiastical titles, nor demand that others address you by them!" *Master* (*kathegetés*) anciently referred to any teacher, guide or leader, and in modern Greek is simply "professor." The word does not refer to civil authorities nor to those who are "lord" or "master" of their slaves or servants concerning whom other instructions are given (Matt. 22:21; Rom. 13:7; I Peter 2:17f.; Eph. 6:5-9). *Master*, rather, bespeaks that high, authoritative religious sense that rightly describes Jesus Christ, hence must not be granted to His inferiors. In fact, it is but a short step from assuming grandiose titles to assuming the authority and basking in the power they imply. But "not lording it over those entrusted to you" (I Peter 5:1-4; II Cor. 1:24) gets forgotten by power-hungry, ladder-climbing wearers of titles, busy accrediting their own teachers, institutions and instruction.

After accepting acclaim as "the Son of David," which everyone knew meant "the Christ," Jesus asserts, *For one is your master, even the Christ*. In this context where He taught the high reverence to the ONE Father in heaven and now narrows earth's theologians to the ONE Christ, this can be nothing short of a claim to be the only authoritative Teacher in Christianity, the only One who, along with the Father, is to be considered worthy of praise and veneration by titles. (Cf. also 11:25-27; 15:17-20, 27; 17:5; 28:18.)

You have one teacher . . . one Father who is in heaven . . . one master, the Christ. There is no time when we can say, "On earth we have no teacher, father or master." His teaching office is never vacant, never needing vicars or a "living teaching authority" divinely inspired to communicate true doctrine. Jesus is ALWAYS our Teacher or Master for as long as God is our heavenly Father. We infer that He pictures these offices or functions as contemporaneous. So saying, Jesus taught three things:

1. He forever freed us from servile submission to arrogant officialdom attempting to rule God's people in the name of Christ, but in the spirit of the Devil! Our headquarters and our brains are not among men in any one city on earth. We are rightly independent of great assemblies that pass resolutions, approve doctrines and otherwise dictate faith and practice, and free from theological chairs that trifle with principles or doctor the faith.
2. By means of three prohibitions and three reasons in three consecutive verses, He insistently and firmly placed us in total dependence upon Him, claiming full mastery over our thoughts, emotions, conscience and will. So doing, He developed our initiative and sense of personal responsibility to know and to do God's will, quite independently of what others around us may do or think. Our very spiritual existence comes, not from some rabbi, earthly father or spiritual guide, but from God through Christ (I Cor. 1:30f.).
3. Jesus Christ is as much our Teacher and only Theologian while He is physically away, as God is always our Father, although He never came to earth. So, although our Headquarters are in heaven (Phil. 3:20f.; Col. 3:1ff.), He is able to rule, guard and feed us on earth as easily as our heavenly Father is able to beget, love and care for us from there. We need no human father-image or vicar of Jesus Christ, once we understand what we have in Him!

The Standard of True Greatness

23:11 **But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant.** (Study notes on 18:1-35, "the Lord's power structure"; 20:26f.; Mark 9:35; 10:43f.; Luke 9:48; 22:26.) Jesus' statement has the dual-toned ring of a promise and of an order, since commands in Hebrew are often stated in future indicative. (Cf. "You shall not kill!")

1. Command: "Let him who is truly a servant be nominated to the high posts of importance and honor in the Church. Only such are qualified."
2. Promise: "Only the disciple who humbly serves others shall be considered greatest among Christians and rank highest in God's favor."

Here is the key to solving the dilemma as to how to react to our authority figures: no one is truly great among Christians who is unwilling to be the servant of all, the humblest, most unassuming, most unpretentious of all. The truly great wear only one title: *servant*, because their one business in life is that of stooping to lift everyone up to God (I Cor. 6:19f.).

The secret of balance is to be found in that high regard we must have for everyone else who does not happen to be our superior, teacher or authority figure. That is, if we raise our level of appreciation for every single person on the basis of their importance to God, be they Christian or not, and, if at the same time, we reverence in our hearts Christ as Lord, we will probably not fall into that servile obsequiousness toward certain authority figures that Jesus here disapproves. Rather, our adoration of a perfect Lord and Master should liberate us from getting overexcited about even the best of human teachers, fraught as they are with all-too-human weaknesses. Our sensitive concern for the weakest, the wobbliest, the less-than-lovely people, that seeks to elevate them to the level of kings and queens whom we may serve "as unto Christ," will not only make new men and women out of them as they respond to this unexpected, new kind of love. It will also transform us to the point that we recognize our authority figures to be of only relative importance anyway. We begin to see them as useful to us only as they, by example and teaching, show us how to perform our Christian ministry.

In short, if our teacher does not measure up to the standard of servanthood, he is not worthy of the title, and no granting him the title will substitute for measuring up! If he measures up, he will be the first to teach us not to tack the title on him. Either way, the title is superfluous.

The Fall of the Pharisee

23:12 And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be humbled and whosoever shall humble himself shall be exalted. (Cf. 18:4; Luke

14:11; 18:14. An ancient principle: Prov. 11:2; 15:33; 16:18; 18:12; 22:4; 29:23; Isa. 66:2; Dan. 4:30-37.) Even while announcing the ruin of proud, self-exalting, presumptuous people, Jesus still does not crush out our desire to advance by bold and active enterprise and initiative. Rather, He redirects our aggressive energies into useful channels where our ambition can do some real good. Anyone who really cares about God's approval and promises of exaltation will humble himself by putting himself at the service of everyone (Phil. 2:3-8; John 13:1-7). James (4:6, 10) unblushingly promotes exaltation by God as a valid motivation for humbling ourselves. (Cf. I Peter 5:5, 6.)
Who will be the humbling and who the exalting?

1. MEN? Even in this world, unbelievers and Christians alike sooner or later recognize that true greatness which is rightly the possession of those wise individuals whose service to mankind is born of real, unstinting concern for others. We also tend to distrust and deflate those self-important people who consider themselves "God's elder brother." If we share the mind of Christ, we must resist the pretentiousness and arrogance of pushy church members who "love the pre-eminence" (III John 9), steam-rolling others while promoting their own pet programs or views. (I Cor. 3:21; 14:38; II Cor. 10-13; Gal. 2:4f.; 4:17; 5:9f.; Eph. 5:3-12; Phil. 2:21; 3:2, 18; Col. 2:8, 16ff.; I Tim. 6:3-5; II Tim. 2:15-18; 3:1-9, 12f.; Tit. 1:10-16; 3:9-11.) Similarly, Christians are exhorted to honor those unassuming leaders, among them who labor in humble, useful service on Christ's behalf, not abusing their position, but quietly, loyally working (I Cor. 16:15-18; I Tim. 5:17ff.; Rom. 16:1f.; Heb. 13:7, 17).

2. GOD!

- a. Even before the final Judgment, God breaks the pride of Pharaoh (Exod. 4-14), Sennacherib (Isa. 36, 37), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4; Jer. 50:17f.; 51:34), Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:20-24) and numerous lesser dignitaries (Mal. 2:1-9). Even non-Biblical Jewish thought, undoubtedly based on divine revelations, grasped this. (Cf. Sirach 1:28ff.) God can exalt or debase men in this life as well as in the next!
- b. Final judgment, with its exaltation to eternal glory or its humiliation and dishonor, is His prerogative (I Cor. 4:5; John 5:44; II Cor. 10:18; 5:9f.). Our judgment is relative and fallible, while His never fails to hand down the perfect verdict. Honest self-humiliation on its knees, with open-eyed wonder will have the

happy surprise of seeing the Almighty Creator and Ruler of the universe stoop to lift His servant (Isa. 57:15; Rom. 14:4). As one wise Christian put it, "The only degree worth the effort to attain it is the 'A.U.G. Degree,' i.e. approved unto God! (II Tim. 2:15)."

How radically Jesus overturns the pagan structures that prevail, not merely in worldly society, but also in so-called "Christian" institutions, conventions and congregations! Rather than automatically single out the Church's highest officials, the Lord hands the crown to those humble, often obscure, people who patiently minister in His name at whatever level they are needed and can function. Rather than becoming proud of achieving the highest levels of professional competence, these simply give themselves unselfishly in generous Christian ministry. Matthew Henry (V, 332) summarized it thus:

In this world the humble have the honor of being accepted with the holy God and respected by all wise and good men; of being qualified for, and often called out to, the most honorable services; for honor is like the shadow, which flees from those that pursue it, and grasp at it, but follows those that flee from it. However, in the other world, they that have humbled themselves in contrition for their sin in compliance with their God, and in condescension to their brethren, shall be exalted to inherit the throne of glory; shall not only be owned, but crowned, before angels and men.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. What are phylacteries? In what does making them broad consist? What was the Pharisees' purpose for doing this?
2. What was the purpose of enlarging the borders of one's garments? What were these borders and why did the Pharisees enlarge them?
3. What was the chief place at feasts?
4. Where were the chief seats in the synagogues generally located?
5. What greetings addressed to religious leaders did Jesus condemn?
6. What reason does Jesus assign for not calling any given person "teacher"?
7. What reason does Jesus assign for not calling any man on earth "father"?
8. What Scriptures help determine whether He meant one's spiritual or physical father?

9. What reason did Jesus assign for calling no man "master"?
10. Show how the deity of Christ is revealed in this section?
11. According to Jesus, who is the greatest, or on what basis is true greatness determined?

TEXT: 23:13-15

13 But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye shut the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye enter not in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering in to enter. [Some authorities insert here, or after verse 12, verse 14: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widow's houses, even while for a pretense, ye make long prayers: therefore ye shall receive greater condemnation." See Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47.]

15 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he is become so, ye make him twofold more a son of hell than yourselves.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Jesus affirms that the Pharisees somehow succeeded in shutting the kingdom of heaven against men, implying that the entrance was really blocked. If so, what personal responsibility would be that of anyone thus shut out? What guilt would they have, if any?
- b. Do you think it is right for God to permit men like the Pharisees to shut the kingdom of heaven against people? What great principles are involved here?
- c. If the Pharisees were really as bad as Jesus pictures them, how could their converts be "twice as much a child of hell" as their spiritual fathers? What does it mean to be twice as bad as a Pharisee?
- d. Why do you think that the Pharisees produced such evil fruit through their ministry? What is there in the essence of Pharisaism that must produce this kind of fruit every time, even if the Pharisees themselves may deplore it?
- e. Is it wrong therefore to try to win people to our understanding of God's truth, and to persuade them to abandon their present position to come to that which we occupy? What is the difference between "evangelizing" and "proselyting"? Which do you do? Can we do both?

- f. What is a sect? When does one become a sectarian? Is the group with which you are connected, where you feel at home as a believer, a sect?
- g. What type of converts are we making? What must be our method, our plea, our goal, our spirit, if we would avoid the proselyting done by the Pharisees?
- h. To save ourselves from sectarian proselyting, must we leave to God's leading the question regarding which group a given convert belongs to, rather than claim him for our congregation or our segment of Christianity? What principles do you consider important in answering this question?

PARAPHRASE

"But how terrible for you teachers of the Law and you Pharisees: every one a counterfeit! You lock the Kingdom of God in men's faces: you yourselves do not enter in; and you block the passage of those who want to get in! How terrible for you, theologians and purists, you imposters! You scour land and sea to make a single convert to your sect. When you succeed, you make him twice as fit for hell as yourselves!"

SUMMARY

The sectarian theology of the Pharisees produced the doubly devastating effect of keeping everyone out of God's Kingdom: they themselves rejected Jesus' invitations to enter, and their opposition to Him cowed many others from doing so. Only membership in the Pharisean brotherhood counted, but this too ruined the earnest disciple because of what sectarianism does to his soul.

NOTES

II. DENUNCIATION OF HYPOCRITICAL RELIGION

23:13 **But woe to you!** Before proceeding with comment, it should be noticed how truly Jesus' Woes picture false religion, profoundly contrasting with His Beatitudes that depict and recommend true religion:

TRUE RELIGION: *THE BEATITUDES*

1. The poor in spirit enjoy access to the kingdom of heaven. This humble submission admits its need of help. It is not confident of its rightness, but more certain of its wrongness and need.
2. They who mourn shall be comforted. This involves sensitivity to others' needs and pains and to one's own personal need to repent.
3. The meek inherit the earth: they surrender self-rule to God through their acquiescence and obedience.
4. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied with that for which they seek, because there can be no satisfaction with less than truth and godliness.
5. The merciful shall obtain mercy.
6. The pure in heart will see God. When there is no double-mindedness, no dual motives, God is pleased with sincerity.
7. Peacemakers are called sons of God.
8. To those who are persecuted for the sake of Jesus and righteousness will belong God's Kingdom, for so men persecuted the prophets before you. You are blessed, so rejoice and be glad.

FALSE RELIGION: *THE WOES*

1. To shut the kingdom of heaven, not entering or permitting others, is arrogantly to reject any suggestion of needing help. It is absolute certainty of one's rightness.
2. Crossing sea and land to make a single convert twice as bad as oneself involves a sectarian pride and an insensitive presumption. For this there is no hope of comfort, only punishment.
3. Evasion of responsibility to truth and duty is a subtle rebellion that quibbles to keep from obeying, the diametric opposite of meekness.
4. Tithing minutiae while neglecting justice, mercy and faith is but satisfaction with empty ritual. Instead of deep thirst for godliness, there is only satisfaction with trivia.
5. While cleansing the outside of eating utensils, the inside is filled by extortion and rapacity, the diametric opposite of kindness or mercy.
6. The white-washed tombs: externally righteous are inwardly full of hypocrisy and lawlessness, because of impure hearts.
7. The beautifiers of tombs were sons of murderers of God's witnesses with whom they warred.
8. (No woe stated) So from inheriting the long-awaited Kingdom, persecutors of Jesus' prophet wise men and scribes will face fearful blood guiltiness to be punished in their own generation.

Although the comparison between these blessings and woes must not be unduly pressed since the parallels are not strictly precise, it is clear that Jesus intended to express the antithesis of that sincere, heart-felt religion which he vividly described in the Beatitudes.

Arrogance and Exclusiveness

23:13 **But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees.** Having publicly warned the crowds of their leaders' hypocrisy, He now addresses them directly. *Woe*: "How sad for you, because of the judgment threatening to overtake you!" (See notes on 11:21 and 18:7.) *Woe* stands in sharp

relief over against the sunny happiness of the Beatitudes, since it depicts unhappiness, misery and calamity. But, it might be objected, does not Jesus expose Himself to the same accusation He levels against the arrogant, exclusivist sectarians? Does not this very message fairly bristle with INTOLERANCE? But someone observed, "Nobody is wholly tolerant. The more one believes in tolerance, the less he can tolerate the intolerant!" Notably absent from these awful words, however, is any evidence of bitterness or resentment or rancor. In fact, our Lord is not haughtily cursing these sectarians, eloquently raining savage damnation on them. But neither are His assertions empty accusations. His unswerving denunciations are like calmly fired, deadly salvoes of righteous anger, aimed with absolute precision, an awesome moral bombardment that hits with telling force right on target, illuminating the entire battlefield when they explode. Nevertheless, through it all there is the sorrow of a loving heart. When the flame and the fury are over, only the broken heart is heard (23:37-39). Jesus' disapprobation here is, in effect, a sentence of eternal doom against which there can be no hope of appeal, except through sincere repentance. (Contrast Rom. 8:31-35.) So, these woes ring with the familiar trumpet-blast of prophetic denunciation. (Cf. Isa. 5:8-23; 10:1, 5; 23:1; 29:1, 15; 30:1; 31:1; 33:1; 45:9f.; Jer. 22:13; 23:1; Ezek. 13:3, 18; 34:2; Amos 6:1; Hab. 2:6-19.) Study Jesus' earlier use of *woe*: Luke 6:24-26; 11:52.

SPECIAL STUDY: ON THE MAKING OF A HYPOCRITE

The usual definition of a hypocrite depicts him as a person who consciously pretends to be what he is not or better than he really is. This definition implies that he knows and understands the standard he imitates, even if he secretly rejects it on many points. But this common definition is inadequate, because it refers only to that deceiver who is fully aware that under an elaborate mask of godliness, he hides a heart ruled by godless desires. Unquestionably, there was much of this sort of pretense among the Pharisees and scribes, but is this all Jesus meant?

No less than five times Jesus referred to these hypocrites as "blind guides" and "blind fools" (23:16-26). Blindness, however, denotes an inability to see and connotes the inability to comprehend. How, then, can hypocrites be correctly described as "blind," if by the previous definition they comprehend the standard perfectly? It is because, in Jesus' concept, there are TWO KINDS OF HYPOCRITE:

1. Those common frauds who see and understand the disconnection of their inner motivations from their outward conduct, and accept it. These conscious deceivers pose as good men outwardly, even though, inwardly, they do not share the motives for goodness that stir really good men to action, because these hypocrites' mainspring is self-interest. Our experiences with these frauds leads to the common definition mentioned above.
2. Jesus clearly sees a second type of hypocrite: those who neither see nor accept the fact that they are involved in bad actions that contradict their good principles. Marshall (*Challenge of NT Ethics*, 60) explains this brand of hypocrisy so typical of the scribes and Pharisees:

The trouble with them was that they sincerely thought that they were good men who were championing the cause of true religion, while all the time they failed to see that their goodness was largely counterfeit as well as lamentably deficient, and that what they regarded as the essentials of true religion were not its essentials at all. . . . Moral and spiritual blindness was their chief defect, though all the time they fondly supposed that nobody could see so clearly as they did. . . . The Pharisee was as self-righteous in his innermost thinking as in his outward demeanor, so that there was no contrast between his inner and his outer self. He honestly thought of himself a model of piety and virtue. Their main fault was that they were *blind to their actual state*, so that a hypocrite in the Gospel sense of the term is rather "one who is firmly convinced that he is pious and virtuous but is blind to his actual condition."

But how did this binding process get started?

All of us, even the most gifted and fortunate, are born with limitations, handicaps, disadvantages, shortages and problems, in comparison with those who do not share our specific hindrances or weaknesses. Everyone else seems to be bigger and better and to have more of everything than we do. So we reject ourselves as we are and begin immediately to compensate for our shortages by imitating others' strong points—whatever it costs. We accept what others have or are, because this seems better than anything we have or are, so we struggle to catch up in various ways.

Even in religion there is no escaping this contrast and its resultant struggle. There is no relief in a perfectionist religion of endless rules

that holds before us an unreachable ideal, but which, all the while, lashes us to meet its standards. We must hate ourselves as we are, so we thrash on desperately to achieve our goal of perfection, but without the psychological satisfaction of success. Apparently others are succeeding at our religion, otherwise they would have given it all up long ago. But, why are we not as imminently pious as they seem to be? Perhaps we should "fake it until we make it." The more the frustrated believer fails to measure up to the piety perceived in others, the more he must hate himself for his inability to live up to what he perceives as God's will for his life. But, because he just cannot keep up with everything, the social pressure of his religious community pushes him to be selective. He is thus prodded into deciding which precepts to practice and which to ignore or postpone. So, to quiet potential criticism for appearing not to measure up, he lays greater stress on the precepts that enjoy a high visibility, the externals. He dare not admit his inward failure to others, for this admission would be his emotional and theological damnation, both in his own eyes and in the estimation of his co-religionists. So, this blinding process is spawned in a psychological need to justify oneself, to make oneself appear orthodox and godly, hence to compare favorably with one's peers.

This explains the high importance of grace and expiation in Christianity, as opposed to a perfectionist religion of legalism. (Grace existed first, of course, in true Old Testament religion, but the Pharisees and their spiritual ancestors buried it under tons of legal restrictions, traditions and the highly praised, but non-existent, "merits of the fathers" (cf. *Pirke Aboth*, 2:2), and left it no effective function in their sectarian system.) Grace and expiation mean that, through forgiveness, God makes us worthy in His beloved Son, quite apart from our ability to live perfectly. When we accept ourselves as we really are, i.e. by accepting the fact that we are not perfect, but sinners, and by confessing our sins, this new honesty clears the way for real change and new hope. We are no longer faking it with God. By accepting our actual state, i.e. dead spiritually, licentious, ill-tempered or whatever, now without any pretense we furnish God a solidly honest base from which to make us over. From that moment we not only see the logic of the method, but really feel motivated to make the changes necessary to become what we could not before. Self-acceptance, i.e. confession, is the threshold of transformation.

The hypocrite, then, is the person who cannot accept himself as he is, cannot confess his inadequacy and real sinfulness, because his

pride has backed him into a corner from which there can be no escape except by confession. This explains the phenomenal conversions of the publicans and prostitutes during the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. When they came along preaching repentance (confession of what one really is and expressing a readiness to abandon it for God's gracious forgiveness and a resultant new life-style), these sinners flocked in, because this message made perfect sense to them. Contrarily, the Pharisees could not respond correctly to John or Jesus, because they did not accept themselves for what they actually were—sinners damned without hope except that held out by a merciful God. They continued to judge themselves according to what they thought they ought to be or according to what they esteemed themselves to have already become, never according to what they really were. Hence, they never succeeded in admitting their true spiritual condition, and consequently never gave God a chance to save them. They refused to admit their difficulties, imperfections and temptations, and so they tranquilly, but fatally, assumed that everything was in order between themselves and God.

This also explains the hypocrites' insensitivity toward others. Because they cannot accept themselves as sinners in need of help, they have little sympathy for others. In the light of a graceless system of law, they see others as simply sinners who ought to exert more effort to be perfect and, since they apparently are not doing this, should be condemned.

In the teaching of Jesus, then, the hypocrite is not only or merely the person who poses as godly while perfectly aware of his ungodliness, but also the person who consciously and intentionally refuses to see some unwelcome aspect of the truth as it affects him personally. To this extent he permits himself to believe in self-deception. Ironically, however, this tool attacks the user, so to speak. Chosen primarily to cover up what he did not want to see, this self-deception later conceals from him what he truly desires to see, without his being aware of his loss. From this point on, this self-deceiver who has manipulated truth, can plunge placidly on into the most unthinkable error and the most vicious folly, while presuming himself to be acting with perfect correctness and orthodoxy. (Cf. John 9:39-41; Acts 26:9; 23:1.)

Peter and Barnabas at Antioch exemplify this latter type of hypocrisy precisely. (Gal. 2:11:21, esp. v. 13: *sunupekrithesan . . . hupokrisei*) Although both men unquestionably accepted Jesus Christ as their only Savior and Lord, yet, by withdrawing

table fellowship from the Gentiles in order to follow Jewish customs, they were unconsciously denying a fundamental tenet of Christianity: justification before God is based on the same faith shared by Gentiles, not upon practices originating in the Mosaic Law. They had not thought out the practical application of their own principles in relation to the Gentiles, hence in this practical test, they were found to be living in contradiction of their own principles. The inward principles of these otherwise good men were not in harmony with their external conduct. This is why Paul correctly describes their conduct as hypocrisy.

Fanatic Sectarianism

23:13 **Woe . . . because ye shut the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye enter not in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering in to enter.** How could legalistic theologians *shut the kingdom of heaven against men*? Certainly not in the absolute sense, because the purposes of the Almighty God cannot be thwarted by a few obscurantists and bigots. Their success in doing this was only relative to their influence with others. There are not really two opposing views of the Kingdom involved here, i.e. that of the Jewish scholars and that of Jesus. Both, in fact, have in view "the rule of God proclaimed and acknowledged by the righteous." Rather, the dissimilarity lies in their opposing views as to what constitutes that righteousness which qualifies men for participating in the Kingdom and as to how this righteousness is to be achieved. *The kingdom of heaven*, for Jesus, is the rule of God proclaimed by John the Baptist and by Jesus Himself. This reign was to take more definite shape at Pentecost with the descent of the Holy Spirit and the establishment of the Church. But, even as Jesus was speaking, publicans and harlots, who ignored the Pharisees, were flocking in by preparing themselves to believe and obey anything God says. (21:28ff.; cf. Special Study; "The Kingdom of God," my Vol. III, 160ff.) In their own view, the scholars esteemed themselves amply qualified to enter the Kingdom, but according to Jesus' estimate, they stood as much outside its portals as anyone else they hindered. There is strident irony here, because the Pharisees' ideal was to render entrance into God's Kingdom possible! (See Bowker, *Jesus and the Pharisees*, 15ff.) But, says Jesus, the practical result of your interpretations of God's Word

makes your own ideal impossible, so you keep people out of the Kingdom! How did this work? Several answers are possible!

1. By adhering to their ideal of righteousness based on perfectionist adherence to their own man-made system of minute rules, they taught that only in this fashion could anyone possibly know that they have fulfilled all that God requires of them. However, since God had not legislated such minutiae, the theologians had filled in the gaps in the Law of God with their own human conclusions elevated to the status of divine revelation. However, by binding men's consciences with an ever-growing list of rules to keep so as to be "perfect enough to merit God's approval," they made it harder than ever for anyone to be confident of ever being really qualified to enter the Kingdom. Thus, since no one could meet the Pharisean ideal, in practice no one could really enter into the Kingdom. Worse, discerning people, who could foresee this inevitable outcome, would be tempted to reject the whole procedure, only to find themselves without any viable alternative. For most Jews, law-keeping, to have any value, meant doing it according to the "authorized interpretations." But vast numbers of conscientious people could not always be as scrupulous about keeping all the minute, traditional regulations. The rabbis, then, treated these folk as "sinners, impious, ignorant"—outside the Kingdom, damned (cf. John 7:49). Even more ironic is the realization that, although the Pharisean ideal had theoretically been to make total righteousness possible for everyone, their approach actually rendered it absolutely unattainable for those who had any conscience, even within their own brotherhood: "*You enter not in yourselves!*" If perfect observance of God's Law be the only door into the Kingdom, then not even the best Pharisee could ever enter there! In their blindness they had not grasped this.
2. By their personal and collective rejection of John the Baptist who prepared the way that people might be ready to enter the Kingdom, they undoubtedly discouraged many who, otherwise, would have entered by taking advantage of all John offered the nation. (Study 21:23-32.) He demanded that they humble themselves and repent of their self-admiration and self-justifications (Matt. 3:7-10). This galled them. How could they deny themselves, abhor the luxury and condemn the life of ease which they put down as unshakable evidence that they had really earned God's approval upon their lifestyle?!

3. By their adamant opposition to Jesus who was really leading people into the Kingdom, they exerted an unhealthy influence over weaker souls less able to throw off their evil spell and follow Jesus. Because "the orthodox" determined to reject and oppose Jesus in every way possible, they swayed the unthinking and bullied the hesitant into a position of confused and undeciding neutrality. Thus, not only did they despise Jesus' invitations to enter the Kingdom on His terms, but they effectively cooled the enthusiasm of many others who might have accepted. (Cf. John 9:22, 33f.; 7:13, 45-52; 12:42; Luke 6:22.)
4. By their overt sectarian spirit they consciously implied that anyone who did not belong to their party was unfit for *the kingdom of heaven*. Were door-keeping duty their private privilege, only Pharisees could enter. With a mob of theologians and unbending sectarians barring the Kingdom's entrance, it is not surprising that anyone must use violence to elbow his way through these spiritual and sociological obstructions to get in! (See notes on 11:12 and Luke 16:16.)
5. Earlier, Jesus had condemned experts in the Law who had "taken away the key of knowledge" (Luke 11:52). The key that admitted entrance to God's Kingdom is a correct knowledge and true interpretation of the Scripture, because to interpret accurately the Old Testament's meaning leads men to recognize Him of whom the Scripture speaks and, through submission to Him who is the focal point of all Scripture, they truly unlock the entrance to God's Kingdom. Further, this correct understanding about the Messiah is the clue to grasping His purpose and planning and to seeing that obedient love, reverence for God and respect for people is the heart and center of the Messiah's message and meaning. Scribal pretentiousness and interference missed all this and confused or discouraged others who had succeeded in discerning this much. By teaching the trash of tradition instead of the true, simple meaning of Scripture, they effectively hid the correct intention of the Bible both from themselves and from others.

Consider, by contrast, what contributions these Bible scholars could have made to the success of Jesus' ministry by recognizing in the Old Testament prophets all the melodies of which Jesus of Nazareth is the fully developed symphony, and by pointing to Him in whom all the lines of the Law's righteous standard converge. Their voices might have furnished scholarly direction and convinced thousands to follow

John and Jesus right into the Kingdom. Instead, they glorified the Law for itself and built sepulchers for the prophets, expecting no Messiah in their own time, at least not like the Galilean from Nazareth! Thus, they locked men out of the Kingdom.

This woe properly begins the list, because even more terrible to persecute God's prophets is really to possess His Word personally, but to withhold it from God's people to whom it is given. Our Lord must attack the presumption in the Pharisean spirit that would jealously snatch the precious water of life from the world's parched lips, so that its personal rights to that cup never be put in doubt. Should Jesus say nothing about this attitude that considered sharing God's good news unconditionally with everyone to be an unthinkable blasphemy and each instance of God's merciful healing of unworthy people an intolerable theological embarrassment?

23:14 has apparently been inserted into Matthew's text by copyists from Mark 12:40 or Luke 20:47, since it is not found in the earliest, best manuscripts and since those who include it differ on where it should go in the text. (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 60)

Not only did they block the Kingdom. They also siphoned off members into their own sect:

Partisan Missionary Zeal

23:15 Feel the bite of Jesus' satire: "You go all over the world to make converts, and what do you produce? One single proselyte. And what do you do with him once you get him? You make him twice as ready for hell as you are!" Although separatistic Judaism was not an explicitly missionary religion, the tireless zeal of the Pharisean vision of legal holiness not only possible but absolutely essential in all of life, naturally prodded its adherents to do everything possible to proclaim these views wherever in the known world a synagogue might be located. Did they seek proselytes from among Jews of other persuasions within Judaism, or converts to Pharisean Judaism from among the pagans? Apparently both. (Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* XX,2; XIV,7,2; *Pirke Aboth*, 1:12; 2 Baruch 41:3f.; 42:5; cf. 1:4.) Their goal would not be reached by making former heathen merely Jews by circumcision, as important as this was, but by making them what, in their separatist vision, is "the true Israel of God," i.e. Pharisees, of course. Such evangelistic fervor is not at all alien to their character. While a few complacent ones may have crowed

like the Pharisee in Luke 18:11, glad to be among God's chosen few and above the common herd, the ardent zeal to make converts to their party is part and parcel of their sectarian spirit (Cf. *Ant.* XVIII, 3,5; *Wars*, II,7,10; *Life of Josephus*, 23,31.) But theirs was a "zeal without knowledge" (Rom. 10:2), because, although they were extremely incompetent to lead men to the truth, they were intensely eager to furnish that leadership, as Jesus explains next:

Ye make him twofold more a son of hell than yourselves is a strong indictment, almost as if some narrow-minded bigot deliberately planned this result. However, the Lord is laying bare their results, not their purpose. (Cf. 7:15-20.) *A son of hell (Gehenna)* is a Semitism for which we would use simple adjectives like "hellish, diabolical, satanic, doomed and damned." (Cf. John 17:12.) They are the theological contrary of "sons of the Kingdom" (13:38). Any unbelievers among "the sons of the Kingdom" will be rigorously uprooted (8:12), because, in reality, they are sons of the devil (John 8:44). *Twofold more a son of hell than yourselves* contains a dual indictment:

1. "You Pharisees are children of hell yourselves!" Why so? Because their setting aside the sovereignty of God in practice, their ignoring His righteousness and their substituting their own self-righteousness is the evil genius and explanation of their system, and unquestionably constitutes rebellion against God (Rom. 10:3).
2. "Your converts are twice as bad as you are!" In what sense?
 - a. IN MATURITY. A new convert, because he has not yet learned all the good reasons why something cannot be done," is often supercharged with such enthusiasm for his new-found faith that he desires to learn and apply everything all at once. But, because the former pagan lacks broad grounding in God's Word, notions that seem important to him he turns into conclusions more extreme than those of his own teachers. Even sincere Bible college students today sometimes stretch the cautiously worded and carefully qualified positions of their professors, so that these teachers would be horrified to hear the doctrines attributed to them by their own students. This phenomenon does not result from their being taught this way, but because the immature, under less restraint from broader knowledge of the material, take their teachers' conclusions farther than these intended.
 - b. IN CHARACTER. The convert, whose zeal for the legalism of Pharisean Judaism leads him to master its principles, could

push its perfectionist methodology to fanatical extremes undreamed of by his teachers, then twist them back on his mentors with a vengeance. Witness the legalistic "ANTI" spirit among the movements to restore New Testament Christianity, that spawns sects pulsing with self-righteous contempt for anyone "not in fellowship" with their particular group. Although the Pharisean rabbi Gamaliel gives surprisingly moderate counsel concerning early Christian leaders (Acts 5:33ff.), his disciple, Saul of Tarsus (Acts 22:3), persecuted them with raging fury (Acts 26:11).

- c. **JUDICIALLY BEFORE GOD.** By conscientiously accepting the punctilious legalism of his teachers, the Pharisean convert's own conscience leaves him no respite, no redemption, no mercy from God, hence doubly damned, first by his following false doctrine already condemned by God, and second, by following it into the hopelessly endless stairway to perfection which human weakness must forever pronounce impossible and fall back in despair, beaten by his own system, or else, obstinate to the end, he could claim the all-covering merits of Abraham to eliminate any slight imperfection possibly remaining! (Other Jews, however, repudiated this doctrine. IV Ezra 7:102-115.).

The unusual severity of Jesus' language is explicable in light of His own mission. He too had crossed far more than sea and land to make believers and save men for truth and righteousness for eternity. Now, instead of finding assistance among the leaders of God's people, He finds the mission of His heart blocked in two directions: inquirers were both denied access to truth which could have saved them (23:13) and they were taught what was both false and fatal instead (23:15).

However, no more unfounded conclusion could be drawn than that Jesus somehow meant to declare evangelism either out of style or wrong-headed today. Why?

1. Because, although Pharisees held many false notions, their zeal for evangelism is itself commendable. Their unsparing labor shames, nay, damns the indifference of disciples of Christ, who, while believing the true Gospel, have neither the desire, the patience nor the determination required to labor assiduously to bring Christ's message of salvation to all the world! Jesus does not condemn Pharisean zeal itself, but its promoting doctrines that made men anything but godly. Zeal for righteousness is always timely and praiseworthy.

2. Because aggressive foreign evangelism across cultural lines is not merely commendable, but imperative, because it was ordered by the King of kings (28:18f.) God's people cannot sit at home and pray for world evangelism without raising up evangelists qualified to "travel over sea and land" to "make disciples of all nations." Christians who rest complacent in their inaction and excuses for not funding the projects necessary to accomplish this, will be startled at the Judgment, when Pharisees stand up and condemn them, because, even with their twisted view of truth, they at least "travelled over sea and land to make one proselyte," but the Christians would not walk across the street nor send a missionary around the world to share the gloriously true tidings of Jesus!
3. Because we may avoid the self-interested party spirit Jesus condemns, if we have the right goals, spirit and methods.
 - a. We must continually ask ourselves these questions: to what are we winning people? What kind of convert are we making? What kind of human being do people become as the result of our efforts? Do our converts become more godly, more fully human than before, or only partially so, or, worse, even less so than before?
 - b. For many, the only practical difference between "evangelizing" and "proselyting" depends on who is doing it. If someone leaves their sect, he is a dishonest renegade, proselyted by the enemy. But if he joins their sect, he is welcomed as an honest, open-minded convert, evangelized by "the true Church." By contrast, our real concern must be whether what we are doing brings men to Christ or to our party creed. Does it lead to consecration to God, or foster party loyalty? Does it proclaim the whole counsel of God, or our human opinions? Do others notably glorify God because of what we are doing (cf. 15:31), or do they tend to brag about us, our achievements and our group?
 - c. To lead someone from a partial understanding to a larger grasp of the truth of Scripture cannot be called proselyting in the sense Jesus disapproves. This is simply to teach this disciple to know and do "all that I have commanded you" (28:20).

FACT QUESTIONS

1. What is the kingdom of heaven that the Pharisees shut against men?

2. In what sense did the Pharisees not enter into the kingdom?
3. Who would have entered the kingdom, were it not for the Pharisees' opposition?
4. How or when did the Pharisees refuse to allow those who would enter to go in?
5. What mental image does Jesus evoke by describing Pharisees as "compassing sea and land to make one proselyte"?
6. What is a proselyte? What kind of proselyte were the Pharisees making?
7. What effect did Pharisean doctrine have on their proselytes?
8. Define "a child of hell" as Jesus used this expression here.
9. Show how the fruits of Pharisaism demonstrated the falsity of their system.

TEXT: 23:16-22

16 Woe unto you, ye blind guides, that say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is debtor. 17 Ye fools and blind: for which is greater, the gold, or the temple that hath sanctified the gold? 18 And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gift that is upon it, he is a debtor. 19 Ye blind: for which is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? 20 He therefore that sweareth by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. 21 And he that sweareth by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein. 22 And he that sweareth by the heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. What is the peculiar irony involved in Jesus' epithet addressed to the Pharisees: "blind guides"? If a person cannot see, then on what basis would he accept the task of being a guide?
- b. If Jesus Himself told men not to call others "fool" (5:22), by what right does He Himself violate that rule here, calling the Pharisees "blind fools" (v. 17)?
- c. What is the reason men give and receive oaths? What is an oath supposed to accomplish?
- d. What is the basis of the Pharisean distinctions pictured in this text?

- e. How did the Pharisean distinctions actually encourage perjury? Did they lend themselves to an evasion of responsibility for one's words? Do you think the Pharisees deliberately aimed to evade responsibility for certain promises or guarantees?
- f. Do you think Jesus really cares whether a person swore by the temple or the gold or the altar or the gift thereon, etc.? If you think not, then why did He go into such detail? By giving these detailed examples, is our Lord "out-Phariseeing the Pharisees" or is there some vital principle involved that requires that He use all these illustrations? If so, what is it?
- g. In light of Jesus' strong statements against swearing, given in the Sermon on the Mount, do you think He intends to encourage people to swear properly and responsibly in this text? Is there any contradiction between His two statements?
- h. Jesus used such epithets in this section, "blind guides" and "blind fools" and "blind men," that one is almost led to think He is underlining another sin beyond mistakes about oaths. Do you feel this? If so, what sin(s) or failure is Jesus uncovering by using these descriptive terms to address the Pharisees?
- i. The Pharisees invented subtle distinctions whereby it was possible for some to evade their moral responsibility to tell the truth. What words or expressions have you noticed that people today are using to avoid telling the truth?

PARAPHRASE

"How terrible for you who would guide others, but are blind yourselves! You teach that if someone swears by the temple, his oath is not binding. But if someone mentions the gold of the temple in his oath, he is then obligated to keep his word. What stupidity not to comprehend! Which is of greater worth: the gold, or the very temple that gives the gold its sanctity as the basis of an oath? You also say that if someone swears by the altar, the oath does not count. But if he swears by the sacrifice that is there on the altar, he is duty-bound to keep his word. You lack moral comprehension! Which is more important: the sacrifice or the altar that gives the offering the only holiness it possesses? Therefore, the person who swears by the altar is, in reality, swearing both by it and by everything on it. Similarly, if a person swears by the temple, he is really swearing by it and by God who dwells therein as well. The person who swears by heaven

is really swearing by the very throne of God and by Him who is enthroned there!"

SUMMARY

Using special wording to avoid responsibility for our promises and for the sanctity and truth of all else that we say, evidences our insensibility to God who really owns and controls everything by which we could possibly swear, and who will bring us to an accounting for all our words before His tribunal.

NOTES

NO SENSE OF AWE BEFORE GOD

1. The Problem Stated

For fuller comments on oaths and swearing in general, see notes on 5:33-37, Vol. I, 288-295. The live issue that called for solutions and to which both Jesus and the Pharisees addressed themselves was reverence toward God. In general, both shared this fundamental vision, but the point at issue here is how it is to be expressed in the specific question of oaths. Both agreed that the point of giving and receiving oaths is to confirm to the hearer the credibility of some statement of the speaker, which could not otherwise be checked. This is done by adding a confirmatory declaration whereby the speaker calls upon God to witness the oath. (Cf. Heb. 6:16f.) It is assumed that the truthfulness of the affirmations is guaranteed by the speaker's respect for the greatness, power, justice and high holiness of God. Further, if the statements thus confirmed are not true, then the swearer has thereby insulted the Almighty and must suffer the consequences. The value of an oath, then, depends on the true extent to which everyone involved holds God in awe. (Cf. Jer. 5:1f.)

Other peoples followed this same philosophy of oaths with the exception that they also swore by sacred objects to which they attributed a sanctity and authority which, if offended, could punish the perjurers. Hebrews, by contrast, were to swear only in the holy, terrible Name of the Lord (Deut. 6:13; 10:20). This intended to confirm their true fidelity to Jahweh and should have led to their fulfilling Israel's deepest reason for existence (Jer. 4:2; cf. Gen. 12:2f.; Isa. 65:16).

As evidenced by our paragraph (23:16-22), however, Jews of Jesus' time were not using God's Name in oaths, but were avoiding it by

substituting more or less stereotyped circumlocutions that served as paraphrases for the Divine Name, even in common speech. (Cf. "Kingdom of Heaven" as a practical synonym for "Kingdom of God" reflects this Jewish cultural attitude of veiling their reference to God without using His Name outright.) On the part of those who began this customary substitution, it was a supposedly pious, but really superstitious, device to avoid misusing God's Name. However, precisely because God Himself was not formally introduced into men's transactions by specific appeal to Him and His Name, reckless swearing by all manner of supposedly sacred objects abounded, corrupting public morality.

2. The Pharisean Scribes' Reaction to the Problem

Rather than attempt a radical correction of mistaken speech patterns sanctioned by deeply-rooted popular custom, rather than create hearts too honest to need an oath, these theologians limited themselves to the expedient of establishing artificial rules that governed the seriousness of an oath, arbitrarily deciding which of the paraphrases used in giving oaths really showed greater sincerity and seriousness, hence were binding, and which formulations were merely profane speech. So, even if ironical in light of their real results, it is completely credible that they were moved by good intentions. They concluded (vv. 16, 18) typically:

1. *by the temple, it is nothing; by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor;*
2. *by the altar, it is nothing; by the gift that is on it, he is a debtor.*

Bruce (*Expositor's Greek Testament*, 281f.) appears to have recovered the logic behind their distinctions: "The special form is more binding than the general. . . . Specializing indicated greater earnestness." That is, to swear by the very gold of the temple or by the very sacrifice on the altar supposedly shows greater attention to the sacred object than a loose, general reference, like to the temple or altar. This type of argumentation may not convince us, but apparently, in the ambient of the first century, it seemed quite persuasive to the Pharisean Jews.

3. Jesus' Critique of Their Solution

a. Your Distinctions Reveal Your Lack of Comprehension

23:16 **Woe unto you, ye blind guides.** Of the Pharisean technicalities two views may be taken:

1. Born of good intentions, they were used deceptively. Undoubtedly some may have made use of these subtle distinctions to cover falsehood. In fact, if everyone knew about these hair-splitting definitions that separated binding from non-binding oaths, there could be no deception or evasion. But, if evasion of responsibility be the use made of these rules, then not everyone would have been in a position to learn these distinctions. In this case the users are exposed as hypocrites whose lofty pretensions do not hide their cunning readiness to utilize evasive techniques to break their obligation to the Law to keep their word where it interfered with their own plans or personal convenience. They were manipulating the Law's regulations to suit their own caprice.
2. Born of ignorance, they were nonetheless wicked. Because Jesus termed the framers of these distinctions *blind guides*, He implied that many could not discern the true, logical, but deadly, conclusions to which their subtleties led and that they were blind to the soul-destroying effects of their refinements. (See notes on 23:13, cf. also vv. 19, 26.) Although properly motivated by a zeal for righteousness, they who offered their conclusions as guidance for the ignorant, were themselves unseeing. They did not recognize that their principles were perverse, leading to more serious abuses of truth and greater dishonesty than the errors they supposedly eliminated. In practice, anyone who took their refinements seriously could lie and then make the most awe-inspiring vow, or make a most difficult promise under oath, without ever intending to keep it, all without any sense of wrong. Nonetheless the Pharisees appeared to be generally unaware of the unquestionably immoral conclusion to which their specious reasoning led. Later (23:17), He called them *blind fools*, because they lacked ordinary common sense to discern what should have been obvious to all.

Because the rationale behind their distinctions is empty of all logic and because their rules are deceptive, if not in intent at least in result, these so-called scholars, who could not fathom this, are doubly unqualified to teach God's people and are properly termed: *fools and blind*. He who has forbidden us to call others a fool (5:22), possesses the authority so to order us and to judge the hearts of these *fools* (John 5:22), and we would be *blind fools* not to discern the difference between His royal judgeship and our position as disciples.

b. An Oath Is An Oath

(You) say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing, but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor. Barclay (*Matthew*, II,211, emphasis his) is right to affirm that "to the Jew an oath was absolutely binding, *so long as it was a binding oath.*" But this very limitation is its own condemnation. Regardless of which formula is used, the glaring admission on the surface of this Pharisean definition is that the person was actually swearing. Either way, whether *by the temple* or its *gold*, *by the altar* or its *sacrifice*, *by heaven* or *by God* Himself, THE MAN HAS SWORN, and he is bound by God to keep his oath (Lev. 19:12; Num. 30:1f.; Deut. 23:21ff.). Nevertheless, they had the effrontery to declare: *it is nothing*. In Jesus' view, it was bad enough that anyone should be led to suppose that truth may be divided into two categories: truth which counts if supported by an oath, and truth that is less significant and may legitimately be manipulated at will, if it lacks this support. This categorizing encourages people to suppose that no blame is to be attached to their telling falsehoods, if no oath is involved. But that this should continue with the connivance and active support of the representatives of God's Law must be a monstrously unthinkable thing and a gross transgression of the spirit of the Second Commandment (Exod. 20:7). So, any oath is a binding oath, unless repented of and atoned for (Lev. 5:4-13).

c. God Is Omitted From Your System

By the temple . . . by the gold . . . by the altar . . . by the gift . . . by heaven . . . by the throne. Rather than believe, with Barclay (*Matthew*, II,323), that our Lord is here merely caricaturing Jewish legalistic methods by reducing them to the absurd, we may hold that He begins with a literal description of some of their conclusions in order to show the theological and logical fallacy involved in all the rest. Who can affirm that Jesus' contemporaries did not swear precisely as He affirms? They ignored the basic principle that an oath must be, as Matthew Henry (V, 336) put it, "an appeal to God, to His omniscience and justice; and to make this appeal to any creature is to put that creature in place of God"! By what justification, except moral blindness or unconfessed antagonism toward God, can man swear by anything but His Name?! Yet their every distinction had the effect of cutting God out of their sworn testimony and of blinding themselves to the interest God has in everything man says. In His place,

they called upon unliving things to be witness to their oaths, which could guarantee no truth and punish no perjury. But if any holiness belong to any of these mere things, it was only because of their association with God who is the final Cause of that holiness.

By multiplying the number of objects by which oaths were thought to be binding, the rabbis tended to make it more and more difficult to determine which oaths were valid, especially for the common man accustomed to the older, general oaths. The resultant tendency of the rabbinical decisions was to increase the possibilities for hypocritical, unintended affirmations without meaning and consequently the occasions for more deception. By driving men back to swearing by God alone (v. 21f.), Jesus aimed to re-establish reverent, God-fearing sincerity.

d. You Have Inverted All Values

23:17 Which is greater, the gold, or the temple that hath sanctified the gold? If the rabbis supposed that particular oaths are more binding than those sworn by the general category that includes the particular, Jesus' rhetorical question leads all to see that "the general includes and is more important than the particular" (Bruce, *Expositor's Greek Testament*, 281f.). As a guarantee of an oath, *the gold* is meaningless, except as it covers that *temple* dedicated to the holy Name of God who dwells there. Only this connection gives *the gold* significance. Without connection with God, nothing is holy!

23:18 The altar in question is the only place of sacrifice in Judaism, located in the Jerusalem temple, and *the gift that is upon it*, then, is the sacrifice itself. Moses himself had already established the greater importance of the altar: ". . . the altar will be most holy, and whatever touches it will be holy" (Exod. 29:37). Although the altar was pre-eminently holy and the gift only secondarily so, yet both had meaning only as concrete expressions of respect for the God who ordered both. Thus, there was no way to remove from oaths serious awareness of and awe for God's omniscience and justice. Only God makes things holy.

This concept of the sacredness of associations the Pharisees, however, had turned upside down by overturning the comparative value of each item. Not only were these Pharisean refinements mistaken per se, but they were actually a diabolical distortion of the theory of oathtaking, since they asserted that the lesser was somehow more sacred than the greater which gave the lesser its meaning.

4. Jesus' Concluding Evaluation

23:20 He therefore that sweareth by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all the things thereon. 21 And he that sweareth by the temple, sweareth by it and by him that dwelleth therein. 22 and he that sweareth by the heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon. Notice how simple it is to move from saying, "*by heaven*" as a veiled, but reverent, reference to God without using His Name, to saying, "*by heaven*" as a sinful evasion. Anyone who uses this expression to avoid responsibility to God for his words obviously intends no reverence at all by his reluctance to name God. This explains why Jesus must show what is really involved in using this dodge. Verse 22 affects all the others retrospectively: if *heaven is the throne of God* (Isa. 66:1), whence He reigns over everything else in His universe, then nothing exists that does not come under the authority of that throne, and nothing exists, therefore, by which man may swear that does not ultimately bring God its Creator and Owner into the question! In the final analysis, therefore, whether one swears by one created object or another is actually immaterial, since everything was created by God and belongs to Him. There is no way to exclude Him or His witness to man's sincerity. Conversely, to swear by anything, without intending to call God to witness one's integrity, is doubly wicked, because it misrepresents the meaning of oaths (a conscious appeal to deity to confirm our words and punish us if false) and because it ignores God's ownership of everything on which an oath could be based.

23:21 **the temple and him that dwelleth therein.** To refer to God in this way is not to deny that the very heavens cannot contain God, but to affirm that, so long as the Old Testament institutions were in force, God manifested His glory in a cloud between the cherubim above the ark of the covenant (Exod. 25:22; Num. 7:89; I Kings 8:10f., 27; Ps. 80:1).

On what basis does Aflord (230) assert: "God did *not then* dwell in the Temple, nor had He done so since the Captivity"? On the basis of Jewish tradition that the presence of the visible glory of God ("the Shekinah") was one of the items not restored in the Second Temple? (Cf. 2 Macc. 2:4-8; Josephus, *Wars*, V, 5,5; 2 Baruch 6:7; 4 Ezra 10:48; Mishnah, Yoma 21:2; cf. 5:2.) But even if the ark of the covenant were thought irreplaceable and the Glory enthroned thereon did not return, what would

that prove about GOD'S REAL PRESENCE in the Temple or in Jerusalem? Again, to affirm that the Shekinah departed from the Temple is not absolutely identical to saying that God Himself departed. That He should withhold the VISIBLE evidence of His presence is neither impossible nor unthinkable, but, without God's express declaration of His absence, who can affirm that He withheld His divine presence altogether? Was He somehow absent from Israel BEFORE the Glory came down, either at Sinai or at the dedication of Solomon's Temple? And was this not merely a visible pledge of His presence, granted to a nation in its spiritual childhood until it could learn to live like Moses, "as seeing Him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27)?

Jesus utilized present participles to describe God as dwelling in the Temple and as sitting on His throne (*Katoikoûnti*, v. 21; *katheméno*, v. 22). Now, if God was truly reigning in heaven when Jesus uttered these words, why should He be thought to have permanently abandoned the Temple centuries before? In fact, Jesus expressed both acts of God in identical language, i.e. with present participles.

Honesty and Integrity

Besides reverence toward God, Jesus is strengthening people's sense of honor and love of truthfulness. He is not concerned with merely unmasking Pharisean trick language and definitions that disguise lies nor is He interested in which formula they use to cheat their neighbors. Our Lord is much more concerned by the devastation wrought by dishonesty both on the liar himself and on the fabric of relations in the human family.

1. The pious lie, couched in the language of a solemn oath, ruins the liar himself, because it undermines his own faith in the word of everyone else with whom he comes into contact. He cannot trust them, because he must suspect them of using untrustworthy language as does he.
2. The fabric of social relationships is based on trust, but the lie ruins it, since the discovery of the deception sows doubt and distrust, nurtures suspicion, weakens public confidence, incites to fear and encourages people to deceive others to free themselves from deception.
3. Man's responsibility always to be truthful is undermined by the

mistaken belief that any of his words do not count, unless supported by oaths, or by the belief that any oath, not stated in the special formula, might legitimately be broken.

So, Jesus would save all these liars from the practical, evil consequences of their own vicious, self-damaging system, by revealing the deep, theological significance of all their oaths whatever their specific formulation. Further, He would save them from their certain destiny (Rev. 21:8). Most of all, Jesus would create in His hearers a sense of belonging to the entire family and, especially, to the family of God. (Cf. Eph. 4:25.) Only a deep sense of respect for the high holiness of God and for the preciousness of every human being can keep a person from deceiving another by specious oaths and empty words that only seem to be meant. Although Jesus preached an unadorned sincerity too honest to need oaths for confirmation, should an oath become necessary and be given, there can be no caviling or equivocation. (5:33-37 on which see notes.)

Criterion of False Religion

Any religion that encourages men on some technicality to side-step God-ordained duty to tell the truth, or permits them to cite the precise letter of the law to keep from obeying what the spirit of that law obviously requires, is a false religion. Any faith that by meaningless quibbles takes men's attention away from God, or that encourages trifling with truth and weakens men's sense of truthfulness and their fear of the Lord, is false.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. What is an oath? How does it work?
2. What had Jesus already taught about oaths and swearing? How does Jesus' teaching on oaths in this section compare with that given in the Sermon on the Mount on this subject?
3. What is the sin of which Jesus accuses the Pharisees in this section? Or is there more than one sin indicated?
4. What is the meaning of the Pharisean judgments: "he is debtor" and "it is nothing"? What were they meaning to accomplish by pronouncing these judgments?
5. What, according to Jesus, is the major principle that people must remember when swearing by the altar, by its sacrifices, by the temple, by heaven and by the throne?

6. What was the Pharisean doctrine on swearing by the temple, the altar, heaven and God's throne? How did Jesus expose the absurdity of their views?
7. Jesus called the Pharisees "blind guides." In what way were they (1) blind and (2) guides?

TEXT: 23:23, 24

23 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye tithe mint and anise and cummin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law, justice, and mercy, and faith: but these ye ought to have done, and not to have left the other undone. 24 Ye blind guides, that strain out the gnat, and swallow the camel!

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. If there are "weightier matters of the law," does not this make other matters in the same law less weighty? Was Jesus indifferent about these lesser matters? Can anyone give too much attention to little things? Explain what you mean.
- b. What is the greatest commandment? What is the second greatest? What makes them greater and more important than others? Do you think Jesus meant to ignore love as one of the weightier matters of the law? (Cf. Luke 11:42.)
- c. Are there big and little sins? Does Jesus' distinction between weightier and (by implication) less weighty matters of the law suggest that some sins could be less important than others?
- d. What is the criterion by which Jesus distinguishes "the weightier matters" from tithing mint, anise and cummin?
- e. People in Jesus' day gave exaggerated attention to little things while ignoring the great principles of justice, mercy and faith. Do you think it is possible for people in our day to do just the opposite, i.e. give great attention to great principles while ignoring items they would refer to as nonessential details, even though God ordered them?
- f. While it is true that Christians are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14), is there a sense in which we too operate under the principle of observing the weightier matters of justice, mercy and faith, without neglecting the other things required of us? If so, how would you illustrate this?

- g. What do you think is wrong with people who are very scrupulous about (relatively) less important rituals, and yet who readily justify greed, impurity, dishonesty, cruelty and other sins in which they are personally involved?
- h. Some brethren believe that this text is Jesus' last word on church finance, i.e. that tithing is hereby reinstated in the Christian system. Do you think they have correctly interpreted Jesus? If so, explain. If not, why not?

PARAPHRASE

How terrible for you teachers of the Law and Pharisees, pretenders! You give God a tenth of your smallest garden spices like mint, aniseed and cummin, but you have neglected the most vital provisions of the Law, like justice, mercy and integrity! These are the things you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, you carefully strain everything for fear of drinking an unclean animal like a gnat, yet you do not notice that you are swallowing a camel whole!"

SUMMARY

Hypocrites are people who, among other things, are scrupulous about trivialities, but grossly negligent about duties of highest and gravest importance.

NOTES

Majoring In Minors

23:23 Ye tithe mint and anise and cummin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith. (Cf. Luke 11:42.) Jesus' first vivacious illustration of rabbinical wrong emphasis is the preposterous snapshot of a squinting Pharisee, patiently counting one out of every ten parts of *mint, anise and cummin*, while long, dusty cobwebs gather on his practice of *justice, mercy and faith*.

Too much could be made, however, of the fact that the Law named only grain, grapes and olives to be tithed (Lev. 27:30ff.; Num. 18:24, 26; Deut. 14:22ff.; 26:12). Some affirm that the inclusion of *mint, anise and cummin* was an "illegitimately over-extending . . . of the law" (Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 831). While the Talmud, too, pictures

tithing of herbs as a refinement of the rabbis (Bruce, *Expositor's Greek Testament*, 282), hence apparently not originally intended by the Law nor practiced by earlier Jews closer to Moses, several points are to be noticed in its favor:

1. The Law did not list in detail ALL of its proper, potential applications, but necessarily limited itself to key illustrations, leaving all unresolved questions in the hands of the Judaic judiciary. (Cf. Deut. 1:9-18; 17:8-13; 19:17; 25:1; remember Paul's argument in I Cor. 9:9f.) On other occasions questions were resolved by prophets. (Cf. Zech. 7:1—8:23.) Even so, Deuteronomy 26:2 specifies: "first-fruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land," while Deuteronomy 26:12 mentions: "a tenth of all your produce," so to tithe garden spices would technically not over-extend the Law's actual precept. In fact, Jews closer to Moses than the Talmudists understood they must tithe not only grain, wine and oil, but also honey (II Chron. 31:5: "all that the fields produced"), "fruit of all the trees" (Neh. 10:35, 37, not merely olive oil).
2. Although Rabbinism typically and wrongly over-stretched the Law in many cases, is this what has actually occurred here? In Jesus' words there is no discernible criticism of the Pharisean choice to tithe garden herbs. He did not affirm, "*These*, that is, God's revealed tithing precepts (not human exaggerations added to them), *ye ought to have done*," but simply, "*These ye ought to have done . . .*," leaving *mint, anise and cummin* to be tithed along with grain, wine and oil.
3. The extraordinary meticulousness of Pharisees regarding their tithing is, in itself, commendable, because they had covenanted before God not to appropriate for personal use anything that rightly belonged to Him, however great or small it might be. If only more Christians would share this same conscientiousness and faithfulness in small things (Luke 16:10f.; 19:17).

No, Jesus' emphasis lies in another direction: You are *hypocrites, for ye tithe . . . and have left undone the weightier matters of the law*. That the Mosaic system had at its base great, overriding principles is well-documented both in the Law and by the Prophets (Deut. 10:12-22; Prov. 21:3; Isa. 1:16f.; Jer. 22:3; Zech. 7:9f.; Mic. 6:8 and the list of other text at 22:36 notes.) *The weightier matters of the law* are these grand principles that give purpose to its every part. *Justice* to the oppressed, *mercy* where strict justice cannot solve the problem

humanely, and *faith* in God as well as faithfulness to God in seeking conscientiously to apply His Word, are just some of the broad, foundational ethical rules upon which genuine holiness and true righteousness are grounded and on which every other item of specific legislation is based. Jesus had already mentioned love for God and man (Luke 11:42; Matt. 22:34-40). Here, too, He expects every disciple to judge every minor detail of everyday life according to this criterion: "Does what I am doing express *the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and faith and the love of God?*" Man's choice, then, is not these *weightier matters* OR *tithing* and other minutiae, but the one AND the other, the one THROUGH the other.

In fact, to tithe one's goods under the Jewish system meant to act *justly* by giving back to God what is *justly* His (Lev. 27:30), to be used for the support of the Levitical priesthood (Num. 18:21) and for *mercy* to the poor (Deut. 14:28f.), in *faith* trusting God's system to be right. Or, to put it another way, Jewish tithing expressed one phase, even if minor, of *justice* (because done precisely like God required and because, regardless of one's income, tithing was uniformly just), of *mercy* (because it furnished the means to care for the needy), of *faith* (because God promised to make it possible to live on the remainder and prosper, so I will do it because I trust Him) and of the love of God (because He can be completely trusted to know what is best for me, whether I can perfectly understand and justify it or not). Jesus' complaint, then, is that, in their tithing, the Pharisees were merely going through the motions, for they *left the other undone*, that is, they were not tithing as an expression of the great principles of true religion, but quite irrespective of them.

It is simply not true, therefore, that a proper sense of proportion, so fundamental to an even-balanced Christian expression, requires us to believe that not all duties are equally important, or that to fail to discern which is important and which less so is to lack spiritual equilibrium. The Jews were right to think: "Be careful over a light precept as over a weighty" but they mistook the reason: "for thou knowest not the giving of the rewards of the precepts (i.e. how divine approval will be expressed concerning each one)" (Aboth 2:1). This equality of duties is a valid understanding, because the supposedly "light precepts," that appear less important, are actually the examples, the illustrations, the cases in point which express the so-called "heavy precepts."

The rabbinical error signalled here by Jesus was their gross partiality in matters of the Law. (Cf. Mal. 2:9.) They believed themselves free

to select which duty they would obey, despite God's expectation (Num. 15:39f.; Deut. 5:1, 32f.; 6:24f.; 8:1; 11:22; chap. 30) and Israel's own explicit promise to be obedient in all things. (Cf. Exod. 19:8; 24:3, 7; Josh. 24:24.) Anyone whose righteousness is expected to come from the Law (Deut. 6:25) must do everything it requires (Deut. 27:26 = Gal. 3:10; James 2:10).

Why do hypocrites of every age take hyper-zealousness for microscopic regulations as the route to righteousness? The rationale is not hard to discover:

1. If it is a good name and fame for godliness he seeks, the hypocrite will even show burning zeal for easy-to-do, relatively insignificant rules to purchase the prestige of being religiously conscientious. In the same motion he can conveniently pay passing respect to God too. This is bargain-basement religion: two for the price of one!
2. It is easier to tithe (or pray in public or go to church or whatever) than it is to do those essential things that really matter to God, like having a deep passion for justice, kindness and true-heartedness. Consistent justice, patient mercy and unfailing integrity are expensive in terms of self-denial, energy and time, too expensive for the self-seeking person.
3. The bigot is hypocritical because he considers important only that which he personally can understand or what expresses the distinctives of this sect. Broad, fundamental principles like *justice, mercy, faith and the love of God*, are too nebulous for him, because they admit too many requirements than his limited understanding or sectarian tradition permits him to conceive.
4. The man of narrow interests, sympathies or outlook sees just a few inconsiderable articles of religion as big. Anything mind-stretching that would require him to think or reconsider the limitedness of his own worldview or concerns is positively painful to contemplate.

It is no accident, therefore, that, in order to lead us back to an equilibrated moral sanity, Jesus ordered: *These (weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and faith), ye ought to have done, and not to have left the other (tithing of mint, anise and cummin) undone.* He expects both: herein is His true sense of balance. Unlike some modern religionists impatient with ceremonies and details, Jesus approves of conscientiousness toward principles and particulars. On the other hand, excessive attention to small details cannot atone

for neglect of large ones. Some disciples today are very strict about church attendance, but unconcerned about their life the rest of the time. Others are strict about identifying themselves by the terms set forth in the Bible, even about "restoring the New Testament Church and calling things by Bible names" (good ideals in themselves), but are strangely unconcerned about being what the terms signify. We must mistrust the misplaced seriousness of that religious zeal that burns itself out on trivial matters but has neither time nor energy remaining for the truly important things God prefers.

One sad irony is the use of this text (23:23) today by preachers seeking some divine fiscal bludgeon to nudge their members into giving God money. Ignoring the obvious address to Jews for whom tithing was obligatory by law under the Mosaic economy, these text doctors grasp at Jesus' words: *these ye ought to have done and NOT LEFT THE OTHER UNDONE,*" and miss two whole CHAPTERS of truly Christian motivations in II Corinthians 8 and 9. Like the Pharisees of old, these modern legalists fail to see there really are some higher Christian principles that are more truly motivating encouragements to give God money than the external compulsion of a tithing law. Perhaps a sadder irony is the Christian who neither tithes nor responds to God's grace, and just leaves everything undone.

The Proverbial Clincher

23:24 Ye blind guides, that strain out the gnat, and swallow the camel! To clinch the point of His previous assertion Jesus moves His audience with another of His humorous sketches. In this one a Pharisee painstakingly strains a drowned gnat out of his drink lest he contaminate himself ceremonially by swallowing that almost visible, but unclean, insect (Lev. 11:20ff.), without even noticing an equally unclean camel (Lev. 11:4) in the same glass, and so he guzzles it right down! (Another facet of this exquisite portrayal is that there may have been a Jewish pun back of His choice of animals: a *gnat* is *kamla'* but a *camel* is *gamla'*; Marshall, *Challenge of NT Ethics*, 61). But the Lord is not merely poking fun at Pharisees. His point is serious: these sectarians laid great stress on inflexibly precise observance of minor regulations (*straining out the gnat*), but consistently ignored gross violations of justice, mercy and faith (*swallowing the camel*). Several illustrations of this twisted sense of duty occur:

1. They would pray long prayers pretending to be pious, but were especially clever at reducing unwary widows to poverty (Mark 12:40 = Luke 20:47).
2. They criticized Jesus' disciples for their unwashed hands (violation of tradition), but instructed people to ignore honor to aged parents (violation of God's Law) (Matt. 15:1-20).
3. Rather than be defiled, hence disqualified from participation in religious ceremonies, they refused to enter a Gentile's house, but hovered around outside, screaming for the judicial murder of an innocent Man (John 18:28—19:16).
4. Sadducean priests were not better to pay out blood money for the betrayal of an innocent Man, but then to quibble over a scruple against putting the same tainted money into the holy coffers (Matt. 26:14ff.; 27:4-10).

Their sin lay, not in straining out the gnat, but in swallowing down the camel. We too must give attention to important details. Faithfulness in small matters is a character index of trustworthiness for greater things (Luke 16:10ff.; 10:17; Matt. 25:21). If God did not order Christians to strain out gnats nor tithe garden herbs, but He did specify some other apparently minor detail, then He wants it done. We must scrupulously endeavor to do everything He asks.

Criterion of False Religion

Any faith that permits its adherents to lose their sense of proportion and become carefully meticulous about religious trivia and trifles, while remaining indifferent to the things that really matter with God, is a false religion, regardless of its official name, origins or past history.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. What is involved in tithing? Where did people learn to do this? Why was tithing necessary?
2. What were the Pharisees doing when they tithed mint, anise and cummin?
3. What are "mint, anise and cummin" used for?
4. What, according to Jesus, are "the weightier matters of the law"? Define each one, showing how each deserves this high title.
5. What principle is involved in Jesus' maxim: "these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others"?

6. What did the gnat and the camel have in common in Jewish thinking?
7. Explain the comment about "straining out gnats and swallowing camels." What does the gnat refer to? What is the camel? What is meant by straining out the one and swallowing the other?
8. What attitude is shown by Jesus toward the less significant features of the Mosaic Law? How does this attitude harmonize with His other teachings about the Law?
9. To whom was Jesus speaking when He said, "This you ought to have done and not left the other undone"?

TEXT: 23:25-28

25 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye cleanse the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full from extortion and excess. 26 Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first the inside of the cup and of the platter, that the outside thereof may become clean also.

27 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchers, which outwardly appear beautiful, but inwardly are full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. 28 Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but inwardly ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Is Jesus merely displeased with the way Pharisees washed their dishes? What are the "cups and platters" which are full of extortion and excess? Are the dishes to be understood literally or figuratively? If literally, how can they be "full from extortion and excess"? If figuratively, what do they represent here? Is it likely that the Pharisees would ever wash merely the outside of a dish and not also the inside with the same scrupulousness?
- b. In washing dishes one must work at cleansing both the inside and the outside. In the moral realm, however, Jesus thinks that cleansing the inside will actually cleanse the outside too. How does this work?
- c. How did it happen that such good men, as the Pharisees outwardly appeared to be, could actually involve themselves in the vicious sins of extortion and excess, hypocrisy and iniquity of which Jesus accuses them here?

- d. Are you a member of "the true church of Christ" whose members adhere to the strictest rule of piety and profess loyalty to God and faithfulness to His law? If so, what is there to keep any member of your congregation from committing any one of the great sins Jesus exposes here? What practical steps are you taking to keep this from happening? Is your plan working?
- e. What are the things that truly contaminate or defile the modern Christian?
- f. Does it really matter to you if your life is corrupted by the uncleanness around you? Does purity of heart really matter to you? What, specifically, are you doing to purify your heart?

PARAPHRASE

"How terrible for you, doctors of the Law and Pharisees, you fakes! You polish the outside of the cup and plate, but fill them with the plunder from your greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First polish the inside of the cup and plate, and the outside will be clean too. How terrible for you theologians and Pharisees, hypocrites! You resemble sepulchers covered with whitewash: on the outside they look fine, but on the inside they are full of dead men's bones and rotten stuff! You are just like that: from the outside you seem to others to be saintly people, but you have hearts brimful of pretense and lawlessness."

SUMMARY

Behavior modification that does not involve the transformation of man's heart—his intellect, conscience, desires and will—must be declared a miserable failure. Mere external change leaves the greed and the self-indulgence that lies at the root of all moral anarchy.

NOTES

Cleansing the Outside

23:25 Woe unto you . . . for ye cleanse the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full from extortion and excess. (Cf. Luke 11:39.) Jesus' language sparkles with brilliant satire as He sketches a line of Pharisees busily washing dishes with great ceremony and seriousness. Inexplicably, however, they are scrubbing

only *the outside of the cup and platter*. In Scene II we see these same sectarians loading their plates and cups with food obtained by their exploitation of others. From these they eat to excess.

Here again Jesus' caricature of Pharisean piety concerns obedience to a command of God that all Israel maintain ceremonial purity even to the extent of washing contaminated objects such as *cups and platters* (Lev. 11:32), a law rigorously respected and expanded by this party (Mark 7:4). From the standpoint of Pharisean theology, this section neatly connects with the preceding, because, along with punctilious tithing, scrupulous Levitical purity was one of the characteristic trademarks of the orthodox Pharisee. (Cf. Edersheim, *Life*, I,312.) Remember the water-pots at the Cana wedding feast, intended for purification (John 2:6). But that the Lord does not mean to criticize the way Pharisees washed their dishes is evident, because a PHARISEE, careful enough to scrub the outside, would surely be scrupulous to cleanse the inside too. But, by a surprising switch expressed by the contrast, *the outside . . . but within*, He draws attention to a stark contradiction in what the Pharisees themselves are doing. Although earnestly scrupulous with the meticulous cleaning of their dinner plates, they show no concern that these same dishes are re-polluted by the ill-gotten food and drink with which they are filled. Note His wording: *within they are full FROM extortion and excess (ex harpagês kai akrasias)*. He speaks, not merely of the contents of the plates, but also of the source of their content.

1. *Extortion (harpagês)* is the act of plundering, but, used of super-pious hypocrites like the Pharisees, Jesus may refer to the unfair use of their legal rights to extract wealth from others. For example, appearing to labor honestly, they used their inside knowledge of the Law and their contrived definitions to rob people. With cruel finesse they could deprive a widow of her living or property, and, by Jesus' account, often did (Mark 12:40 = Luke 20:47; cf. Isa. 10:1f.). Not unlikely the Pharisee could fully justify this rapaciousness to himself, arguing that foreclosure on a widow's mortgage was his just due. But, because of the heartlessness it involved, the Lord rules it *extortion!* (Cf. Exod. 22:22-27; Deut. 24:17f.; 15:7-11; 10:14-22; Prov. 15:25; 23:10f.; Jer. 7:6; 22:3.) It is not because they did not have the right, but because their sinful, unquenchable thirst for more (*pleonexia*, greed) betrayed itself in a ruthless, at least formally legal, exploitation of the weak. (Cf. Luke 16:14f.)

It is a fraudulent use of God's Law to utilize it to impoverish His people (I Tim. 1:8; cf. Lev. 25:25ff.; Deut. 15:1-11; 23:19f.; 24:6, 10-13)!

2. *Excess (akrasias*, literally, lacking self-control, intemperate, incontinent). However, in what way does Jesus intend this accusation?
 - a. In the TAKING of what fills his bowls? If so, this Pharisee, normally a strait-laced bigot that holds everyone else to the letter of the law, indulges himself, taking liberties by bending the rules for his own convenience. He does not hold himself to the law.
 - b. Or in the USING of what fills his bowls? Undoubtedly, the self-indulgent Pharisee could rationalize any intemperance in meat or drink by asking, "Am I not to enjoy God's lavish reward for my righteousness? Should I not eat and drink to the full so as to do justice to His bounty?!"

Thus, it could be both, since in this case excess in taking unbridled liberties with the law and the property of others furnished the hypocrite with opportunity for further self-indulgence.

So, by their excessive attention to ritual purity (*cleansing the outside of the cup and platter*) these pretenders purchased a reputation for being saintly men with whom everyone could trust the safe-keeping of their soul and earthly property. But from behind this smoke-screen of apparent rigorousness, they struck their unsuspecting victims with the viciousness and venom of a rattlesnake. Whether or not the Pharisees intended this facade as a hunter's blind to conceal their true intentions and movements, this was virtually its function.

23:26 Thou blind Pharisee: see notes on 23:13. *Blind* to the iniquity in their own lives, they neither discerned it nor hated it. So, to unmask it to their face is to make possible their salvation. (Cf. Rev. 3:17ff.; Jer. 4:14; Ps. 51:2, 7, 10.) They were *blind* to Old Testament religion that taught heart purity as the only definitive condition whereby external cleansing had any validity. They were *blind* not to perceive that to fill their cup and platter with the loot from their extortion and intemperance rendered them UNCLEAN because SIN POLLUTES everything it touches more so than any Levitical contamination ever could! So, Jesus opens their eyes to the obvious solution: "Get to the source of your problem: clean up the inside first and the rest will be easy!"

Now, if the inside of the cup and the platter are rendered impure by what filled them, i.e. by the tainted contents obtained by oppressing

others, then the command, *cleanse first the inside*, must mean: (1) earn your food honestly, (2) eliminate those crooked methods, i.e. the plunder and license, that formerly furnished your food and drink. The only ethical way to remove the fruits of plunder is to return everything extorted to the victims. Zacchaeus understood this and applied Jesus' teaching correctly, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Luke 19:8; cf. Exod. 22:1-15).

The foregoing interpretation takes Jesus' words more or less literally as referring to the spiritually proper approach to decontamination of literal eating vessels. But is Jesus merely interested in teaching Pharisees the truly godly way to wash their dishes, so they will be Levitically pure with the cleanness God intended in the Mosaic Law? If so, His point and its immediate application ends here.

On the other hand we may ask whether Jesus carries in His mind here the same concept He expressed earlier (Luke 11:39-41), where He discussed *tò éxōthen* and *tò ésōthen*, the outside and inside of the Pharisees' lives. There He referred to their hidden motives and their observable, external conduct, a point, incidentally, which He will underscore in His next illustrations (Matt. 23:27ff.). So it is not uncontextual to think of this meaning as underlying His thought even here (v. 26). There He said, "The inside of you is full of extortion and wickedness" (Luke 11:39: *tò dè èsōthen humôn gémei harpagês kai ponēriās*). They had not seen that "He who made the outside made the inside too" and were ordered to "give for alms those things which are within" with the result that "everything is clean for you." Thus, if Jesus is speaking in metaphors, the vessels stand for the human soul. The external cleansing, then, is the Pharisean attempt to change external behavior without getting at the true cause of all defilement, the sin deep in man's heart, whereby he corrupts everything he touches.

Cleanse first the inside . . . that the outside thereof may become clean also, means: Deal with a man's heart and those sins of the spirit that make him act the way he does! When his heart belongs to God by sanctification, whatever that man does or says will reflect his inner cleansing. (Ezek. 36:25-27; James 4:7f. pictures people of polluted hands [deeds] and impure hearts [mixed motives] as "double-minded." Such hypocrites have a public image and a private life that are in conflict. Cf. Titus 1:15f. Thus, total cleansing and unconditional submission to God is the only route back to sanity and freedom, to joy and true exaltation.) Get rid of your extortion and excess by a

truly godly repentance and holiness in your private life, and the external ceremonies of your religion will be properly observed as a matter of course. Jesus' solution (Luke 11:40f.) prescribed turning the greed that filled them into practical generosity to the poor, and to the surprise (*kai idou!*) of the new regenerated hearts, they would find everything truly pure for them, because a clean heart produces a clean life and pure actions. (See notes introductory to the Sermon on the Mount.

Concealing the Inside

Again Jesus illustrates the concept taught in the preceding charge: the fallacy of scrupulous concern for externals that neglects a revolving inner character. Because He explained His own meaning, let Him be our Teacher:

23:27

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!

for ye are like unto whited sepulchers which outwardly appear beautiful, but inwardly are full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.

23:28

Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but inwardly ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

Men *whited sepulchers* for two reasons:

1. So they could be identified as tombs lest passersby defile themselves through unconcious contact with the dead (cf. Num. 19:11-16). In Luke 11:44 Jesus taught that men were defiled by touching an unmarked tomb, since there was nothing to warn people of its presence. Consequently, white-washing remedied this defect. Here (23:27f.), however, His point is different, because Pharisees, as *whited sepulchers*, would presumably warn others that the defilement of death and corruption is near. Further, no Pharisee would have believed that others' contact with his superior holiness could do anything but bless. Hence, he certainly would not have warned others to avoid him by "whitening the sepulcher."
2. So they would *appear outwardly beautiful* is the reason given here by the Lord for their white-washing (cf. 23:29). A beautified funerary monument can be a masterpiece. But this work of art, although it reflect the taste and skill of its builder, is *inwardly full of dead men's bones and of all uncleanness*. The eye-pleasing

exterior beguiles the beholder into supposing the tomb's contents to be innocuous, rather, as lovely as its facade. Unhappily, this mistake leads as surely to his contamination as if the grave had never been marked and he stumbled onto it by accident.

Outwardly . . . inwardly: it is precisely this difference between a person's real character and his public reputation that distinguishes the hypocrite. This is true whether or not the hypocrite is fully aware of the dissimilarity. (See on 23:13, "blind guides.") Nevertheless, what a man is inwardly, what he does secretly, when he supposes himself most alone, this is what he is. Any distinction between this and what he wants others to know about him gauges the depth of his dissimulation. Barclay (*Matthew*, II, 328) graphically sketched this fake:

A man may walk with bowed head, and reverent steps, and folded hands in the posture of humility, but all the time he may be looking down with cold contempt on those whom he regards as sinners; his very humility may be the pose of pride; and as he walks so humbly, he may be thinking with relish of the picture of piety which he presents to those who are watching him.

Ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but inwardly ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. Even Josephus (*Ant.* XVII,2,4) documents their fraudulent faith: they "valued themselves highly upon the exact skill they had in the law of their fathers, and made men believe they were highly favoured by God." Then he described how the Pharisees led some noble women on with deception, enticing them to do what was against their best interests. Undoubtedly, the Pharisean ideal was, as indeed our own must be, "the beauty of holiness." (Cf. Ps. 29:2; 96:9.) But their legalism, as also Christian legalism, produces this unvarying result: outwardly, the convert is cleaned up and freed from the crasser forms of paganism. By focusing his attention on trying to conform to a set of commonly accepted rules without the soul-transforming power of a new birth (John 3:10), he produces an impressive show of religiousness. By fulfilling the role expected of him by his ecclesiastical community, he *appears righteous* to his peers, notwithstanding the contradiction between his private reasons for keeping the rules and the public impression he makes on others. Luke (16:15) suggests that their external white-washing was not mere moral cosmetics, but immoral pride that justifies itself to convince others of its goodness. God, however, always discerns

the not-always-obvious difference. (Cf. I Sam. 16:7.) To appear *righteous before men* had been their goal so as to enjoy human approval, rather than that of God who sees and judges the darkest secrets of men's hearts. "And it will then be small comfort to . . . hypocrites, to remember how creditably and plausibly they went to hell, applauded by all their neighbors" (Matthew Henry, V, 339). So, despite the Pharisees' best intentions, their hypocritical character was itself a necessary, natural product of their system of social reform. By laying great stress on patient, punctilious performance of lesser precepts while (perhaps unconsciously) neglecting the love, justice, mercy and faith that really count with God, they created a dichotomy that corrupted their own hearts and others by real iniquity.

In strident contrast with Pharisean pretensions to be honored by others (23:6f.), Jesus explains why they should be avoided! Anyone in the company of a Pharisean rabbi, whose unimpeachable external conduct exuded an intensely religious atmosphere of earnest piety, would probably consider himself twice blessed, not realizing how defiling or how morally compromising such company really is. Although not every Pharisee deliberately concealed his true character from others, he nonetheless spread the moral contagion Jesus describes in this chapter, and no one suspected anything. No wonder Jesus alerted others to this danger!

The Fundamental Principle Is Moral Purity

Other texts of Scripture, that speak of Christian purity and its defilement, point clearly to SIN IN THE HEART as the source of true contamination. (Cf. 5:8, 21f., 28f., 37, 44f.; 6:1, 3, 6, 18, 24, 33f.; 15:19.) Other texts underline the motive for everything we do. (Cf. I Tim. 1:5; Eph. 6:24; I Peter 1:22.) Others warn that desire for social approval can corrupt good morals. (I Cor. 15:33f.; James 4:4; John 5:44.) Other texts furnish incentive to remove all corruption, by describing the respective destiny of the corrupt and of the pure. (Cf. Rev. 21:7f., 27; 22:11-15.) So, the contradiction between inner and outer self-expression can be overcome, when the inner good character is the only true motive for our outward actions and attitudes, even if we are repeatedly anguished to see how often our practice falls short of our ideals. Moral consistency is obtainable, paradoxically, by confessing that we do not possess it, because in the confession we strip aside the veil that hides our inner self (James 5:16). Moral

purity can be had by being constantly aware that God, whose praise or blame counts with us, sees every discrepancy between motives and conduct, and by our living so as to have only one motive behind all that we do: to please Him (II Cor. 5:9-11, 14f.).

FACT QUESTIONS

1. What are the cups and plates which the Pharisees washed?
2. To what Mosaic law is reference made in the allusion to dish-washing?
3. Explain how the cups and plates could be "full from extortion and rapacity."
4. Explain what is meant by cleansing the inside of such vessels so that the outside would also be clean.
5. Explain the allusion to whitewashed tombs and tell why they furnished so apt an illustration of Pharisean character.
6. Explain how Pharisees' own hypocrisy is the necessary, natural product of their own system of social reform.
7. What other Biblical passages speak to the subject of uncleanness and purity in the life of Christians?

TEXT: 29-36

29 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye build the sepulchres of the prophets, and garnish the tombs of the righteous, 30 and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we should not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. 31 Wherefore ye witness to yourselves, that ye are sons of them that slew the prophets. 32 Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. 33 Ye serpents, ye offspring of vipers, how shall ye escape the judgment of hell? 34 Therefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: some of them shall ye kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city: 35 that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of Abel the righteous unto the blood of Zachariah son of Barachiah, whom ye slew between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Do you think Jesus intends to condemn the Pharisees for "building the sepulchres of the prophets and garnishing the tombs of the

- righteous"? Should they have done that? If not, why not? If so, what spirit?
- b. Why is the confident affirmation of the Pharisees, "If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets," just another hypothesis contrary to fact?
 - c. What is so damning about the Pharisees' use of the expression "our fathers"? Jesus sees it as the basis for driving home His accusation.
 - d. Why do you think the ancient prophets, whose tombs these hypocrites beautified, were hated in their own day? Why were they honored by succeeding generations, who, according to Jesus, really shared the same attitude as those who killed them originally? Explain how this really exemplifies a typical characteristic of human nature, hence repeatable in our own times.
 - e. If, according to Jesus' argument, the Pharisees confessed themselves worthy heirs of the slayers of God's prophets, how can Jesus order them to "fill up, then, the measure of your fathers"? Is this not inciting them to further evil? Why would Jesus Christ saying anything so provocative? What could possibly be gained by this?
 - f. Jesus termed the Pharisees "serpents, offspring of vipers." Is this a nice way to talk to people one hopes to win to one's cause? Or did Jesus have any such hope now? Who had already used this language to describe this crowd?
 - g. How do you account for Jesus' vehement, judgmental language: "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell"? What does HE know about their final fate?
 - h. How does Jesus' promise to send Israel "prophets, wise men and scribes" become a tacit declaration of His deity?
 - i. Do you see Jesus' prediction that Israel would kill and crucify, scourge and persecute His messengers as a prophecy or as an astute observation about the probabilities? If He knew the Pharisees were persecuting Him, could He not have guessed, with considerable accuracy, that they would do much the same to His followers?
 - j. If Jesus found the "scribes" to be constantly opposing His teaching and mission, how could He justify sending "scribes" to Israel? What was the position of the scribe in ancient Jewish life? What modern term(s) would you use to paraphrase what Jesus meant? To what function in the New Testament Church is Jesus here referring?

- k. Jesus said, "Therefore I send you prophets, some of whom you will kill . . . that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth. . . ." What logical connection is there between the multiplied blood guiltiness for all the righteous ever slain and the mistreatment of Jesus' messengers? Is He sending these messengers for the *purpose* of increasing Israel's guilt? Or would this be but an undesired, however, inevitable, *result* of His sending them? Why does He begin by saying, "Therefore . . ."?
- l. Just how many righteous people murdered do you think Jesus meant in this reference to "all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah"?
- m. Do you not think it unjust of God to bring the guilt of the murders of all the righteous upon the Jewish people, since they had not personally committed them? Is Jesus ignoring the ancient law of personal accountability: "The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself"? (Cf. Ezek. 18; Deut. 24:16; Jer. 31:30.)
- n. Jesus refers to a "Zechariah, son of Barachiah, slain between the sanctuary and the altar." But the only Zechariah murdered in Biblical history is "son of Jehoida," not Barachiah. (Cf. II Chron. 24:20ff.) The only Zechariah "son of Barachiah" is the writing prophet about whose death nothing is known. Luke (11:51) omits the father's name altogether. Worse yet, Jesus accuses the Pharisees of having slain him ("whom you murdered . . ."). How do you deal with this problem?
- o. In what sense do you think Jesus meant the expression "this generation" in His warning, "All these things will come upon this generation"?
- p. Do you think some modern Christians are tempted to boast of the great, spiritual accomplishments of past spiritual giants, while at the same time cutting down their own contemporaries who teach the same message and manifest the same righteousness as the past heroes themselves? Explain. If you think people do this, what is wrong with them? What makes them do this?

PARAPHRASE

"How terrible for you text doctors and sectarians, false faces! You erect funerary monuments for the prophets and embellish the

burial places of good men. Piously you assert, 'If WE had lived in our fathers' day and time, we would not have joined with them in killing the prophets.' So you do admit that you are sons of the very men who assassinated God's spokesmen! Now it is your turn: go ahead and finish what your fathers began! You poisonous snakes, hatched by murderous reptiles: how can you escape being condemned to hell? But take notice that I, on my part, am therefore going to send you prophets, sages and Biblical scholars. Some of these you will slay, even crucify. Some you will flog in your synagogues and hunt down from one town to another. In the plan of God this is so that you will become guilty of all those innocents whose blood has been shed on earth, beginning with the murder of innocent Abel and ending with the assassination of Zechariah, Barachiah's son, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. I can tell you for sure that all the punishment of this guilt will be borne by the generation now living!"

SUMMARY

Men sanctimoniously boast of the monumental moral achievements of past spiritual giants, while cutting down their own contemporaries who preach the same truth and uphold the same standards as those ancient heroes. Such hypocrisy is punishable in hell. Nevertheless, such conduct would not deter Jesus from dispatching His messengers to save Israel, even though He clearly foresees their maltreatment. But just as clearly He announces the impending judgment to fall upon the generation then living as punishment for the guilt of slaughtering God's spokesmen.

NOTES

A Rancorous and Persecuting Spirit, Guilty of Murdering God's Witnesses

23:29 Woe unto you . . . for ye build the sepulchers of the prophets, and garnish the tombs of the righteous. (Cf. Luke 11:47f.) How these words must have stung the shocked hearers! Israel owed so much to the ministry of its prophets and to the moral grandeur and fearless proclamation of men whose very lives reproved Israel's transgressions and called the nation back to God. The nation ostensibly wished to express its thanks by honoring these valiant spiritual warriors of God

by erecting monuments in their memory or by replacing ruder, previous structures with finer, more ornate ones. Such high tribute, by reflection, appeared to honor Him who sent them. For its promoters to hear Jesus define the seemingly laudible tomb projects as a gross lack of honesty or sincerity, could be no less than offensive. But our Lord nonetheless correctly terms it "hypocrisy," because, although they may be blind to the true significance of their deeds, their actions are quite out of harmony with their professed principles. Their two-facedness lies in claiming to be troubled by the assassination of God's messengers in the past, while they were even then scheming to snuff out a living Prophet who reproached them for their own darling sins. Because it morally costs them nothing (no need to repent or change), Jesus' contemporaries willingly pay their respects to the courageous prophets whose voice for God was not silenced by the angry bellowing of their contemporaries. Rather than honor those worthies by reproducing their godliness and submitting to their doctrine, these hypocrites erected monumental mausoleums only to perpetuate their memory, while crucifying those ancients' modern colleagues.

Note the association: *prophets and righteous men*. (Cf. 10:41; 13:17; study the use of "prophets and saints" in reference to God's people martyred for their testimony, in Revelation 11:18; 16:6; 18:20, 24). *Righteous men* belong right beside *the prophets*, because their lives testify to their recognition of the will of God and accuse the bad conscience of the wicked, as much as do the verbal testimonies of the prophets. Life, character and godly example all count! This explains why Jesus put this climactic woe last. It exposes the root problem that accounts for all the others. Israel's unconscionable indifference to God's men was tantamount to rebellion against Him to whom the godly were uncompromisingly faithful. (See notes on 10:40ff.; cf. Luke 10:16; John 12:44; 13:20; Acts 16:15; Gal. 4:14; I Thess. 2:13.) It was because the Traditionalist Theologians of Israel really cared little about honoring God that they could act as Jesus described in this entire chapter. Further, while other sins were bad enough, the sin of despising God's heralds, scoffing at His prophets and murdering innocent people who refuse to go along, recreates the same moral climate that led to the Babylonian captivity: "there was no remedy" (II Chron. 36:16) "and the Lord was not willing to forgive" (II Kings 24:3f.; cf. Jer. 15:1ff.). If it be thought hard to believe that God's people could so cruelly mistreat His prophets, consider the evidence. Constantly harrassed, Jeremiah was tried and

23:29, 30

barely acquitted, but poor Urijah fell victim to the sword of Jehoiakim (Jer. 26; cf. 32:1ff.; 36; 37:16ff.; 38). Amos was a *persona non grata* in Israel (Amos 7:10ff.). The uncompromising Micaiah was imprisoned by Ahab (I Kings 22:1-28). King Asa jailed Hanani (II Chron. 16:7ff.). Jesus will mention Zechariah's assassination (II Chron. 24:20ff.). Not the least are the countless rebellions against the great Moses (Exod. 14:11f.; 16:1-12; 17:1-7; 32:1ff.; Num. 11:1ff.; 12:1ff.; 14:1ff.; 16:1ff.; 20:2-13; 21:4ff.). Remember Stephen's charge against the Sanhedrin in Acts 7:52!

A Nice Speech, but a Glaring Admission

23:30 and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Psychologically, they may well have persuaded themselves of their greater readiness to hear and obey the now-dead prophets. They could protest that these monuments intended to signal their definite, spiritual dissociation from their cruel ancestors who had brutalized the prophets. They could argue that their actions evidenced their approval of the prophets' pronouncements and their own conscientious decision to carry out what the prophets had preached and for which they were eliminated. Resentful, they could counter Jesus' indictment: "How can you charge us with hypocrisy in giving respect and recognition to the prophets, when, today we are really practicing what they preached? After all, we are not crude idolators; we worship the one, true God!" But in this profusion of devotion, Jesus discerns a glaring admission:

23:31 Wherefore ye witness to yourselves, that ye are sons of them that slew the prophets. "The words that will convict you are your own and are sufficient to show you to be their true, spiritual heirs." In what ways did these sectarians inadvertently betray themselves?

1. They confessed without shame to being sons of the prophet-killers. Their highly revealing choice of language is hardly accidental. Their attitude was not that "our prophets" were killed by "the fathers," but *our fathers* killed *the prophets*. (Contrast Stephen's language: YOUR fathers," Acts 7:51f.).
2. Down under the veneer of high devotion, Jesus sees the same superficiality and ceremonialism, the same sinful attitudes characteristic of preceding ages. Complacently and gratuitously they

claim to be better men than their ancestors: Matthew Henry (V, 339f.) wrote:

The dectfulness of sinners' hearts appears very much in this, that . . . they fancy . . . that, if they had had other people's opportunities, they should have improved them more faithfully; if they had been in other people's temptations, they should have resisted them more vigorously; when yet they improve not the opportunities they have, nor resist the temptations they are in.

Their swaggering boast of greater piety, presumably evident in their properly entombing the prophets, betrays the same unjustified self-esteem their conceited fathers possessed. More appropriate than their self-praise would have been the contrite admission, "We have sinned, we and our fathers" (Alford, 232).

3. Further self-incriminating evidence lies in their confession that the men whose blood was shed were *the prophets*. On what reasonable basis could they justify their calling them "*prophets*"? Did they know it because these men of God had furnished the true prophetic signs as their credentials? (Deut. 18:15-22; 13:1-5; Isa. 8:19f.; I Kings 22:28; Jer. 26; etc.) And, precisely as their fathers had done when rejecting the true prophets in their day, the scribes and Pharisees did not utilize these same standards to test Jesus' claims honestly so as to recognize (or discredit) Him.
4. Because Jesus' contemporaries had not learned the lessons of their national, prophetic heritage, they would repeat its errors. In verse 34 Jesus will demonstrate just how truly these sons are typical of their fathers. They will repeat the dark history of their grandfathers almost literally. He had already predicted the harrassment of His disciples by those who "persecuted the prophets who were before you" (5:12), as if the persecutors of all ages belonged to but one monstrous class.
5. "You confess the guilt of your fathers? Then you know the standard against which they sinned! But if you pretend to condemn their sin, and yet permit yourselves to repeat it—and repeat it you will!—you testify against yourselves by proving your more excellent opportunity to know and do better, and consequently condemn yourselves for your greater inexcusability!" (Cf. Rom. 1:32—2:29.)

So, *If we had been . . . we would not have. . .*, is but a hypothesis contrary to fact, because even during this Last Week of Jesus' ministry

Israel's religious and political elite had been waging an all-out smear campaign to crush this Prophet whose spectacular credentials established His divine authority more concretely than all who had preceded Him (12:14; John 5:18; 7:1, 25, 30, 44; 8:59; 10:31, 39; 11:49-53). The treatment they accorded Jesus, their living Prophet, unerringly established what kind of treatment they would have accorded the martyred prophets, had they lived in their time.

Jesus' thorough refutation of their pretense to do homage to the prophets exposes an unfortunately typical human trait evident in their practice. They venerated the prophets merely because they were idealized, emptied of meaning and gone. While eulogizing them and turning their tombs into national shrines, by hating the prophets of their own day these hypocrites were motivated by the same spirit that goaded their fathers to murder. Why is this true?

1. They were unwilling to come to grips with truth that was new to them and unapproved by official consent.
2. Their traditional concepts, their selfish interests could not tolerate their contemporary prophet's forceful, pointed application of unwelcome truth to their personal immorality and to their own social evils.
3. They shared no deep yearning to know God's judgment on their personal lives. Their heart was not in harmony with God Himself. They were not open to anything He might say without their prior approval.
4. They did not realize why they, the successive generation, were really honoring their fallen prophets. Like their fathers, they did not fear the dead prophet. He no longer threatened their comfort or convenience by troubling their conscience with embarrassing truth and accusing questions. The dead prophet no longer confronts them like an accusing conscience, calling attention to THEIR corruption or prodding THEM to action. It simply costs far less morally to make a national hero of an unthreatening, dead prophet, than to have to live with and listen to a living one. (Study I Thess. 2:14b-16.)
5. They undervalued the witness that the ancient prophets had already given to Jesus as the Christ. Were they really sensitive to that testimony in its entirety, they would have seen in the program of the Galilean Prophet the marvelous fulfilment of God's testimony to His real identity.

HOW MAY WE EXTRICATE OURSELVES
FROM THIS HYPOCRISY?

1. We must not be content merely to produce a wooden copy of the mannerisms, speech patterns, cultural distinctives and other superficial characteristics of God's great leaders of the past. We must savor their spirit and love the Spirit who made them what they are, following His leading in our time and life.
2. Nor must we try to remain statically rooted to the cultural distinctives of their era, as if these represented a superior holiness. We must faithfully preach their timeless message to living people in our own culture and in our own era.
3. We must embrace all that is true and unquestionably from God, regardless of who says it, whether we ever believed it before or not, whether our fathers ever heard of it or not. We must hold it fast, simply because we love the God who revealed it.
4. We show our true respect for God's prophets by our treatment of those who speak His messages to us today, not by the empty praise we express for those long-dead.

When God Gives Up On People

23:32 **Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.** This *measure*, according to one view, is the standard of wickedness set by *your fathers*. "Your forefathers have set a high mark in ungodliness and, with unreasoning consistency, you have accepted their misguided philosophy. Meet their mark!" This surprising challenge provokes this scolding reproof: "How can a person who claims to lead men to God provoke these bitter enemies to further brutality? What could He possibly hope to gain by egging them on to further evil?" Several rebuttals are possible:

1. His is a call to end their hypocrisy by dropping their mask of sham piety: "Act according to your true character for once, so people can see how truly you really are like your fathers!"
2. It is a revelation that He fully knows their dark plotting: "Get on with your bloody business! This is the week, this is the city and you are the men. Since I am your target, finish what your fathers began!" (Cf. John 13:27; Matt. 26:50 taken as a command.)

3. Jesus concedes them their will. *Fill ye up* (*plēròsate*, aorist imperative). Although imperative in form, His words do not necessarily order His enemies to act, because imperative verbs may sometimes express a concession. (See note on 19:12 and citation from Blass-Debrunner; cf. Hosea 4:17; Rev. 22:11.) "If you are firmly resolved to tread the path marked out by your fathers, go ahead, but do not complain that I did not warn you!" (Cf. John 2:19 also imperative.) Because these Jews did not like to retain the love, the knowledge, the honor and the messages of God in their hearts (John 5:23, 38, 41, 44; 8:42, 47; 12:43; 15:24f.; 16:3), Jesus gives them up to do what ought not to be done. (Study Rom. 1:24, 26, 28.) He openly recognizes their God-given freedom to act either to receive or reject Him, and concedes them the right to the latter option, however much it pains Him.
4. This is persuasive reverse psychology that powerfully pushes them to face the logical extremes of their insane plotting, before they actually carry it out. If pointed parables cannot awaken their seared conscience, perhaps blunt, plain-spoken exposure of the monstrosity of their planned sin would shake them. Thus, His love continues to work at their salvation, despite their determination to remain irreclaimable. To the tough He becomes tough, that by all means He might save some. (Cf. I Cor. 9:19-23.)

Another, more threatening interpretation may lie behind the words, "*Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.*" In this case, *the measure of your fathers* is a figurative, divine measuring vessel in the hand of God into which one generation after another pours the dreadful responsibility for its sinfulness. In fact, God is keeping score, whether people know and believe it or not. (Cf. Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 8:7.) When God deems it full to overflowing (cf. Gen. 15:16), He pours out judgment on the sinners. Jesus means, accordingly, "In the same manner your fathers filled their measure to overflowing and God poured out His wrath on them, you too might as well go ahead and fill the divine measure, and pay the moral consequences for your guilt!" This interpretation emphasizes their ripeness for judgment in contrast to God's limit for tolerating their sins. (Cf. Jer. 44:22; Rev. 14:17f.) Some might see *the measure of your fathers* as *the measure* begun by *your fathers*. In this case, each succeeding generation of wicked unbelievers adds to the final overflow by doing its part, hence Jesus challenges His generation to run the cup over, bringing divine wrath upon the nation that rejected God's mercy. He often

brings punishment of one generation upon the next. Whether He does so or not often depends upon whether or not the sons follow the wicked example of their parents (Ezek. 18). But where they do, He justly punishes the children for willingly repeating the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of them that hate Him (Deut. 5:9f.).

Notice how Jesus interwove His scathing denunciation of the Pharisees with concepts introduced earlier the same day. The bloody repudiation of the prophets here reflects the attitudes of the Tenant Farmers in the Vineyard (21:33-39).

23:33 *Ye serpents, ye offspring of vipers*: by repeating nearly word-for-word John the Baptist's searing censure of these religious pretenders expressed years before this (3:7; cf. Luke 3:7), and His own verdict uttered in mid-ministry (12:34), Jesus forcefully reminds them what little effect all this prophetic preaching of repentance had produced in them. John had challenged their motives: "Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" Now, Jesus three and a half years later, convincingly closes all doors to escape, asking, "*How shall ye escape the judgment of hell?*"

THEIR CHARACTER explains the severity of His attack. They are *serpents, offspring of vipers*. (Cf. notes on 3:7.) Like those reptiles full of venom, they are poised to strike without warning. (Cf. Paul's unfigurative language that expressed approximately the same sense, (Acts 13:10). Not unlikely, Jesus' words also reveal their spiritual parentage. (Cf. John 8:44; I John 3:8-10.)

THEIR CONDEMNATION: *the judgment of hell*, i.e. the judgment that God pronounced that condemns them to suffer there. Jesus Christ does not hesitate to preach hell and damnation nor to point the way of escape therefrom nor to expose the character of those who just suffer there. However blistering Jesus' sentence may sound, it does not here expose the relative severity involved: "They shall receive the greater condemnation!" (Mark 12:40 = Luke 20:47). Not merely in hell, they face a greater degree of punishment there, because of their superior chance to know and to do God's will (Jer. 16:11f.; notes on 11:22, 24).

THEIR QUANDARY: *how shall we escape?* Given their present course and character, they could not. Although His question is formally rhetorical, the literal form of His question should cause at least some of the more meditative among them to reflect. "If God sees you in your present, hell-inspired role, can He welcome you? If not, what

plans are you making to avert His inexorable wrath?" But His deliberative question is really a rhetorical substitute for an assertion: "You shall not escape being consigned to Hell!" So long as they remain impenitent, their destiny is inflexibly decided.

The typically Pharisean response would be, "I shall escape the judgment of hell by virtue of my prayer and tithing, and where these do not suffice, by the merits of the fathers," as if ANY amount of human effort possessed sufficient merit to earn escape from punishment. This constitutes self-deception, because this very accumulation of religious pretenses proves that the hypocrite knew about our holy God, hence could have recognized his own imperfection because of its striking contrast to God's glorious righteousness, and so could have doubted the value of all his own human goodness, and finally surrendered all claim to his self-justifications and cast himself on the all-sufficient mercies of God.

Murderers of Contemporary Prophets

23:34 Therefore, behold, I send unto you prophets. (Cf. Luke 11:49-51.) *Behold:* watch for the unexpected in what I am about to say. Rather than deny you further light and opportunity on the grounds of what you have any normal right to expect, I will do the astonishingly unpredictable! *Therefore,* i.e. in light of your wilful, headlong plunge into self-destruction in hell because of your moral agreement with your fathers who assassinated the prophets, *I send unto you some more prophets!* What incredible mercy, patience and love!

1. The clearly foreseen, murderous project of these wicked men would not deter the Son of God from commissioning His heralds. The hatred and rejection that His people would confront are no good reason to abandon His plan to evangelize Israel and the world. To the very end Jesus is faithful minister to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (10:6, 23; 15:24; Acts 13:46), sending one servant after another (21:36) to harvest the fruits of righteousness in Israel, only to see them go down, mistreated and martyred one by one.
2. But our Lord is not simply furnishing more cannonfodder for the malice of His detractors. Rather, He is graciously redoubling His efforts to expose these killers to the LOVE OF GOD! Incredibly, the martyrs' merciful mission to unbelieving Judaism was to begin

at Jerusalem, the stronghold of these prophet-slayers (Luke 24:47f.; Acts 1:4, 8)!

Behold, I send you prophets: Who does He think He is anyway? Only the Lord God sends prophets (II Chron. 36:15f.; Neh. 9:26, 30; Deut. 18:15, 18; Amos 3:7)! Here the divine majesty of God's Son breaks through the veil of the earthly flesh of Jesus of Nazareth, revealing Him as the Sender of the prophets. Further, He kept His word. (John 20:21, Matt. 28:18f.; see notes on 5:12.) Earlier Jesus had promised, "I will send them prophets and apostles" (Luke 11:49f.), but here, *I send unto you prophets, wise men and scribes.* Following the death of the last genuine *prophets*, Israel's teachers had been uninspired sages and theologians, the *wise men and scribes*. So, the Kingdom of the Messiah is to be led by its *Nebhiim, Hakamim and Sopherim* too, as was God's Kingdom of Israel. In using this terminology to speak of Christian teachers, the Lord is not merely copying the Jewish economy to give His Church a pseudoclassic structure and an unearned prestige. Rather, by using this language, He achieved two purposes:

1. He indicated His intention to equip His people with Christian teachers and missionaries who would announce and expound God's will and wisdom. In contrast to the theologians of the old order, the new covenant scholars would be sent by and loyal to the Messiah, proclaiming His Gospel.
 - a. *Prophets*, as distinguished from the other offices, wrote or spoke God's message by direct inspiration or mandate. Among these are the Apostles and Spirit-led men like Stephen and Philip (Acts 7, 8), Agabus and others (Acts 11:27f.), those at Antioch (Acts 13:1), Judas and Silas (Acts 15:32) and Philip's daughters (Acts 21:9).
 - b. *Wise men (sophòs)* in Israel were not simply what is implied by this word in the Greek world. Instead, they were teachers of wisdom (*hakamim*) whose function was to develop practical applications of what, in Israel, was considered the Wisdom *par excellence*, the Law. Not necessarily inspired, the Christian wise men would be experienced, devout disciples qualified to teach, like Barnabas and Apollos (Acts 18:24ff.).
 - c. *Scribes* in Israel were not merely secretaries who copied Scripture, but men whose expertise in expounding it made them the recognized theologians in Israel. Although Paul was primarily a missionary (*apòstolos*), his undying mark on Christian history

was made by his theological writing in the form of New Testament epistles which explain Christian doctrine and its applications. Many others, too, would fit this category. (See notes on 13:52.) Mark and Luke are not merely Gospel *scribes* who limited themselves to chronicling, but men who, like the Apostles, Matthew and John, arranged their materials in didactic form so as to communicate the true sense of Jesus Christ. While these latter Evangelists were Apostles by mandate, they also functioned as *scribes* in the sense Jesus' original hearers would have understood Him here.

It is well to notice, however, that the functions of *wise men* and *scribes* overlapped historically in Judaism, so that these titles referred sometimes to the same person. (Cf. Bowker, *Jesus and the Pharisees*, 40.)

2. Jesus verbally associates His Christian teachers with the Old Testament prophets and righteous men, so as to introduce a parallel between their respective ministries for which they were cruelly ill-treated. By specifying how His Pharisean opponents would retrace the well-worn pattern of victimizing God's ambassadors, He established the formers' spiritual kinship to the bloody fathers whose ruthlessness they claimed to repudiate.
 - a. *Some of them you will kill and crucify.* These are not necessarily the same people suffering, first, death, and then the added humiliation of exposure on a cross. Rather, some would be put to death by stoning (Acts 7:54—8:1; 26:10) or perhaps by the sword (Acts 12:1ff.); others by being nailed to a cross. (Cf. Matt. 21:35.) Because crucifixion was normally a method used by the Romans, the Lord is predicting some executions by Romans instigated by Jews (Peter? John 21:18f.).
 - b. *Some of them you will scourge in your synagogues.* (Cf. 10:17; Acts 5:40f.; 22:19; 26:11; II Cor. 11:24, the notorious 39 lashes.)
 - c. *Some you will persecute from city to city.* (10:23; I Thess. 2:14-16; Acts 13:45, 50; 14:2, 5; 17:5; 18:5f., 12; 19:33; 20:3; 21:27; 23:12; 24:1ff.; 26:11, and the Acts accounts of Paul's harrassment by Jews who, not content to see him leave their town, pursued him to other cities as well, in order to hinder his ministry (Acts 14:19; 17:13).

However, Jesus' mentioning this outrage preannounced unbelieving Israel's final response to His last, merciful invitations to accept His grace. So doing, they justified the judgment He must announce next:

Answering for the Murder of the Martyrs

23:35 **that upon you may come all the righteous blood.** To which verb is Jesus' clause to be connected in the mind of the reader?

1. *I send you prophets . . . that upon you may come all the blood . . . ?* OR
2. *You will kill, crucify, scourge . . . and persecute . . . that upon you may come all the blood . . . ?*

In the former case, He appears to commission His prophets so as to increase unbelievers' guilt. In the latter, it appears that Jewish leaders desired to bring this condemnation upon themselves. From God's perspective, is the clause, *that upon you may come . . .*, an expression of purpose or result? That is, did Jesus send His messengers with the purpose of increasing Israel's guilt for rejecting them, or did it just turn out that way?

1. PURPOSE. Sending more emissaries was the only way to save anyone. He planned it that way, because, although He clearly risked raising the guilt-level of the obstinate and unrepentant, He contemporaneously multiplied the gracious opportunities to accept His generous invitation to the long-awaited banquet of God! (Cf. 8:11f.) Even if it meant the sacrifice of His heralds, He was offering complete amnesty to anyone who would surrender. By the convicting power of apostolic preaching He intensified their sense of guilt and so left the salvageable among them so deeply conscience-stricken that their repentance became real and lasting. (Cf. Acts 2:37 as a case in point of just such self-reproach produced by Peter's hammering home the fact that Israel had murdered their longed-for Messiah.)
2. RESULT: Nobody was forced, no one's freedom compromised. Everyone could cast his personal vote, for, or against, Jesus of Nazareth, but no one could escape the inevitable consequences of his individual decision. Jesus left open two free options, and, if anyone selected one of the two choices, no one would stop him. But, once the die was cast, nothing could halt the resulting avalanche of judgment plunging down on those who turned Jesus down. Thus, human freedom and divine sovereignty are respected to the very last.

Three questions remain to be considered: (1) Why should all this guilt be required of one single generation of Jews? (2) What is involved

in the great time-span from Abel to Zechariah? (3) Who is this Zechariah and what has Abel to do with Jesus' basic point? These questions find their solution in a correct understanding of what Jesus means by *all the righteous blood shed on the earth*. This expression appears to be absolutely universal. Does Jesus' broad condemnation apply to literally every innocent victim of violence, i.e. must the vengeance of God rain down upon Jesus' own generation to vindicate all these? To this, the premature reaction is: "Injustice! To blame one generation for all the world's innocent victims is unworthy of God!" But Jesus' concept in this paragraph (23:39ff.) is a unit. He began discussing the tombs of the prophets and of the *righteous* (*dikaïōn*, 23:29). It is the prophets' blood that was shed (23:30). Jesus' generation is composed of the sons of those who murdered these witnesses for God (23:31). Unless compelling reasons lead us to refer *the righteous blood* to some distant victims yet unmentioned, we must regard it as referring to that of God's witnesses who were martyred for their testimony to God's truth. (Cf. 10:40ff.; John 15:20.) Not the least of this *righteous blood* would be that of Jesus Himself (27:25; Acts 3:14f.; I Peter 3:18). Jesus includes *the righteous* right along with *the prophets*, because every righteous man who ever lived is a witness for God, living proof that God's will is knowable, just as surely a witness as a living prophet. Therefore, the suppressing of *the righteous* proves that their slayers reject the norm that God's people stand for.

This, then, explains why Jesus began with *Abel the righteous*. For, while that ancient saint did not relay an inspired message from God to man, as did the prophets, yet he became the first recorded witness for God when he stood firm in sacrificing what God required, notwithstanding the older brother's insistence on bringing something else (Heb. 11:4). So, by humbly offering his sacrifices in faith, he testified to the knowability and rightness of God's will. His is the first recorded example of a man's trusting God, doing what was right and being commended by God for it (Gen. 4:4f.). However, for this testimony he was murdered by the jealous hate of his brother, and thus became the first martyr in the battle between godliness and unrighteousness. His death cries out against anyone who "walks in the way of Cain" (Jude 11), victimizing his brother because his brother's actions are *righteous* (I John 3:12).

But who is *Zechariah*? Because the book of Chronicles occurs last in the Hebrew canon, the last martyred prophet of God in the Hebrew Old Testament is the priestly Zechariah, son of Jehoiada,

stoned to death in the court of the Temple (II Chron. 24:20ff.) He too had delivered God's Word, but was murdered by order of King Joash. As he lay dying, he gasped, "May the Lord see this and call you to account!" God DID see it and avenged His prophet's death (II Chron. 24:23ff.). But how could *Zechariah* son of Jehoiada be called in our text "*son of Barachiah*"? Either Matthew wrote these words or he did not.

1. If Matthew wrote them:

a. The priestly son of Jehoiada is not intended. Jesus may refer to martyrdom that occurred more recently than the close of the Old Testament, well-known to His hearers, but unrecorded elsewhere. This would compel us to surrender the view that He means all Biblical murders and refers, instead, to all martyrs for righteousness in pre-Christian history.

b. Jesus may refer to Zechariah son of Jehoiada.

(1) *Barachiah* and Jehoiada are possibly different names for the same father. Many Hebrews bore two names, e.g. Jechoniah = Jehoiachin; Gideon = Jerubbaal; Dan. 1:6. However, were this the case with such a famous father like Jehoiada, it is strange that he should never have been called by this other name in the Old Testament.

(2) *Barachiah* and Jehoiada are both "fathers" of *Zechariah*, however, in different senses, one being the true father and the other the grandfather. Accordingly, *Zechariah* would be grandson of the famous Jehoiada, but son of an obscure *Barachiah* whose name was registered in Levitical genealogies, knowable to the Jews and here cited by Jesus. This explanation is less likely, because the Old Testament chronicler lays stress on the martyr's being "Jehoiadah's son," as if immediate sonship were meant.

c. Least likely is the suggestion that Jesus intended a "Zacharias son of Baruch," unjustly accused and murdered in the Temple near the end of the Jewish war (Josephus, *Wars*, IV,5,4). The Lord speaks of *Zechariah*'s death as a fact already well-known, not a yet-future martyrdom. He does not say, "Whom you will slay," but *whom you slew*. Further, the names are different: "Baruch" is not *Barachiah*, however similar.

2. If Matthew did NOT write *Zechariah son of Barachiah*:

a. Perhaps Matthew wrote only *Zechariah*, as did Luke (11:51). If so, a very early copyist, remembering the more famous Old

Testament writing prophet's patronymic (Zech. 1:1), mistakenly supposed that Jesus alluded to him, rather than the almost forgotten son of Jehoiada, and erroneously inserted *son of Barachiah*, whereas Jeohoiada's son is meant.

- b. Perhaps Matthew originally wrote, *Zachariah son of Jehoiada*, but an early scribe, forgetting Jehoiada's son, considered "Jehoiada" a mistake to be corrected by altering it to "Barachiah," father of the Minor Prophet (Zech. 1:1).
- c. But in favor of these hypotheses there is no documentary evidence in the manuscripts, except the omission of *son of Barachiah* in the original Sinaiticus and Eusebius, and a comment by Jerome in his commentary on our text: "In the Gospel which is used by the Nazarenes, in the place of 'Son of Barachiah' we find written 'son of Jehoiada.'" These appear to be personal choices of scribes too isolated to affect the textual tradition.

Although a judicial assassination of Jeremiah's contemporary, Urijah (Jer. 26:23) took place about 200 years after that of Zechariah, Jehoiada's son, the latter's martyrdom appears literally on the last pages of the Hebrew Old Testament, and perhaps for this reason Jesus mentioned him as the end point.

A MISCARRIAGE OF DIVINE JUSTICE?

Whether or not we have correctly identified *Zechariah*, Jesus' point still stands. If He meant Jehoiada's son, then the time span in His mind, from Abel to Zechariah, encompasses all the murders from the beginning to the end of the Hebrew Bible. Otherwise, from the first murder down to the latest assassination of God's prophet. But, regardless of the choice, with what justice can the Lord indict the religionists of His day for the brutal rejection of *the prophets and righteous men* over such a vast span of time, when His contemporaries did not even exist at the time of those atrocities? Several answers are possible:

1. In saying, *that upon you may come . . . whom you murdered*, the allusion is generically to the entire Jewish nation in all of its ages from its inception down to Christ. While Jesus' contemporaries could not rightly be indicted for crimes committed by their predecessors centuries earlier, nevertheless, by their hatred for God's servants (23:34), they qualify for membership in the one teeming

society of those who murder prophets. *Between the sanctuary and the altar* bespeaks the blind fury of the persecutors who knew nothing sacred, neither the person of God's prophet nor the holiness of His temple. Although this elucidates why the larger part of many generations of Israel is guilty of its personal crimes against God, it does not yet explain why one particular generation should receive the total brunt of the punishments for crimes reaching clear back to Abel, i.e. even before the official birth of Israel at the call of Abraham.

2. The terrible indictment is unequivocally levelled solely at Jesus' own generation. Why?
 - a. Because the past had prepared for the present. It is a fact observable in the history of nations that the catastrophes of a people are often the grim harvest of sins and errors sown long before. It may require generations for these to come to a head. Those who lit the fuse are often long gone before the explosion that blows the mountain of iniquity, burying beneath its weight only the contemporaries who, like their forebears, had shared in amassing the sin. But the past would lose with the present. The ancient, prophet-murdering fathers would now lose all they had so carefully transmitted to posterity, as their equally iniquitous descendents were swept away in the fury of God.
 - b. Because the present welcomed the past. By murdering God's Son, persecuting His apostles and other messengers, Jesus' contemporaries would sin in full light of their own history's lessons. Jesus' age stood at the end point of God's dealings with men, a period rich in accumulated evidence of the great criminality of this act, since God had shouted protests against the killing of His prophets clear back to the assassination of Abel! In full view of history's vindication of God's prophets, Jesus' generation would proceed to crucify Him who enjoyed the highest, most complete authentication by God who through Jesus had done the most evident and most numerous miracles. (Cf. John 7:31; 11:47f.) Every generation of sons that witness the previous instances of disobedience, hear the many warnings, observe the exemplary punishment of their fathers, and yet repeat the same disobedience, is to be judged more than simply as bad as their fathers. They are far more guilty than their predecessors and must answer for much, much more, because, by duplicating their fathers' sins in full light of their divine punishment, they

concur in their father's acts. The principle of divine justice is clear: the accumulated brilliance of all this light and the force of all the evidence against which they will have sinned multiplies the degree of guiltiness they would incur for having turned against it.

No wonder the wrath of God was timed to explode in that generation! More astonishing yet is the forty years of grace God bestowed on His people before outraged justice lashed Jerusalem in a holocaust of blood in 70 A.D. But here is a lesson: even as in the last days of the Jewish state the patience of God waited while the Church broadcast the Gospel in a final effort to save the savable, but a day came when the ax fell, so also today God's vengeance waits patiently while the number of those to be slain for their witness to His Word moves toward completion (Rev. 6:9-11). But that judgment and their vindication will come at last (Rev. 16:6; 18:20; 19:2).

23:36 Verily I say unto you, all these things shall come upon this generation. Here again is the familiar theme of the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen in the Vineyard (21:40). This time, however, Jesus reveals the time-schedule for the hurricane of holy wrath that would break over Israel: *this generation*. He will enlarge upon this ominous threat in the next chapter when He describes the siege and taking of Jerusalem and reiterates the time-schedule (24:34). The wrath of God that destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and dispersed the unbelieving Jews among the nations, therefore, was neither unreasonable nor unexpected (Deut. 28).

The expression, *this generation*, as Jesus often employs it, is loaded negatively to mean "this crowd," "this people" referring to those people who refused to be persuaded of His Messiahship on the basis of the good evidences He furnished. (Cf. 11:16; 12:39, 41f., 45; 16:4; 17:17; Mark 8:12, 38; Luke 7:31; 9:41; 11:29-32, 50f.; 17:25; cf. Peter's expression: Acts 2:40, or Paul's, Phil. 2:15.) This common nuance however, does not exclude its literal meaning, "the people now living," i.e. all the people born and living at about the same time (cf. Matt. 1:17!) a sense which flows into the other: "a group of such people with some experience, belief, attitude, etc. in common," (cf. *genèd*, Arndt-Gingrich, 153). His antithesis in our text is "all previous generations" of prophet-murderers, as opposed to *this generation*.

Ironically, all of Israel's guilt, accumulated from all previous ages was finally and permanently to be borne away by the one perfect

sacrifice of the Lamb of God in that one *generation* (Heb. 9:15; Rev. 12:5, 9-11)! All those of that *generation* who would yet embrace this offer to divine mercy could be saved and miss the threatened disaster. (See on 24:15ff.) Unbelievers of that same last, characteristic generation (24:34), however, would feel the full impact of God's terrible punitive justice. (Deut. 5:9, note God's use of *generation*.)

FACT QUESTIONS

1. What is meant by Jesus' observation that the Pharisees "build the sepulchers of the prophets and garnish the tombs of the righteous"? What motivated them to do this?
2. To what "prophets and righteous men," now buried in the garnished tombs, does Jesus refer?
3. Who actually slew the prophets?
4. In what sense are the Pharisees the sons of the prophet-slayers?
5. What is "the measure of your fathers" that the Pharisees are ordered to "fill up"?
6. In what sense were Pharisees "serpents, a generation of vipers"?
7. Define "the judgment of hell" that the Pharisees could not escape.
8. In the New Testament Church identify the personnel referred to by Jesus as "prophets, wise men and scribes" whom He would send.
9. Name some messengers of Jesus Christ whom the unbelieving Jewish nation and its rulers (a) killed, (b) crucified, (c) scourged, (d) persecuted from city to city.
10. What does it mean for the blood of someone to come upon someone else in the phrase: "that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth . . . "?
11. Identify "Zechariah . . . murdered between the sanctuary and the altar." List three or four Zechariahs in the Bible, one of which may be the man mentioned by Jesus in this section. State the problems connected with any certain identification and furnish solutions to each problem wherever possible.
12. In what way did Jesus' prophecy come true that all the blood would come upon that generation?

TEXT: 23:37-39

37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy

children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! 38 Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. 39 For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. If the message of this chapter was addressed fundamentally to the Pharisees, how do you explain the shift in persons addressed, i.e. from the Pharisees to Jerusalem? What connection is there between the two concepts (Pharisees and Jerusalem) that would justify Jesus' concluding His piercing analysis of the former with a heart-broken warning to the latter?
- b. How does this closing section of Jesus' indignant indictment of the Pharisees show His basic, underlying attitude toward the wicked who rejected Him? How should it modify the opinion of those who assail Jesus for what they consider a bitterness incompatible with love?
- c. Jesus affirms, "How often would I have gathered your children together . . .," and yet the Synoptic Gospels record no significant time spent by Jesus in Jerusalem. How could Jesus make a statement like this, if He had not diligently labored at winning Jerusalem's populace to faith in Him? Or had He? On what basis would you answer this?
- d. Why was it that Jerusalem was so notorious for killing God's prophets? What was there about this city that made it so perilous for His prophets and a relatively rare thing for them to be murdered elsewhere?
- e. Can you list some possible reasons why Jerusalem refused to respond to the appeal of Jesus? (Cf. Mark 3:15-19; Luke 8:14; John 12:37, 42f.; 5:40-47.)
- f. Since the cry, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," had already been raised during the Triumphal Entry, is not this an argument that the present text is out of place and refers to a situation that occurred before Palm Sunday? If so, prove that it does. If not, what does Jesus mean by these words spoken in the context of the Last Week already in progress? Can He use the same words twice in differing situations, to communicate two slightly differing meanings?
- g. Do you think Jesus implies that the city would someday embrace a totally believing population that would welcome Him, acclaiming

Him as Messiah as the multitudes had done during the Triumphal Entry? Or would it be a purely individual reaction on the part of some and not others?

- h. In what sense would Jerusalem not see Jesus until she made the required confession?
- i. Do you think that this section is intended to furnish an appropriate conclusion to Jesus' address on Pharisaism? If so, why? If not, why not.
- j. What does this section have to say to the question whether Jesus can ever abandon those whom He loves and for whom He died, if these will not accept Him?
- k. What does this section reveal about the high dignity of Jesus?

PARAPHRASE

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! the city that has continued to murder God's prophets and stone His messengers sent to you! How many times I have yearned to gather your inhabitants together under my leadership and protection, in the same way a hen gathers her little chicks under her wings. But you all refused! Notice, however, your House is left to you—desolate. I can assure you that you will never see me again until you can say, 'May God bless His Messiah!'"

SUMMARY

Earthly Jerusalem's extraordinary opportunity to welcome God's last, greatest Prophet rendered more unmistakable the inveterate character of her rebelliousness, because she refused her only Savior. Now He must abandon her people's great House, leaving them to protect it as best they could against utter ruin. Their only, final hope of salvation lay in their raising the welcoming cry that recognized Him as their Messiah.

NOTES

Contempt for His Marvelously Patient Compassion

23:37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! This is Matthew's last reference to *Jerusalem*

by name. Even though after this Matthew will refer to "the holy city" (27:53) or speak simply of "the city" (26:18; 28:11), Matthew's choice not to name this city any more hereafter may have ominous significance. The earthly *Jerusalem* will be discarded by God after its having had such a dominant place in the history of His dealings with Israel.

Jesus rightly concluded His penetrating analysis of Pharisean hypocrisy with a heartbroken warning to Jerusalem, for various reasons:

1. *Jerusalem*, as theocratic center of the nation, was the supreme goal of ideal Israel. Any plan of God without sacred Zion was unthinkable. (Ps. 146:10; 147:2, 12ff.; and all of Zechariah's "Jerusalem" prophecies.) But the conspicuous historical reality was a stony-hearted city that concretely shared the Pharisees' hypocrisy and their readiness to silence God's messengers: *Jerusalem that killeth the prophets and stoneth them that are sent unto her*. Such a Jerusalem embodied both the Pharisees' ideals and their sins. At best and at worst, all that the Pharisees were morally, Jerusalem was. So, to condemn the one, in essence, is to address the other also.
2. But to switch from the Pharisee, the religio-political party whose philosophy infected wide segments of Israel, to Jerusalem, Israel's philosophical and ideological summit, gives Jesus a superb oratorical advantage. Many in Israel probably shared Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees. (Cf. "Fragment of a Zadokite Work" in *Pseudepigrapha*, edited by Charles, 785ff.; Bowker, *Jesus and the Pharisees*, 29-38; Josephus, *Wars*, I,5,1-3.) Yet those who criticized the Pharisees could smirk complacently that THEY were not members of that hypocritical brotherhood, and that THEIR holiest joy lay in the exaltation of Zion, *Jerusalem*, the City of the Great King. Now Jesus must bluntly lay bare the unholiness and barbarous heart of *Jerusalem*, a city that, for all its past sacred associations, blatantly butchered the ambassadors of the Almighty! Concretely, *Jerusalem* is no better than the best of her people, but its strictest sect is notoriously hypocritical!
3. However, by switching from speaking to the Pharisees' party to addressing Jerusalem, Jesus flashes before His hearers one poignant personification: *Jerusalem*, mother beloved of all her children, all Israel collectively. Jesus' own love for the high ideals associated with Jerusalem led Him to seek and to save her children. Now, despite Jerusalem's unpromising precedents, He offers one more, longing invitation couched in the form of a warning that holds out a glimmer of hope.

4. To separate *Jerusalem* for separate censure is to focus attention on the stronghold of all those religious sects in Israel that had so bitterly opposed Jesus. So, He has not changed the subject. Rather, He has simply adjusted His aim and focused the scope of His warnings.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! This repeated address indicates anguished love. (Cf. II Sam. 18:33; 19:4; Luke 10:41; 22:31; Jer. 22:29.) His address here cannot mean Jesus had felt no sympathy for the rest of the nation. His active ministries on Galilean soil and in Perea, even in Samaria, forever established His love for those districts too. The point here is that, through no fault of His own, He had been unable to convert those who would not be convinced in Jerusalem. All her sacred associations notwithstanding, her true, typical character must be exposed: she is *Jerusalem that kills the prophets and stones them that are sent to her!* (The present participles in Greek point to her continuing practice and resulting reputation.) Remember Jesus' severely ironical comment: "It cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33)! Stoning was the capital punishment intended for false prophets (Deut. 13:5, 10). Diabolically, Jerusalem turned the weaponry intended to protect God's people against the true messengers of God!

How often would I have gathered thy children together! The underlying assumption is that Christ had expended frequent, however unsuccessful, efforts to win Jerusalem to discipleship, and yet the Synoptic Gospels record no trips to Jerusalem or its suburbs. On the other hand, John registers five such visits between Jesus' baptism and this final visit to the city. Note, therefore, how incidentally Matthew here and Luke 13:34 imply that Jesus' appearances in Jerusalem recorded by John really had occurred, and that the purpose at which He aimed is precisely what we see reflected in John's account: great, gracious appeals addressed to Jerusalem to believe Him and be saved. (Cf. John 2:13—3:21; 5:1-47; 7:10—10:39; 11:1-45.) So, there is no contradiction between the Synoptics and John's Gospel. Rather than misrepresent the facts, the latter simply documents *how often* Jesus had made ill-received attempts to save Jerusalem.

I would have gathered thy children together. This is Jesus' estimate of Himself as He stands before Israel. He considers Himself Jerusalem's only Savior. *Even as a hen gathereth her chickens under*

her wings: in this heart-warming image Jesus compares Himself to a hen aware of grave danger to her little brood, by which He means Israel the nation. (Cf. Old Testament use of a similar figure: Deut. 32:11; Ps. 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4; Isa. 31:5; Ruth 2:12.) *Thy children* refers to the people of Zion, hence, Israel in general. (Cf. Ps. 149:2; Joel 2:23 in the more literal translations.) But this nation belonged to Jesus as truly as the chickens to the hen. Clearly, Jesus had long foreseen the disaster—both spiritual and national—that lay ahead for His people. This is why He expended every effort to convince them to believe in Him and to find true safety in God's Kingdom as He presented it. But He is not merely Israel's benefactor and guide. His symbol of the hen pictures Himself as a Savior who throws His own life between His people and the menacing danger! But who is this who claims to be able to rescue them from imminent peril? Is it merely the 33-year-old Galilean rabbi, the former carpenter of Nazareth? Standing there offering Himself as Savior of Israel is the nation's true Owner, the Messiah of God!

Feel the conflict of two determined wills: *I would . . . but you would not* (*ēthélēsa . . . ouk ēthelēsate*). Jesus willed to save them, but their stubborn will shut out His influence. (Contrast John 5:40 and II Peter 3:9. See also Luke 19:14, 27.) His indefatigable efforts to convince the nation met with open-eyed, deliberate resistance, but He, the Son of God, weeping over their perverseness, had to admit defeat. Here is written the awesome freedom of the human will that can defiantly swagger in the presence of the gracious appeals of Almighty God and actually defeat His intention to save men! Even the Omnipotent God has chosen not to force the will of any man or nation He cannot persuade to repent. Individually, however, those converted will comprise the remnant of the saved, wooed and won by His merciful love. Paul, for example, knew he could not win them all, but this did not stop him at once nor make his efforts a mere pretense. (Cf. Rom. 9:1—10:3; I Cor. 9:22, "some," not all; Rom. 11:14.) Grace, in practice, refers to one person's free determination to save another, if the other is willing. But there is no way that he who makes the effort can save the other if the latter obstinately resists and finally rejects his gracious efforts. Therefore, grace can be resisted and rejected.

This final paragraph in Jesus' last public address before the cross forever proves that He was not just hurling vengeful diatribes at people who offended Him personally. Rather, His severe denunciation

of Pharisean religion was but the deeply regretful reading of God's just sentence against this unbelieving, contemptuous, unrepentant people. The anguished cry with which He closes (23:37) is of a piece with His bone-deep sadness when He wept over Jerusalem during the Messianic Entry (Luke 19:41-44). It is the Lord's mercy, passionately pleading with dying sinners. It is a spurned love astonishingly undiminished by their malice, incredibly uncooled by their stubbornness and divinely patient no matter how long it was taking.

But the outcome of Jerusalem's judgment of Jesus is not without consequence to its people. If they spurn the self-giving protection of the hen, they damn themselves to exposure to the talons of the eagle!

The Consequence of Refusing Jesus Christ

23:38 **Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.** This ominous sentence declares as a settled matter the future desolation of what was dearest to every Hebrew. But what is meant by *your house*?

1. "The *house* of Israel" is a common Old Testament synonym for the entire NATION. (Cf. Jer. 12:7; Hosea 8:1; Ezek. 18:30f.) Israel had been the privileged people of God up to the age about to be inaugurated by Jesus through the Gospel. But, as He had taught earlier (21:43; 22:7), God would take these Kingdom privileges away from those whose hold on them was never more than a TENANCY. Further, God would send His armies to destroy those murderers of His servants, the prophets, and burn their city. Jesus depicts God's abandoning a mutinous, unbelieving nation, leaving it to its own devices to save itself from that desolation that must result from their deserting God's Anointed who could have saved them. To Israel had been granted exceptional opportunities to be the people of God, but these were despised by the majority. Only the remnant in Israel accepted Jesus and, with the Gentiles, became the new, true "Israel of God." (Cf. I Peter 2:9f.; contrast Exod. 19:5f.)
2. The *house* par excellence is the TEMPLE, the house in which dwelt the glory of Israel, the presence of God. (Cf. II Chron. 6; Isa. 66:1f.; notes on Matt. 23:21; see also 2 Baruch 8:2; Testament of Levi 15:1; 16:4 where "house" equals "temple.") Jesus affirms that, even as God had formerly abandoned His earthly dwelling to chastise His people, He would do it again. (Study Ezek. 10:1—11:23;

- cf. Jer. 7:2-14; 26:6; see Judg. 18:31; I Kings 9:6-9; I Sam. 4:22; Ps. 78:59-62.) Now, however, contrary to past hopes, according to which God would return to dwell in a purified sanctuary (Ezek. 43:4), Jesus holds out no such hope, except through submission to Himself as Messiah sent by God. This time, however, the glory of God would dwell in a new, far truer Temple, the people of God, the Church of Christ (Eph. 2:19-22; I Cor. 3:16f.; 6:19; John 14:23). Then, when the great temple veil parted from top to bottom when Jesus died (27:51), the Holy of Holies were exposed to common view, as if God deliberately declassified that building to indicate its profanation as a temple and His indifference toward it as a peculiarly holy place. It was no longer to be "the house of God" (12:4) nor "My house" (21:13), but *your house*.
3. Early Jewish thought pictured the CITY OF JERUSALEM as the *house* of God. (Cf. Enoch 89:50-72; 90:29-36; Testament of Levi 10:5.) If it is Jesus' thought, He addresses the city as He had earlier (23:37), now prophesying its ruin. (Cf. Luke 19:41ff.) But even though Jerusalem has once again become a Jewish city, it has no temple, no priesthood, no sacrifices and its people must defend it as best they can.
 4. In the spirit of the great imprecatory Psalm 69:25, Israel's *house* could mean THEIR DWELLING place on earth, especially in Palestine. The Psalm's context pictures the treachery, the atrocious crimes and the wilful cruelty of those who persecute God's righteous servants, and cries out for vengeance to the holy Judge. Accordingly, Jesus answers, this anguished prayer for justice is heard and judgment is about to fall, hurling the unbelieving nation from its dwelling place, leaving it like a decimated army's encampment or an empty Bedouin tent.
 5. Does Jesus mean the royal palace as symbolic of the earthly Davidic lineage? (Cf. the similarity between Matt. 23:38 and Jer. 22:5 in context.) Although there was no Davidic palace standing in Jesus' day and the Herod, whose palace stood within the city, was no scion of David, could not Jesus intimate that the royal, Davidic *house* upon which Israel's materialistic, Messianic hopes depended would disappear for lack of legitimate aspirants to the throne? Objectively, without Jesus the true Son of David, the throne of Israel is left desolate, hence the greater urgency that Israel confess Him to be the Messiah (23:39).

Regardless of which view is taken, the result is the same, because Jerusalem, the temple, the materialistic Davidic hopes and national Israel all went down together during the Jewish war in 66-70 A.D., with only an ill-fated politico-military resurgence under Bar-Cochba (131-135 A.D.). Chapter 24 will furnish the details. Now, Jesus formally severs Himself from Israel's *house*. What should have been a dwelling-place for God had become the center of spiritual revolt against Him and the market-place of vested interests in Judaism. The unique purpose for the continued existence of "the house of Israel" had ceased, so when Jesus walked out, with Him went the glory and protecting presence of God. When Jesus abandoned the Temple and Jerusalem, a deplorable epoch came to an end, leaving only an unhappy present and an ominous future. And yet even here our Savior cannot even threaten without showing. . . .

A Glimmer of Hope in the Encircling Gloom

23:39 For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord. Since the Lord begins by saying, "*For I say . . .*," His declaration explains why Israel's house would be left desolate: "You will *never ever* (Greek: *ou mé*) see me from now on until you say, Blessed is he." So, whatever ramifications this verse has, they must explain the desolation of Israel's famous house. No view of this text can be correct that ignores Matthew's book-length context in which he established that God rejects the exclusive claims of a purely fleshly Israel and welcomes the Gentiles to become His people too. (Cf. 3:7-12; 8:11f.; 10:6, 14f.; 11:20ff.; 12:41f.; 21:38—22:14.) Even so, questions arise:

1. In what sense must Jerusalem *see* Jesus: literally or with the eye of faith? After this moment Jerusalem saw Him literally, stretched out on a cross near the city (John 19:20; Luke 23:48). Earlier, Jesus had spoken cryptically about going where unbelievers could not come. Although they sought Him, they would be unable to find Him (John 7:33-36; 8:21-27; 13:33; 14:16f.). On the latter occasion He explained clearly to believers: "I shall go to Him who sent me" (John 14:19f.). Consistent with His promise, therefore, upon arising from the dead, He showed Himself alive, not to all men, but to pre-selected witnesses (Acts 10:40ff.). From that moment, therefore, anyone who desired to see Jesus must do so by faith.

2. Why *henceforth*, and not before? How does this limitation, “from this time forward,” sharpen His intended meaning? Jerusalem had only seen Jesus physically and would only see Him thus again on the cross. But had Jerusalem ever really seen this young Galilean for what He really is, or would she ever? Having declared His love and longing to save His people, Jesus formally concludes His ministry as servant to the Jews. No longer will His voice be heard exhorting the nation to follow Him back to God. No longer would Israel marvel at His miracles that blessed the land. His time of public manifestation of Himself is over.
3. In what sense would Jerusalem’s saying, ‘*Bless be he . . .*,’ help her to see Jesus in the sense intended? Are His words intended as a gracious, even if veiled, offer of hope, or as a threat? Or both? The meaning is simple: unbelieving Judaism would never fathom the true significance of Jesus of Nazareth, never again see Him for what He presented Himself to be during the Messianic Entry into Jerusalem, until its people cried the believers’ confession that Jesus is Christ. While this announcement threatens the majority who rejected Jesus’ claims as untenable, it holds out hope for those individual members of God’s people who would surrender the throne of their heart to the Galilean Carpenter lately acclaimed as Messiah by His enthusiastic disciples. So, to be brought to acknowledge His Lordship as Christ and true King of Israel is to see His true character. *Henceforth*, then, means that up to that moment Jesus had revealed His glory to Jerusalem and to Israel by a ministry replete with evidences of His true identity. From the moment of His departure from the Temple, this would no longer be true. He would go to the cross, through the empty tomb and on to glory, without ever turning back to plead with Israel, as He had in the past. With these words the Lord officially withdrew from the nation as such, concluding His public ministry, because His mandate to seek the lost sheep of the house of Israel has now concluded in their refusal to be saved. Any initiative to revive the relationship must be theirs. Everything He could do to save them has not been done.

In these words, *Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say . . .*, is couched an ominous threat: “If you will not accept me according to my true identity as God’s Anointed during this day of grace, you shall not be permitted to see me as your long-awaited Messiah. This state of affairs shall continue until that

day when I appear a second time and then, to your eternal shame and regret, you will be forced to acknowledge me as Lord. Then it will be too late, since I will have become God's anointed Judge." (Cf. Acts 17:30f.; II Cor. 5:10; John 5:27.)

If it be thought that the Psalm quoted, "Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord" (Ps. 118:26), is too positive in tone to bear the double sense of free confession and unwilling admission, the double sense is not unexampled. (Cf. Isa. 45:23-25 as Paul uses it in Rom. 14:11f. and Phil. 2:9-11.) It is not clear whether Jesus expects any of His enemies to surrender to His Lordship prior to that fatal day. However, His expression leaves open the possibility that some could.

A PROMISE OF THE FINAL CONVERSION OF ISRAEL?

When Jesus uttered this warning earlier (Luke 13:34f.), His words found fulfillment in the Messianic Entry, as thousands welcomed Him with precisely this blessing (21:9). Now, however, that event is history and yet He repeats His warning. Consequently, some suppose that He now reveals that God would depart from the house of Israel to remain until that nation should see Jesus as the Christ in His true glory at His Second Coming and re-enter the Temple to usher in the Millennium. Some infer that all Israel on earth just prior to Jesus' return are the people to whom Jesus makes reference. In fact, *Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say . . .*, implies: "You shall see me when you say. . . ." Therefore, it is concluded that all Jews on earth at the Second Coming will somehow be instantly and miraculously converted by the returning Christ and will joyously receive Him whom their fathers rejected. This view, however, is unsupported for the following reasons:

1. THIS THEORY IGNORES CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS. Jesus addressed Jerusalem by name in the context and, by implication, all of Israel living in His day that shared Jerusalem's rejection of God's Messenger (23:29-37). If this text is correctly understood as holding out hope for, or threatening, anyone, it speaks primarily to Jesus' contemporaries, and secondarily to any of their descendants who share the spirit of these their fathers. Jesus does not say, "THEY shall not see me, till THEY say," as if referring to some

long-distant future generation of Israel living on earth at His return, but, "*YE shall not see me, till YE shall say. . .*" No interpretation of this text can be valid that is true of an Israel of the future that is not also true of Jesus' contemporaries in the same way.

2. **THIS THEORY IGNORES THE INDIVIDUALITY OF HUMAN NATURE.** Although the Jews addressed by Jesus here are uniformly disbelievers, not all would remain so. There would be diverse reactions to Jesus' words. While His address, *ye*, does speak of the whole class of unbelievers, this class consists of individuals, each of whom must decide personally to recognize Jesus as Messiah and submit to Him or not. (See notes on 3:11.) Jesus was not universally applauded by ALL ISRAEL. The nation was already being broken down into its individual components on the basis of each person's decision about Jesus. So, why should it be supposed that anyone but INDIVIDUALS would so acclaim Him from that moment forward, either at Pentecost or upon their later personal conversion, or even at the Second Coming when it will be too late? (See on 24:30; 26:64.)

In answer, some cite II Cor. 3:15f., but this text assumes an individual turning to the Lord, not necessarily a wholesale, national transformation.

3. **THIS THEORY IGNORES THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL CONVERSION.** Any theory of a latter-day blanket transformation of Israel misunderstands God's respect for the freedom of the human will and wipes out differences in people, as if such a conversion would occur automatically upon Jesus' return, notwithstanding all individual attempts to resist conversion prior to that moment.
- a. Wholesale conversion, without the participation of the free will of each single Hebrew, is not conversion in any true, Biblical sense. So, unless God chooses to work a psychological miracle that instantly and irresistably overpowers those unconvinced minds, then the present, ordinary rules for turning to God must suffice for their salvation. Hence, if God intends to respect man's free will, then the present Gospel offers all Jews the only true, valid alternatives (Rom. 1:16). So, if Jewish free will is left intact until final judgment, then the psychological probabilities involved (based on their millennial history from Moses to Christ) push us back to recall the general trend of Old Testament prophecies, namely, that only a remnant of the Hebrew

people would seek the Lord and turn in obedient faith to recognize Jesus as the Christ, not the whole nation. (Cf. Isa. 1:9; 4:2f.; 6:13; 10:20ff.; 11:11, 16; 29:19f.; 37:31f.; 65:9-17, etc.)

- b. Human free will not only guarantees man's freedom to differ with God, but also his freedom to differ with and from his fellows. What makes one Jew different from another includes the various attitudes of each separate Hebrew, specifically their submission to, or prejudice against, the Nazarene. Must it be thought that the returning Messiah shall miraculously evaporate all previous bias against the despised Nazarene Carpenter who must be the object of faith of all previous generations of both Jews and Gentiles down to that final day of His return? This is not a question of possibilities, since Jesus could do it with Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road, but, rather, a question of moral probabilities, because He has now included Jews and Gentiles alike under sin that He may have mercy on all and be the Lord of both, extending His sway over both by Gospel proclamation to both. Considering the kind of non-nationalistic, non-materialistic Kingdom Jesus has to offer and how radically it differs from Jewish nationalistic ideals, is it conceivable that the returning Messiah could eradicate all previous closed mindedness toward His universal, spiritual Kingdom of God, any better than the inglorious, humble Jesus of the first coming did?
- c. All texts on Biblical conversion claim that it is the formerly lowly Jesus of Nazareth and His Gospel for all men, with whom all of us have to do. (Cf. Acts 17:31.) However, His winsomeness appears only to the eye of faith (Isa. 53:2b). The scandal of the cross, however, will not hold back those believing Hebrews who will be saved, however fatally blinded their fleshly kinsmen (Rom. 9:1-3; 10:1; I Cor. 1:18-24).
4. **THIS THEORY DOES INJUSTICE TO A MAJORITY OF THE HEBREW PEOPLE.** According to this view, in connection with His Second Coming, Jesus will make a special, private(?) appearance to Israel, in such a winsome form that Jews living on earth at His return will universally flock to confess His Lordship. But this means that, if Jesus' words refer exclusively to the few fortunate Hebrews living on earth at that far-off, yet-future date, then all those Jews, unlucky enough to die in unbelief before that magic date, will perish without having seen the all-persuasive Christ

and without His all-essential salvation. But, if physical descent from Abraham has any importance at all, are not these unfortunate losers "sons of Abraham" in this sense too? Conversely, if only those fortunate few living at that glorious future day are to be saved by a psychological miracle, are these the only "Israel" worth saving? From all that God has taught us about Himself, we must ask: is it just, or like God, to offer psychologically overwhelming proof to convince some Jews that is not also available to all other Jews? But is God so partial as to close His heart to every precious Jew whose only misfortune is to die before the deadline for Christ's return? But, if it be answered that these latter have the presently available Christian Gospel to save them, then the whole theory is compromised, because this admission offers hope to all Jews in any age on the same terms as the Gentiles.

5. **THIS THEORY, THEREFORE, DOES INJUSTICE TO THE UNIVERSALITY AND FINALITY OF THE GOSPEL.** To suppose that Christ intends to offer psychologically overwhelming evidence of His glory to convince Jews at His return, i.e. evidence that is not available to Gentiles, is to rewrite major sections of Christian theology as this is expressed in Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. True, God is sovereign and can freely show mercy on whomever He will (Rom. 9:14ff.). But those whom He has prepared beforehand for glory are those whom He has called by the Gospel, even us, not from the Gentiles only, but also from the JEWS (Rom. 9:24; II Thess. 2:14). Jews are already being offered the winsome, persuasive Christ through the Gospel. Must we degrade our definitive message by attributing superior convincing power to an uncertain, supposedly future personal appearance of Christ to Jews who have consistently turned down His own universal Gospel?

Some see in Zechariah 12:10 a prediction of Israel's marvelous change of heart when God would "pour out upon the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication" whereby they would "look upon me, the one they have pierced and mourn. . . ." In light of Revelation 1:7, the assumption is that Zechariah refers to a returned Christ. But no interpretation of Zechariah can be valid that ignores the Apostle's affirmation that Zechariah 12:10 was fulfilled at the cross when all-sufficient grace was made possible by Jesus' death (John 19:37). Jews' hearts began to be broken at Pentecost when they finally grasped the true

significance and identity of Him Whom they had pierced, were convinced by the gracious supplications of the Spirit speaking through Peter and cried out in true repentance (Acts 2:37). In this light, then, Revelation 1:7 does not necessarily predict a future *conversion* of those who crucified Jesus, but, rather, a future vindication of His claims against those who refused Him. (See notes on 24:30.) In fact, Zechariah predicts (1) individual, tribal mourning (Zech. 12:14): can modern Israel or any in Judaism establish its clan-lines to fulfill this? (2) He also predicts mourning for Him whom they have pierced "as one mourns for an only child" i.e. a bitter grief "as one grieves for a firstborn son." This speaks of weeping over an unalterable loss, not the weeping of penitence and change. This sense of finality and loss is reinforced by the comparative illustration: "the weeping of Jerusalem will be great, like the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo" where Israel bitterly mourned the loss of that other son of David, the good king Josiah. (Cf. II Chron. 35:20-25.) So we must see the spirit of grace and supplication poured out by God on Jerusalem as His merciful offer of grace whereby God Himself pleaded with Israel to repent and accept the offer of His firstborn Son on the cross. But, says John (Rev. 1:7), the day will come when they shall see that same Crucified One in His true glory and the impenitent Jews will have more reason than ever to grieve their eternal loss.

6. THIS THEORY IGNORES THE CHRISTIAN REDEFINITION OF "ISRAEL." Any discussion of Israel in eschatology must take into account God's redefinition of the term "Israel." The expression, ". . . and so all Israel shall be saved," is often cited to sustain the continuing, privileged place of fleshly Israel in the eschatological planning of God (Rom. 11:26). However, Romans 11:26 is the conclusion of Paul's major section, Romans 9-11, where he carefully redefined what God means by the term "Israel" and distinguished the true "sons of Abraham" from those who are merely his physical descendants (Rom. 9:6-8, 22-27). Accordingly, there is now no distinction between Jew and Gentile (Rom. 10:12; Gal. 3:28). Jews, if they are to be saved, must submit to the same terms offered Gentiles, i.e. through the undeserved mercy of God (Rom. 11:32). Ungodly, unrepentant, unbelieving Israelites are not "of Israel," no matter what their pretensions (Rom. 9:6).

Conversely, believing Gentiles are true "sons of Abraham," notwithstanding their former lack of qualification. (Cf. Gal. 3:6-9, 14, 27-29.) Neither previous Jewishness nor former paganism count for anything now (Gal. 6:15). What counts with God is that new creation in Christ Jesus that constitutes the genuine "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). This explains how Paul can affirm so confidently: "And SO (in the manner described in Rom. 9-11) ALL ISRAEL SHALL BE SAVED." So, by Paul's inspired redefinition of "Israel," we who have submitted to Jesus as Lord constitute that "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." (Cf. I Peter 2:5, 9f.) This is the Israel to be saved.

7. THIS THEORY FAILS TO APPRECIATE THE CONDITIONALITY OF GOD'S PROMISES. Although all Israel is potentially capable of being saved, and although God has never withdrawn His gracious gifts to Israel nor regretted calling them, in practice, however, the nation as such has remained "a disobedient and contrary people" (Rom. 10:21). Because Paul understood that God's call is conditioned by their believing response expressed through obedient service (Rom. 11:29f.; cf. 16:26), his realism admitted only the possibility to "save SOME of them" (Rom. 11:14; cf. I Cor. 9:19-22). Can there be any hope for those who refuse to submit to His conditions?
8. THIS THEORY IS CONTROVERTED BY JESUS' PREFERENCE FOR HIS MULTINATIONAL CHURCH AS OPPOSED TO UNBELIEVING JEWS. To suppose that Judaism in the Last Day shall enjoy superior privilege or special opportunities to be saved is to forget Jesus' declared predilection for His Church, in contrast to "those who are of the synagogue of Satan, WHO CLAIM TO BE JEWS THOUGH THEY ARE NOT, but are liars." These latter, rather, He will "make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved YOU" (Rev. 2:9; 3:9).

So, to see promised in Jesus' words a final, miraculous conversion of Israel is to miss the fact that hundreds, even thousands, of Jews had already that week and in the weeks shortly thereafter, willingly confessed Jesus as Christ and became Christians. These Hebrew Christians, for whom large portions of the great New Testament Epistles were specially penned, are the firstfruits of the savable Remnant chosen by grace (Rom. 11:5). But, if by grace, then not because they were Jews, but because believers won like anyone else.

WHAT DOES THIS SECTION REVEAL ABOUT JESUS?

He who comes (ho erchōmenos) is often a Messianic title (cf. 11:3 notes). To recognize in the lowly Galilean the true Anointed of God is to see His true position and relationship to the Father and the Spirit. Now, however, "these things are hid from (Jerusalem's) eyes" (Luke 19:41f.). Had they known Who He really was, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory (I Cor. 2:8).

With only the Sermon on the Mount, especially the Beatitudes, in mind, many would falsely assume that gentle Jesus, meek and mild, could never raise His voice against anything. This full-blown warning against the spirit of hypocrisy and false teaching lays before our eyes a fuller, clearer picture of our righteous Lord.

Our magnanimous Lord holds out undeserved hope to a people that, on the basis of His exact, unflinching censure of their sham holiness and obstinate resistance to God's messengers, should have abandoned all hope of spiritual survival. But His terms of repentance are unmistakable: despairing Israelites must say, "*Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!*" with all the meaning this concept of the Messiah conveys. They must turn to Him on His conditions, not theirs. So, the last word does not belong to Jesus' antagonists and critics, but rather to the living Christ who will gather for Himself out of these and all peoples a congregation of worshippers. Even today He is working on this project and will keep at it until that Day when we all, either with black despair or irrepressible joy, cry, "*Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord!*"

FACT QUESTIONS

1. Name some prophets sent by God, who were killed at Jerusalem.
2. Jerusalem's stoning of the prophets meant that the authorities had pronounced what judgment against them?
3. On what basis can we know that Jesus had really sought to persuade Jerusalem to accept Him as God's Messenger? List the Bible texts that prove the reality of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem (or in its vicinity), and which illustrate the truth of Jesus' affirmation: "How often would I have gathered your children. . . ."
4. Who are the "children" of Jerusalem? What is meant by this expression?
5. Explain the illustration of the hen and her chicks, showing how

Jesus meant it. Show (1) who is the hen, (2) who are the chicks, and (3) why she tried to gather them under her wings.

6. According to Jesus, what is the basic reason He could not save Jerusalem?
7. In what other historic moment had Jesus been acclaimed with the words: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"?
8. What is the "house" that was about to be "left . . . desolate"? In what sense was it "left unto you"? Who intended to abandon this "house" in this way?
9. On what other occasions had Jesus pronounced a prophecy quite similar to this one?
10. To what future moment did Jesus point when He said, "You will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'"? Prove your answer.
11. In what sense was it true that, from the moment of Jesus' pronouncement, Jerusalem would not see Him any more? How long would He be thus invisible to Jerusalem? Did Jesus make any public appearances after the resurrection? If so, when and to whom?
12. Had Jesus ever before prophesied this disappearance? If so, when and what did He mean? (Cf. John 7:33f.; 8:21.)
13. Explain the relationship that Jesus sees between seeing Him and Jerusalem's crying, "Blessed be he . . ." ("You will not see me again, until you say. . .") In what sense would saying "Blessed be he . . ." help Jerusalem "see" Jesus in the sense He intends?