

# Jesus' Shepherd Heart For The Religious Leaders

Matthew 23:1-39

Key Verse: 23:37

**“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”**

In chapters 21-25 of Matthew's gospel we are learning the kingship of Jesus Christ. Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly, cleansed the temple, and then contended with religious leaders who opposed him. They did their best to trap Jesus. However, he turned their efforts into opportunities to teach people who he was. He is the son of the vineyard owner, as revealed in the parable, and he is the capstone - fulfilling Scripture. He is the king's son in the parable of the wedding banquet. He is David's Lord, and thus, the Son of God. Jesus boldly declared that he was the promised Messiah, the King of the Jews. In this way, Jesus stood in the temple courts and offered himself to Israel. Yet the nation, led by Jewish religious leaders, rejected him.

Today's passage records Jesus' last words spoken in the Temple. Jesus pronounced woes on the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. It was to help them repent. Although they were trying to kill him, Jesus was truly concerned about their souls. Jesus knew that without repentance they would go into eternal punishment (33). Some of Jesus' words sound harsh. Jesus' words challenge our modern tendency to embrace everything with tolerance. Yet, as we listen to Jesus, we find his uncompromising stand on the truth, especially in regard to who he is. Jesus is the Savior King sent by God; there is no other. Apart from him there is no salvation. We Christians stand on this truth in relativistic times. And this causes us to come into conflict with Jesus' enemies. How should we respond in an environment increasingly hostile to Christ? Let's learn Jesus' life-giving love for enemies.

We can divide this passage into three parts. In verses 1-12, Jesus speaks to the crowds and to his disciples. He wanted to liberate ordinary people from the deadly influence of the religious leaders. He also taught his disciples what kind of leaders they should be, in contrast. In verses 13-36, Jesus addressed the Jewish religious leaders directly, pronouncing seven woes on them. As we listen to this, we may become uncomfortable, feeling too much like the religious leaders. It is our opportunity to repent. In verses 37-39, Jesus laments over the city of Jerusalem, revealing God's heart for the lost. And finally, he prophesies a future

# Jesus' Shepherd Heart For The Religious Leaders

return to the temple, being received by his people as the Messiah. This inspires us with great hope.

## I. Jesus speaks to the crowd and his disciples (1-12)

Look at verses 1-3a. Jesus told the crowd and his disciples: **“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you.”** Teachers of the law were interpretative experts on the Torah, while the Pharisees were experts in theological matters that the Torah raised. Though their offices were different, they worked together as Bible teachers for Israel. Both were dedicated professionals who were well educated and highly trained. Here “Moses' seat” refers to a stone chair common in most synagogues. It was the place where teachers sat while expounding the law. Jesus honored Moses' seat. Jesus upheld Moses' law and the teaching of it in an official capacity by the religious leaders. Insofar as they accurately interpreted Scripture, they were to be obeyed. Jesus wants his people to honor the word of God, even when teachers are not so good. This requires spiritual discernment and careful Bible study (Ac 17:11; 1 Cor 14:29).

However, look at verse 3b. **“But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.”** The religious leaders' practice did not match their teaching, and was not to be emulated. Here Jesus is not necessarily referring to some gross moral failures, but to their lifestyle governed by extra-biblical rules which contradicted the spirit of Moses' law. In an earlier encounter, Jesus gave the example that they disobeyed God's command to honor their parents by claiming that they were “devoted to God” in accord with their oral tradition (Mt 15:5-6). Their regulations and rituals were complicated and contradictory. They were a heavy, cumbersome load which burdened ordinary people greatly. The religious leaders saw this, but did nothing to ease people's burdens. They were high-minded and indifferent. They were well-educated, but they were not shepherds. After hearing their messages, people felt crushed and helpless without remedy.

Privilege, position and education do not necessarily a good Bible teacher make. In verses 5-7, Jesus exposed their problem; it was an impure motive. Jesus said, **“Everything they do is done for people to see”** (5a). They were not aware of God's presence, but only of people. So their devotion was not a means to draw near to God, but a show for others to see. For example, they made their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long (5b). Phylacteries were small cube-shaped cases made of leather, containing Scripture passages written on

## Jesus' Shepherd Heart For The Religious Leaders

parchment (Dt 6:8, 11:18; Ex 13:9). These were worn on their heads and arms to keep the word of God in their hearts and minds as they went about daily life. Tassels with a blue cord (slide 6) were attached to the four corners of a man's garment, reminding the people to obey God's commandments and to be holy. Phylacteries and tassels were helpful for spiritual life and clearly recommended in Scripture (Nu 15:37--41; Dt 22:12). However, when the religious leaders' motive was impure, these things became a means merely of showing off before people.

To ordinary people, the religious leaders looked pious. One Pharisee prayed: **"God, I thank you that I am not like other people--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get"** (Lk 18:11-12). Most likely this was true. So people naturally honored them, seeing their religious practices and moral standard. The problem was that the religious leaders used their influence to make people rebellious toward Christ. Jesus exposed their inner sin-sickness to help them repent and to rescue people being led astray under their teaching.

Jesus, as only God can do, saw their inner hearts. They craved the places of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues (6). They loved to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called "Rabbi" (7). To them, being honored by people was everything. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that those who receive men's praise have received their reward in full (Mt 6:2,5,16). They have no reward from God. At the root of the religious leaders' hypocrisy was the desire for self-glory. God made man to live for his glory. Self-glory seeking is a great sin which contaminates everything we say and do. In fact, it leaves no room in one's heart for God (Jn 5:44). It invites the devil's work (Jn 8:44). The only solution is to repent and ask God's cleansing. God alone can heal our hearts of this disease and restore a right motive to serve him and others.

In verses 8-12, Jesus turns his attention squarely to his disciples and teaches them what not to do from the negative example of the religious leaders. Jesus said in verse 8, **"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers."** Rabbis were gifted teachers who developed their own understanding and practice of the law, which was usually distinctive in some way. They were honored and revered throughout their lifetimes and referred to affectionately long after they died. Their followers often emphasized their distinct teachings, took pride in them, and became divisive. This was the human glory of many rabbis. But Jesus taught his disciples to be different. Their attention should

# Jesus' Shepherd Heart For The Religious Leaders

remain focused on their one Teacher, Jesus. They were not to exalt themselves, but to live as brothers, who are equals, and learn of Jesus mutually.

Jesus said in verse 9: **“And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven.”** Of course, Jesus was not telling children to call their fathers by their first names instead of “father.” Jesus clearly taught that children should honor their fathers and mothers (Mt 15:6; 19:19). But Jesus was helping his disciples avoid the bad practice of the religious leaders who assumed positions of undue authority over people. Some Pharisees claimed that as a “spiritual father” they had even more authority over people than a natural father. On this basis, they tried to rule over people, micromanaging their lives. Jesus does not want this to happen in the community of his disciples. Jesus repeatedly taught his disciples that God was their Father. Whoever believes in Jesus becomes a child of God who can call God, **“Abba, Father!”** Certainly, we should still appreciate those who have born the spiritual birth pains for us, like St. Paul did for the Galatians (Gal 4:19). And we should learn to love God's people with a father's heart as Apostle John did; he refers to believers as his **“dear children”** repeatedly in his epistles. But fundamentally, we are all children of God through faith in Christ. We can all come to God directly as children to our Father. As Jesus said, **“you have one Father, and he is in heaven.”**

Jesus went on in verse 10: **“Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah.”** In a Christian community, Jesus is the Instructor of us all. Jesus' teachings should rule our community and we should learn together of Jesus until we all become like Jesus.

Forming the kind of Christian community Jesus wanted is not just a matter of knowing principles. Fundamentally it requires transformation of the heart. Instead of seeking honor through titles and positions, Jesus' people must learn how to serve others as Jesus did. Jesus said, **“The greatest among you will be your servant”** (11). The stars of the Christian community are not the most talented, ambitious, and well educated, but those who serve like Jesus did. Servants are not threatening or domineering. They are humble and they seek to truly obey God's will and to meet the real needs of others. Their service builds up the body of Christ. Let's read verse 12. **“For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”** Ultimately, Christ himself reigns over his people. Christ humbles those who exalt themselves and he exalts those who humble themselves (12). Andrew Murray compared this principle to the flow of water. Just as water finds the lowest elevation and collects there, so Jesus'

# Jesus' Shepherd Heart For The Religious Leaders

Spirit finds the most humble heart and dwells there, equipping that person to be a blessing. Let's learn of Jesus' humble servanthip, repenting the self-glory seeking desire of the religious leaders.

## **II. Jesus pronounces seven woes on the religious leaders (13-36)**

In verses 13-32 Jesus repeats six times the phrase, **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!”** Another time he says, **“Woe to you, blind guides!”** The word translated “woe” comes from the Greek word “ouai” which is a mixed cry of regret, compassion, sorrow and denunciation. Jesus was deeply grieved over the failure of the religious leaders. When he pronounced woes upon them, it was with a broken heart. Though Jesus gives many detailed explanations, the problem he mentions repeatedly was their hypocrisy. The word translated “hypocrite” has its root in the Greek theatre and means “actor”. The religious leaders pretended to be what they were not. Jesus pointed out their specific practice of hypocrisy in several ways. Though specific to that culture in some ways, they still speak to us today. Let's consider them briefly.

**First, they shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces (13).** As religious leaders, they should cooperate with God in what he was doing. Instead they opposed the promised Messiah and influenced others not to believe in him. In this way they shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. Jesus came to open the door. Through repentance and faith in Jesus, now anyone can enter the kingdom of God.

**Second, they made their converts' lives like hell (15).** They were very zealous to win people over to their particular form of legalistic righteousness. When they did so, the tendency of the converts was to exaggerate what they had learned and become even more zealous than their teachers. Converts did not gain peace, freedom and joy, but rather anxiety, restlessness and misery.

**Third, they were blind guides (16-22).** Jesus repeats five times that they were blind (16,17,19,24,26). They did not see God. Their value system was materialistic. They were very sensitive to gold, gifts and money. But they were unaware of God. That is why they could break an oath made beside something holy, but they never broke an oath made with money. In this way, they influenced simple and pure people to be blindly materialistic.

# Jesus' Shepherd Heart For The Religious Leaders

**Fourth, they neglected justice, mercy and faithfulness (23-24).** In their zeal, they tithed a tenth of their garden herbs. But they did not practice justice, mercy or faithfulness. They were excellent in small matters, but missed the point of knowing God's heart. Jesus compared it to straining out a gnat, but swallowing a camel.

**Fifth, they cleaned the outside but not the inside (25-26).** Jesus compared them to cups. While they were busy shining their outside, their inside was dirty. Though they looked holy, their hearts were filled with greed and self-indulgence. Jesus urged them to purify their hearts and to be clean from the inside out by faith.

**Sixth, they appeared as righteous but were dead inside (27-28).** Jesus also compared them to whitewashed tombs. Though they looked good, they were full of hypocrisy and wickedness. When these evils of the sinful nature ruled their inner lives, they were dead inside. Not only were they miserable, they also spread a deadly influence, like gangrene. However, anyone who accepts Jesus as Savior crosses from death to life (Jn 5:24). 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, **“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”**

**Seventh, they decorated their murderous history with fancy graves (29-36).** In the history of Israel, there was a shameful trend that people murdered the prophets because they hated their message of repentance. Later, the religious leaders acknowledged that the prophets were right and they decorated their tombs. But in their hearts they had the same murderous desire their forefathers had.

In their deadly hypocrisy the religious leaders were about to commit the greatest sin of all by murdering the holy Son of God. Jesus warned them of hell to come. Jesus wanted them to be spared. So he sent prophets, sages and teachers. The religious leaders would mistreat them and even kill them, as Stephen was martyred before the Sanhedrin members. And at last, God's judgment for all the righteous blood that had ever been shed would come upon that generation (36).

## **III. Jesus laments over Jerusalem and prophesies hope (37-39)**

After issuing serious woes upon the religious leaders, Jesus began to lament for Jerusalem. Look at verse 37. **“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”** In this lament, Jesus is opening to us a window into the heart of God.

## Jesus' Shepherd Heart For The Religious Leaders

Jesus was speaking, not just as a man who lived in history, but as the holy Son of God who ruled history. God had established Jerusalem with a great vision: to make her the source of God's life-giving words that would flow to peoples of all nations (Isa 2:3). He had nursed her into strength to accomplish this task and provided everything she needed to carry it out. But when his people lived in the land flowing with milk and honey, they lost their sense of mission and lived for their own purposes and pleasure. God sent prophets to nudge them back toward the direction he had given. He sent not just one or two prophets, but many prophets over several centuries. But, like the tenants in the parable, they mistreated and killed them. Despite their rebellious attitude, God was there for them, holding out his arms of grace and love, waiting for them to return. God's patience lasted not just a few years, or even a lifetime, but for hundreds of years, spanning many ups and downs in their history. God longed to care for them and protect them and nurture them as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But her people were unwilling. Here we learn that God is not like man. God is patient, loving and gracious despite all the sins and rebellion of his people. However, the coming of the Son was the last opportunity for Jerusalem. Their rejection of the Son would result in the grievous and terrible judgment of God. This happened in 70 A.D. when the Roman general Titus invaded the city. He killed over 1,000,000 people and took another 100,000 into captivity. The temple and the city were totally destroyed and the nation Israel was scattered and without a home for nearly two thousand years.

Yet even in that awful moment, Jesus had hope. Look at verse 39. **“For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”** There will come a day when the nation accepts Jesus as Messiah. God's dream and purpose will be fulfilled. Jesus had hope for Israel even in the time of awful judgment.

In this passage we have learned Jesus' heart, which is God's heart, even for his enemies. Jesus was very clear in teaching them the truth about their wickedness and hypocrisy. At the same time, Jesus grieved over them with a broken heart. Jesus truly loved their souls. And Jesus had the great hope of God which gave him a sense of victory in the glory to come. Let's learn Jesus' love and hope as we struggle to bring the message of the gospel to the people of our times.