

Text:

Matthew 23.1-12

Big Picture:

The tension with the Pharisees reaches its climax with a direct criticism by Jesus of the Pharisees, who attempt to place themselves above those whom they should be serving.

Preparing for the Lesson:

After the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus through several questions, Jesus turns the table on them through a discourse made to the crowds and disciples. Although we are never told specifically the Pharisees are a part of the crowd, the nature of Jesus' comments make us believe this is the case. In some ways, our section today serves to introduce what Jesus will expand upon in the "Seven Woes" of 23.13-39.

The phrase "Moses' seat" was probably not referring to a specific chair as much as to the notion that teachers sat when they taught and Moses would have been considered the giver of the law. In this sense, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees were considered the ones who interpreted and administered the law. Although we have a negative view of them, we still need to understand that the role they played had great significance for the Jewish people.

The problem, we discover, is that in sitting in this "seat," the teachers and Pharisees appear to have enjoyed the privileges of the role more than they participated in the responsibility of being in that role. They want others to do as they say, but are certainly not intent on helping others actually do that.

A phylactery was a pouch or box that held a written out text of the *shema* of Deuteronomy 6.6 ("Hear O, Israel..."). The tassels Jesus mentions were attached to the ends of the Pharisee's prayer shawls. Obviously, in both cases, the bigger, the more noticeable, which was the point. The Pharisees loved to be seen doing their acts of piety. They might even have questioned the point of performing those acts if no one was there to actually see them do so. We too have moments when we are this way, hoping to be noticed or seen as we go about following Jesus.

Jesus continues his admonition by telling his followers not to be called "Rabbi," or "Father." If you grew up in a church context, you may have often heard this passage used to demonstrate how certain denominations are in error, because members are called "Father So-and-so." Jesus' point was not to criticize a particular denomination, but to point out that the love of titles is not the point of following Jesus. Interestingly enough, there are many things we could substitute here that are not titles, but still could be considered to be important for our own sense of recognition. Because of this, let's be careful not to be too quick to point the finger at other's shortcomings, while refusing to look at our own.

Finally, Jesus concludes this section with instruction to be a servant. This is really nothing new in the Gospel of Matthew, but gains weight when contrasted to the lives of the teachers of the law and Pharisees. Instead of seeking to exalt ourselves, we need to look to serve others.

Possible Lesson Outline:

Begin your group time by asking your group the following: If your favorite online news site were to take a poll of the most religious person in America, who do you think would win? Why? If you were to ask South Plains the same question, who do you think we would pick? Why the difference? How does America determine “most religious?” What does this tell us about the way we appear to others?

Ask discussion questions.

Close with a time of prayer.

For the Kids:

Ask your children to tell you the difference between doing something for other people and doing something for yourself. Which do we most often try to do? Why? How can we do something for others more than we do things for ourselves?

A video example of this concept can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ejh_hb15Fc
Be sure to watch until the player at the end talks – it is a perfect example of discovering what it means to learn how to serve others.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why would sitting in “Moses’ seat” give the teachers of the law and the Pharisees authority to instruct the disciples and the crowds? Why was Moses a significant part of the Jewish faith?
2. Are you surprised that Jesus would tell the disciples to obey everything the teachers of the law and the Pharisees instructed? Why or why not?
3. There is some irony in Jesus telling his disciples to do everything the Pharisees tell the disciples to do ... but not to do what the Pharisees actually do. What is the point Jesus is trying to make here?
4. Why do we react so strongly to those who are hypocrites, that is, those who pretend to be one way, but are really another?
5. In what ways do we at times practice our religion for show or in order for others to see us? What are some ways today that we might make our “phylacteries wide” and our “tassels long?”
6. In what ways do our attempts at finding the place of honor at church only serve to turn away those seeking to follow Jesus?
7. What are some specific things you can do to remind yourself to serve when your temptation is to exalt yourself instead?

This Week:

The challenge this week, as it seems to have been for the last several weeks, is to use Jesus’ admonition and serve others, versus exalt yourself. Spend a few minutes as a group thinking of ways you can help each other be servants and encourage one another not to think of self first.

What's Next:

Next week's section is Matthew 24.36-26.35. One Groups will be looking at 25.1-13.

Text:

Matthew 23.1-24.35

Summary:

Our text today is a section of the final discourse of Jesus, which serves as a warning against the self-serving nature of the Pharisees. Those who follow kingdom ways do so by serving others, not through making themselves look better.

Key Points:

Jesus begins with a warning against the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, who attempt to make themselves look good, but refuse to help others who are attempting to follow God. These groups would have been the ones making the rules or passing along the law, but they wanted to be seen in a position of power more than they wanted to help others be better followers. Jesus tells his followers they are to be servants and humble themselves, not exalt themselves.

We then have a long section of “Woes” against the Pharisees. While we could spend time trying to dissect each of the seven woes, I think a summary better suits our purposes. The Pharisees, Jesus says, thought more of themselves and their places of power than they thought of the people they were leading. They did not think of mercy and justice. Those who are to follow Jesus think of these things.

Chapter 24 begins with an observation of the temple that spurs the disciples to ask a two-part question of Jesus. The first part is: “When will the temple be destroyed?” The second, for the disciples, was a natural outflow of the first: “What would be the sign of Jesus’ coming and the end times?”

In our passage today (which will be continued in next week’s passage), Jesus explains that there will be many signs that appear to be the signs of the end of the age. As bad as they may appear, they are not the end. However, when the end comes, Jesus goes on to say, you will know it. (So, be ready, Jesus will say next week—the exact time is unknown.)

Most likely, based on when we think the Gospel of Matthew is written, the wars and rumors of war had already happened and in fact, the temple may have already been destroyed. Matthew’s readers would have heard Jesus’ words not as yet-to-be-fulfilled prophecy, but affirmation of what had already happened. Notice that this is not the end. Jesus disconnects the destruction (and the “when will this happen”) with the end times.

Possible Reading Schedule:

The reading schedule can be adjusted to fit best your circumstances. Each section in this week's text is short, so it may be better to read through the entire text two or three times this week. The following is a suggested schedule to read through the text for this week in seven days:

- Matthew 23.1-12
- Matthew 23.13-22
- Matthew 23.23-32
- Matthew 23.32-39
- Matthew 24.1-8
- Matthew 24.9-25
- Matthew 24.26-35

Discussion Questions:

NOTE: These questions will be geared toward discussions with your family during your studies. They are intended to help you to continue to think about the text throughout the week. Feel free to adapt them as you see fit for your specific family situation.

- In what ways do we—or people we know—try to place ourselves in important positions of faith? What do you think people are trying to gain when this happens? How can we serve others more than we exalt ourselves?
- If Jesus were to come back today, what groups of people do you think he would direct a list of “woes” to? What would he have included as a part of his “woes?”
- In the 4th woe, Jesus says the Pharisees focus on the minor things, but forget the most important things like justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Why is this so easy to do? In what ways do we do these things today?
- In what ways do we clean the outside of our cups, but leave the inside unclean? How can we do a better job helping each other keep the outside—and the inside—clean?
- Herod's temple was an impressive structure that probably would have seemed indestructible, so Jesus' words would have seemed nearly unbelievable. What examples of buildings and/or institutions can you think of that we would consider indestructible today, perhaps even to the point of idolatry?
- The disciple's response to Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple was to ask, “When will this happen?” Why is the “when” of the end times so fascinating for us today? What examples can you give of this being the case for us?
- Using Matthew 24.4-35, how would you answer someone who says the end of the world is happening next week? What proofs might they use and how would Jesus refute their arguments? Given these things, what implications are there for how we are to live a life of faith?

Things to Do:

NOTE: Each week within this section, there will be a list of activities that will help you and your family better process the story of that particular week. The activities will be focused on including the entire family, but can be done by individuals as well. The idea is that you pick and choose an activity that best fits your situation.

- What, if any, information can you find out about “Moses’ seat.”
- Find a picture of a phylactery and the prayer shawls and tassels used by the Pharisees. Can you see how larger or longer items would have stood out more?
- List your “Top Ten Ways to Serve Others this Week.” Do them.
- Pick justice, mercy, or faithfulness and then research what the Old Testament Prophets said about the topic you pick. Why did the Pharisees not understand what the prophets were saying? How can you be sure to follow the prophets’ instructions?
- Fill a cup with mud. Wipe the outside sparkling clean. Drink it. Just kidding. (Although, can you see Jesus’ point?)
- Research, design, and/or build a scale model of the temple.
- Or, find out how large were the stones of the temple. Mark off the distance, and then stand next to it. Does this help you understand how shocking Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the temple might have been?
- Read Isaiah 13.10 and 34.4 in context. How do these passages help you understand better Matthew 24.29?
- Look up all the reference in Matthew to the “Son of Man” coming. What picture do you get of this event based on these passages?
- Memorize the key verses for this week: Matthew 23.12.