Jesus Criticizes Unjust Leaders
Matt 23:1-8, 23-26
SS Lesson for 07/08/2018

Devotional Scripture: Luke 14:7-14

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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson helps us to understand why Jesus Criticizes Unjust Leaders. The study’s aim is to understand that God’s attitude toward hypocritical religion has not changed and never will. The study’s application is to resolve never to enter into the sins of selfishness or hypocrisy.

(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: Matt 23:2-3

2 saying: ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. 3 Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

23:1-12. The hypocrisy and unbelief of the nation’s religious leaders, evidenced in chapter 22, prompted a strong message from Jesus. He turned to the crowds and to His disciples, who were in the temple listening to His debates with the various religious leaders. He warned them about their teachings saying that their authority was to be recognized (they sit in Moses’ seat, i.e., they teach the Law), but their practices, being hypocritical, should not be followed. They placed heavy burdens on people but were not righteous themselves (23:4). All their works were performed to be observed by men. Their phylacteries, small leather pouches containing strips of parchment with Old Testament verses (Ex. 13:9, 16; Deut. 6:8, 11:18), tied to their left arms and foreheads, were wide and thus conspicuous. And the tassels of their prayer shawls (Num. 15:38) were long and noticeable. They loved places of honor and to be called Rabbi, implying they were scholars. Such was not to be the attitude of Jesus’ followers. Titles (such as Rabbi... father... teacher) and position were not to be sought; instead there should be a brotherly relationship among the disciples (Matt. 23:8). Jesus was not saying there would be no lines of authority among them. But He was emphasizing that service for Him—the one Master (didaskalos, lit., “teacher”) and one Teacher (kathēgētēs “an authoritative guide,” used only here in the NT)—was more important than human positions of honor. Leadership positions should never be a goal in and of themselves, but should always be viewed as opportunities to serve others. The Pharisees, who exalted themselves, would be humbled, and Jesus’ followers, by humbling themselves in service, would someday be exalted.

23:13. In warning the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees of their ultimate destruction if they continued in their present path, Jesus pronounced seven denunciations, each beginning with Woe to you. “Those woes, in contrast to the Beatitudes, denounce false religion as utterly abhorrent to God and worthy of severe condemnation” (Walvoord, Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come, p. 171). In six of the seven, Jesus called the leaders you hypocrites. His first denunciation concerned the fact that the Pharisees were preventing others from entering the kingdom. Their antagonism toward Jesus had caused many to turn away from Him. Many Jews were looking to their leaders for direction. Their failure to accept Jesus as Messiah had placed a stumbling block in the paths of their countrymen. For this they stood condemned.

23:14. The NIV and some Greek manuscripts omit this verse. It may have been added because of Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47. If it is authentic here, the number of woes is eight. This “woe” demonstrated the inconsistency of the religious leaders for they made long “prayers” to impress people with their spirituality, but also oppressed widows, whom they should have helped.

23:15. This woe addressed the zealous activity of the religious leaders for they actively traveled not only over land but also over the sea to make even a single convert (prosēlyton “proselyte”) to Judaism. The problem with this was that by their actions they were condemning many individuals to eternal damnation. By imposing external restrictions of Rabbinic traditions on their converts, they were preventing these people from seeing the truth. In fact, such a convert became twice as much a son of hell as the Pharisees, that is, he became more pharisaic than the Pharisees themselves! “A son of hell” (lit., “of Gehenna”; cf. v. 33), was one deserving eternal punishment.

23:16-22. In the third woe Jesus pointed out the tricky character of the leaders. (In the first two woes Jesus spoke of the leaders’ effects on others; in the other five woes He spoke of the leaders’ own characters and actions.) When taking oaths, they made fine lines of distinction that could possibly invalidate their oaths. If one swore by the temple, or by the altar of the temple, it meant nothing to them. While thus appearing to be making a binding oath, they inwardly had no intention of keeping it. But if one swore by the gold of the temple or the gift on the altar, he would be bound by the oath. But Jesus said they were wrong in
suggested that gold was greater than the temple and a gift greater than the altar. Jesus pointed out that any oath based on the temple or things in it was binding for behind the temple was the One who dwelt in it. This was parallel to making an oath by God’s throne, for that oath was also binding because of the One who sat on the throne. Such distinctions by the religious leaders were condemned by Jesus, for they were clearly deceptive and dishonest. Jesus denounced those leaders as blind guides (v. 16), blind fools (v. 17), and blind men (v. 19; cf. vv. 24, 26).

23:23-24. The fourth woe related to the pharisaic practice of meticulously tithing all their possessions. They went so far as to carry the practice down to the smallest spices from plants: mint, dill, and cummin. While meticulously following the Law in this area (Lev. 27:30), they failed to manifest the justice, mercy, and faithfulness demanded by the Law. They were majoring on minors, straining out a gnat, while minoring on majors, swallowing a camel. Being so busy with small details, they never dealt with the important matters. Jesus was not saying tithing was unimportant; He was saying they were completely neglecting the one area at the expense of the other. They should have been doing both. Since they were not, they were blind guides.

23:25-26. The fifth woe emphasized the hypocritical nature of the Pharisees. They were concerned with external cleanliness, such as the outside of the cup and dish from which they would eat. But in their hearts were greed and self-indulgence. Their cleansing was primarily for the sake of being seen by men. But they were not above robbery and excesses in their own lives. If cleansing would take place internally, their outside would also be affected.

23:27-28. In the sixth woe Jesus continued the thought of the previous statement about external purification. The fifth woe stressed their actions; the sixth, their appearances. He called the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees... whitewashed tombs. A custom then was to keep tombs painted white on the outside so they would appear beautiful. But inside the tombs was the decaying flesh of dead people. Similarly, while the Pharisees appeared beautiful on the outside because of their religious conformity, they were corrupt and decaying inside. They were full of hypocrisy and wickedness (anomia, “lawlessness”).

23:29-32. The final woe also emphasized the religious leaders’ hypocrisy. They spent time building tombs and decorating the graves of the righteous. They were quick to say that if they had lived in the time of the prophets, they would never have been involved in shedding the blood of these righteous men. Jesus knew they were already in the process of planning His death. By that act they would demonstrate they were just like the former generations who murdered the prophets. By rejecting the Prophet, they would be following in the footsteps of their forefathers and “filling up” their ancestors’ sin.

23:33-36. In severe language Jesus condemned the religious leaders, calling them snakes and a brood of vipers, whose eternal destiny was hell (lit., “Gehenna”), the place of eternal punishment (cf. v. 15; cf. 5:22). The evidence that they were deserving of hell would be their continual rejection of the truth. The Lord promised to send them prophets and wise men and teachers, but the leaders would reject their words and even kill some and flog and pursue others. Their response to the proclaimed truth would justify the judgment coming on them. Abel was the first righteous martyr mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures (Gen. 4:8) and Zechariah was the last martyr (2 Chron. 24:20-22), 2 Chronicles being last in the Hebrew Bible. (In this statement Jesus attested the Old Testament canon.) In 2 Chronicles 24:20, Zechariah is called the “son of Jehoiada,” whereas in Matthew he is the son of Berakiah. “Son of” can mean descendant; thus Jehoiada, being a priest, could have been Zechariah’s grandfather. Or Jesus may have had in mind the Prophet Zechariah who was the son of Berakiah (Zech. 1:1). On that generation (genean) of Jews, who were guilty because they were following their blind (Matt. 23:16-17, 19, 24, 26) leaders, would fall God’s judgment for their involvement in shedding innocent blood. The Lord was anticipating the nation’s continuing rejection of the gospel. Their refusal of the Messiah ultimately led to the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.

23:37-39 (Luke 13:34-35). In a final lament over the city of Jerusalem, Jesus stated His desire for that nation. Jerusalem, the capital, represented the entire nation, and people there had killed the prophets and stoned those sent to them (cf. Matt. 23:34; 21:35). He longed to gather the nation together much as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. The nation, unlike chicks that naturally run to their mother hen in times of danger, willfully refused (you were not willing) to turn to the Lord. They were responsible to make a choice and their choice brought condemnation. The result was their house was left... desolate, or alone. Their “house” could mean their city; this is probably the most commonly accepted view. Or Jesus might have meant the temple or even the Davidic dynasty. Perhaps all these are involved. But Jesus is not through with the nation and the city of Jerusalem. Though He would soon depart (John 13:33), at a future
time He will be seen again (Zech. 12:10) and will be accepted, not rejected. In that day the nation will say, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, a quotation of Psalm 118:26. Jesus was speaking of His return to the earth to establish His millennial kingdom. This statement led to the following discussion.

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

Of all the things the Lord Jesus said and taught, He reserved His most condemning language for unjust religious leaders. In this golden text, He focused on the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes were a class of people who had expertise in the Jewish law and were supreme over the people in teaching, always careful to enforce strict compliance with the law and their interpretation of it. In the Gospels, we see them demanding to be honored and respected. The Pharisees were the scribes’ "partners in crime," a religious party that was characterized by extreme devotion to the practice of the law, including many laws that were man-made. They wanted to be extra clean and righteous in all that they did. As we read the Gospels, we see that these groups frequently condemned others for supposed violations of religious law and duty, however minor. These religious Jews were dominant among the Jews of the Lord's time. Notice that they sat in "Moses' seat." Moses' seat was the honored place of teaching in a synagogue, and those who sat there had positions of authority over the people. Later in the passage, the Lord uttered a lengthy and pointed rebuke of these leaders, calling them such things as "blind guides" (Matt. 23:16), "serpents," and a "generation of vipers" (vs. 33). He pointed to numerous vices and failures such as hypocrisy, public displays of feigned religious piety, lack of humility, a focus on man-made rules, greed, corrupt inner lives, and hatred of true prophets. To paraphrase our text, the Lord essentially told His disciples and the multitude that if the unjust leaders taught the right things, they should listen to them but that they should never do what they did and live the way they lived. They were leaders who lacked integrity and honesty and did not practice what they preached. In the Christian life, we all have to learn discernment about what we are taught and who is doing the teaching. Is what we are being taught by our leaders sound and in agreement with God's Word? If so, we are to listen and follow it. If not, we need to find a place that is faithful to God's Word. That is a key element of discernment. We must also look at the lives of those who teach us. Are they sincerely committed to living what they teach from God's Word? No one lives in a completely blameless way, but we should be able to discern true sincerity and godliness in leadership. When we see godly teachers who have integrity, we should draw near and learn to follow them. Nothing is better for our own discipleship than to follow good and godly teachers. We must realize that the Lord Jesus was not attacking the idea of leadership for God's people. He was attacking false leadership and the way some leaders fail to properly teach God's people, setting a poor example. We are not to follow unjust, dishonest, or corrupt leaders. Instead, we should look to those who love God's Word, teach it plainly, and obey it.

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Today’s lesson from Matthew 23 covers an incident that occurred during what is often called Passion Week, the final week of Jesus’ earthly life and ministry. The week began with Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11) and climaxed with his crucifixion and resurrection. It is generally believed that the events recorded in Matthew 21:23-24:51 (part of which is today’s text) occurred during Tuesday of Passion Week. This segment of text includes Jesus’ authority being questioned by the chief priests and elders of the Jews, a series of parables, and various questions directed toward Jesus.

Major Theme Analysis

Do Not Imitate Unjust Leaders (Matt 23:1-8)

1 Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples,
2 saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.
3 Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.
4 For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.
5 But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments.
6 They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues,
7 greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.'
8 But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren.

Beware of spiritual inconsistency (1-4)

_Inconsistent in judging faults (Matt 7:3)_
3 "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?

_Inconsistent in motives (Luke 6:46)_
46 "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?

_Inconsistent in involvement (Luke 11:46)_
46 Jesus replied, "And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

_Inconsistent in judgments (Rom 2:1)_
2 You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.

_Inconsistent in associations (Gal 2:14)_
14 When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?

Do not seek self-exaltation (5-6)

_Self-exaltation through desiring greater honor (Prov 25:6-7)_
6 Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among great men; 7 it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here," than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman. What you have seen with your eyes

_Self-exaltation through praising self (Prov 27:2)_
2 Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips.

_Self-exaltation through seeking to be greater than others (Matt 18:1-4)_
1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2 He called a little child and had him stand among them. 3 And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

_Self-exaltation through seeking noble treatment (Luke 14:7-11)_
7 When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: 8 "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. 9 If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. 10 But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. 11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."
Self-exaltation through assuming greater righteousness (Luke 18:9-14)

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' 13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' 14 "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Beware of seeking to be teachers (7-8)

Teachers will be judged more strictly (James 3:1-2)

1 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 2 We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

Teachers sometimes misjudge their knowledge (Rom 2:17-21)

17 Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; 18 if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; 19 if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth — 21 you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal?

Teachers will have more demanded of them because of being given more responsibilities (Luke 12:48)

48 But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

Teachers must be proven faithful in what has been given them (1 Cor 4:2)

2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

Woes to Hypocrisy (Matt 23:23-26)

23 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.
24 Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!
25 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence.
26 Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.

Neglecting spiritual piety (23-24)

Neglecting piety by not showing mercy to those in need (Luke 10:30-36)

30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' 36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"
Neglecting piety by not helping the poor (Prov 21:13)
13 If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.

Neglecting piety by not doing good deeds when given the opportunity (James 4:17)
17 Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins.

Neglecting piety by not abiding by the golden rule (Matt 7:12)
12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Neglecting piety by not showing mercy over assumed duties and sacrifices (Matt 12:7)
7 If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent.

Neglecting spiritual purity (25-26)

Neglecting purity by considering outward appearances over spiritual ones (1 Sam 16:7)
7 But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

Neglecting purity by judging by appearances (John 7:24)
24 Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment."

Neglecting purity by not riding themselves from everything that hinders (2 Cor 7:1)
7 Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Neglecting purity by not being a vessel of honor (2 Tim 2:20-21)
20 In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. 21 If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.

Neglecting purity by not being near to God and not resisting sin (James 4:8)
8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Concluding Thoughts from Thomas Constable

Verse 1

As we have seen, there were three groups of people present in the temple courtyard. These were the disciples of Jesus, His critics, namely, the various groups of Israel’s leaders, and the crowds of ordinary Israelites. Jesus now turned from addressing the Pharisees (Matthew 22:41) and proceeded to speak to the multitudes and His disciples primarily.

Jesus had begun to criticize the Pharisees and scribes to their faces about one year earlier (Matthew 15:7). Later He warned His disciples to beware of the teachings of the Pharisees and the Sadducees (Matthew 16:5-12). Now He denounced these enemies publicly. He did so because the decision the masses and His disciples now faced was whether to follow Jesus or Israel’s established religious leaders. They could not do both.

Verses 1-12
Verse 2

The scribes were the official teachers of the Old Testament. The Pharisees were a theological party within Judaism. Jesus was addressing two different though somewhat overlapping groups when He made this distinction. Some scribes were Pharisees, but not all Pharisees were scribes. The first title addressed the role of some of the leaders and the second the theological beliefs of some of them. A modern illustration might be "preachers" and "evangelicals." Not all preachers are evangelicals though some are. Likewise not all evangelicals are preachers though some are.

According to Old Testament figurative usage a person who sat on a predecessor’s seat was that person’s successor (Exodus 11:5; Exodus 12:29; 1 Kings 1:35; 1 Kings 1:46; 1 Kings 2:12; 1 Kings 16:11; 2 Kings 15:12; Psalm 132:12). When Jesus said the scribes and Pharisees had seated themselves on Moses’ seat He meant they viewed themselves as Moses” legal successors, possessing his authority. This is indeed how they viewed themselves. [Note: Mishnah Sanhedrin11:3.] Jewish synagogues typically had a stone seat at the front where the authoritative teacher sat. [Note: E. L. Sukenik, Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece, pp57-61.] Likewise most rabbis sat when they taught. The NASB translation "have seated themselves" hints at the irony that follows in the first part of Matthew 23:3. They presumed to be Moses” successors with his authority.

Verse 3-4

Jesus” statement in the first part of Matthew 23:3 contradicts what He said earlier about how the other Jews should respond to the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 15:7; Matthew 16:5-12). Assuming the consistency of Jesus” teaching we should understand His words here as ironical. [Note: J. Jeremias, New Testament Theology, Part I, The Proclamation of Jesus, p210.] Another view sees Jesus affirming the authority of the Pharisees in principle, since they taught the Torah, but not endorsing all their teachings (halakah, legal interpretations of Scripture). [Note: See Noel S. Rabinowitz, " Matthew 23:2-4 : Does Jesus Recognize the Authority of the Pharisees and Does He Endorse their Halakah?" Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society46:3 (September2003):423-47.] The first, preferable interpretation allows the Greek aorist verb ekathisan ("to sit," Matthew 23:2) to have its natural force. This view also explains the chiasm in Matthew 23:2-4 in which the first two statements constitute irony and the second two give non-ironical advice. Jesus continued to use irony in this address (Matthew 23:23-28).

Both the School of Hillel and the School of Shammmai increased the burden of responsibility on the Jews by adding to the Law. [Note: Edersheim, The Life . . ., 2:407.]

Verses 5-7

Jesus proceeded to identify more of these leaders” practices that the crowds and His disciples should not copy (cf. Matthew 6:1-18). "Phylacteries" were small boxes of leather or parchment in which the Jews placed copies of four Old Testament texts written on vellum (fine parchment, customarily Exodus 13:1-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; and Deuteronomy 11:13-21). They then tied these onto their foreheads and or forearms with straps to fulfill Exodus 13:9; Exodus 13:16, and Deuteronomy 6:8; Deuteronomy 11:18. God probably intended the Jews to interpret these commands figuratively, but the superficial religious leaders took them literally. The Greek word translated "phylacteries" (totapote, lit. "frontlets") occurs here only in the New Testament. It had pagan associations, and Jesus” use of it here implied that the Jews were using these little boxes as good luck charms. [Note: Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, s.v. "phylactery," by J. Arthur Thompson, 4:786-87.] Furthermore they made them big so other Jews would be sure to notice their "piety."

Likewise the hypocritical leaders lengthened the tassels they wore on the corners of their garments (Matthew 23:5). God had commanded the wearing of these tassels to remind His people of their holy and royal calling (Numbers 15:37-41; Deuteronomy 22:12). All the Jews wore these tassels, including Jesus (Matthew 9:20; Matthew 14:36). However the religious leaders characteristically wore long ones to imply great piety and to attract the admiration of the common people.

The leaders wanted to sit as close to the law scrolls as possible in the synagogues. These were the chief seats (Matthew 23:6). The title "rabbi" meant "my teacher" or "my master." It was originally just a title of respect. However eventually the term became a title expressing great veneration. The leaders in Jesus” day wanted it because it set them off as distinctive and superior to others. Modern people who take this view of an advanced academic degree or a title fall into the same error.

Verses 8-10
These verses applied to all the Jews but particularly the disciples (cf. Matthew 23:1). By placing "you" in the emphatic first position when He spoke to the disciples Jesus was implying that they would take the position of leadership over God’s people that the critics then occupied (cf. Matthew 13:52). They were not to love it when people called them "rabbi" because they had but one teacher (Gr. didaskalos), namely, Jesus. They were to regard themselves as on the same brotherly level as learners rather than as masters over the unlearned.

The term "fathers" (Matthew 23:9) probably referred to their fathers in the faith, the spiritual predecessors of the present generation (cf. 2 Kings 2:12). Apparently the fathers in view were dead. The change in tense of the Greek verbs between Matthew 23:8-10 seems to suggest this. If this is true, the person who now addresses a Roman Catholic priest, for example, as "father" is probably using this term in a slightly different sense than the Jews used it in Jesus’ day (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:15; 1 John 2:13-14). If a modern Christian uses the term with the idea that the "father" is his or her spiritual superior, however, he or she would be guilty of doing what Jesus forbade here.

The only person worthy of the title of teacher in the ultimate sense is Messiah. He is the only one who can sit in Moses’ seat and continue to interpret and reveal the will of God correctly and authoritatively (cf. Matthew 1:1; Matthew 16:16; Matthew 22:41-46). Jesus used a third Greek word for teacher here, namely, kathegetes. He probably did so to connect it with other key words in this section having to do with authoritative teaching: ekathisan ("they sat down," Matthew 23:2) and kathedra ("seat," Matthew 23:2). Thus He employed the rhetorical device of homophony (similar sounding words).

"Jesus’ enemies, the certified teachers of Israel, could not answer basic biblical questions about the Messiah. Now Hebrews, Jesus the Messiah, declares in the wake of that travesty that he himself is the only one qualified to sit in Moses’ seat to succeed him as authoritative Teacher of God’s will and mind." [Note: Carson, "Matthew," p475.]

It would be incorrect to conclude from this teaching that Jesus discouraged all recognition of distinctions between leaders and their roles among His servants. The apostles, for example, had authority in the church that surpassed that of ordinary Christians. Elders and deacons continue to exercise divinely recognized authority in the church, and God has commanded us to respect these individuals (1 Corinthians 16:15-16; Hebrews 13:7; Hebrews 13:17). What Jesus was condemning was seeking and giving honor that transcends what is appropriate since believers are all brethren, since God is our true spiritual Father, and since Jesus is our real teacher and leader. The teachers and leaders of God’s people must remember that they are always fellow learners with the saints. They are still children of the heavenly Father, and they are ever subject to Jesus Christ.

"... the risen Christ is as displeased with those in his church who demand unquestioning submission to themselves and their opinions and confuse a reputation for showy piety with godly surrender to his teaching as he ever was with any Pharisee." [Note: Ibid.]

**Verse 23-24**

The fourth woe (23:23-24)

The Mosaic Law required the Israelites to tithe grain, wine, and oil (Deuteronomy 14:22-29). How far they had to take this was a matter of debate. Jesus did not discourage scrupulous observance of this law. He directed His condemnation to the leaders’ failure to observe more important "weightier" commands in the Law while dickering over which specific plants, spices, and seeds to tithe. He went back to Micah 6:8 for the three primary duties that God requires. He probably chose the gnat (Gr. qalma) and the camel (Gr. gamla) as examples because of their sizes and their similar sounding names.

"It is usually the case that legalists are sticklers for details, but blind to great principles. This crowd thought nothing of condemning an innocent Prayer of Manasseh, yet they were afraid to enter Pilate’s judgment hall lest they be defiled (John 18:28)." [Note: Wiersbe, 1:85.]

This judgment constitutes the center of the chiasm and the most important failure of the scribes and Pharisees. They were distorting the will of God as He had revealed it in Scripture (cf. Matthew 9:9-13; Matthew 12:1-14). This distortion resulted in erroneous doctrine (woes3,5) that resulted in disastrous practice (woes2,6) that resulted in kingdom postponement (woes1,7).

It is important to recognize that Scripture reveals God’s will and that we should never elevate the authority of human interpretations to the level of Scripture itself. However, it is also important to recognize that within
Jesus Criticizes Unjust Leaders

Scripture some commands are more important than others and that we should observe these distinctions and not confuse them. This involves wisdom and balance in interpretation and application.

Modern teachers and preachers of God’s Word can commit many of the errors that marked the Pharisees. However, we need to remember that the Pharisees did not believe that Jesus was the divine Messiah.

Verse 25-26

The fifth woe (23:25-26)

Jesus condemned characteristic Pharisaic superficiality with this metaphor. The vessels represent the Pharisees and those they taught. The Jews were to be clean vessels that God could use to bring spiritual nourishment and refreshment to others. The Pharisees taught the importance of being ritually clean by observing the dietary and cleansing ordinances of the Law. Nevertheless they neglected internal purity. The Pharisees were erring in their emphases. They put too much importance on minor matters, especially ritual and external matters, and not enough on major matters, especially those involving spiritual reality. The singular "Pharisee" is probably a generic reference to all Pharisees (Matthew 23:26).

(Adapted from URL:https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dcc/matthew-23.html)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Let us revisit the case of Saul, the ardent Pharisee who was second to none in his hostility toward the Christian faith. After his conversion, he became, as the apostle Paul, one of the most passionate spokesmen for that same faith. What made the difference? Certainly, the appearance of Jesus to Saul on the road to Damascus was the determining factor. But as we read Paul’s later testimony, particularly in the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians, we see that something took place in his thinking and perspective. He had come to reject completely the typical set of priorities that guided a Pharisee’s outlook on matters of religion. Paul described himself as someone who, as a Pharisee, had “reasons for [his] confidence” (Philippians 3:4). His résumé was quite impressive in an earthly sense (3:5, 6). All the items he lists in that description he refers to as “gains to me” (3:7). They constituted what he calls “a righteousness of my own” (3:9). But Paul discovered something (and someone) far greater than his own self-made faith (which really wasn’t faith at all). He calls it “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:8). While Paul calls his righteousness obtained through the law “faultless” (3:6), law is by its very nature cold and impersonal. One cannot have a personal relationship with the law. It was in a person (Jesus) that Paul found what the law could never provide. Among those blessings was a joy (a repeated theme in Philippians) that rigid devotion to the law (any law) is powerless to give. Gladly did Paul suffer losing “all things” (all the ingredients of his self-made religion) and “consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8). He was determined to move forward (3:13, 14), with his ultimate goal of seeing Jesus—not in a vision, but face-to-face in his heavenly presence (3:20). It can be hard for us to appreciate Paul’s experience fully. It may be difficult to grasp the radical nature of the decision that led him to follow Jesus and reject an upbringing and a heritage that was deeply ingrained within him. Even so, Paul’s example and testimony remind us that following Jesus is worth any price we pay to do so.

The spiritual condition of the religious leaders, as exposed by Jesus in our text, was, sadly, nothing out of the ordinary. God’s people in both Old and New Testaments were always subject to the temptation to focus more on external acts of worship or devotion to God while neglecting the condition of the heart. This can be an especially serious pitfall for leaders of God’s people (the focus of today’s lesson title). They can become so enamored with their authority and the title they hold that they forget to give proper attention to their own spiritual condition as a model for others to emulate. Wise King Solomon advised, “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Proverbs 4:23). Yet Solomon failed to follow his own advice and allowed his heart to turn from the Lord through the influence of his pagan wives (1 Kings 11:1-4). We too must be cautious of how we care for our hearts. We cannot just point our fingers at the Pharisees and highlight their faults, lest we too fall prey to the pride that acted like a cancer on their hearts. Our society is very conscious of certain items (TV shows, books, movies, music) came with a (spiritual) heart unhealthy...
warning attached? What if we started watching, reading, or listening to one of these and a siren or alarm went off as if to say, “Careful, this is bad for your heart”? The Bible is meant to serve as that kind of alarm. But it has to become a part of our spiritual heart to the point that we know it well enough (a good reason to memorize Scripture!) to call on it for guidance in times of temptation, tragedy, or other circumstances that have the potential to draw our hearts away from God. Perhaps the words of Psalm 119:11 say it best—words that are part of the “pledge to the Bible” that is often recited by young people in Sunday school or Vacation Bible School classes: “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”

**Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary**

1. We are constantly setting examples for others in our words and deeds (Matt. 23:1-4)
2. Our Christian service should be only for the sake of the gospel (vs. 5)
3. Titles and positions of prominence should not be motivating factors for serving God (vss. 6-8)
4. Tradition and ceremony can easily distract us from focusing on the work of the Lord (vs. 23)
5. Our eyes must be open to the truth (vs. 24)
6. God is more concerned about our hearts than our appearance (vss. 25-26)