

Matthew 23: The Woes to Jerusalem

Vss. 16-22 - Jesus now calls the Pharisees and scribes "blind guides." This is a criticism He has used before ([Matthew 15:12-14](#); [John 9:39-41](#)). Blindness is often used in Scripture to symbolize those who reject God's message, making it impossible for them to perceive what is spiritually true. In this case, Christ points to their irrational approach to vows. Logically, swearing by any of the sacred objects would amount to swearing by God in heaven. Instead, the scribes and Pharisees imply that some oaths can easily be broken, a practice Jesus has also condemned ([Matthew 5:33-37](#)). Attempting to create loopholes in one's integrity is not only dishonest, but also foolish ([Matthew 23:16-22](#)).

Here Jesus emphasized that the altar itself is greater than the sacrifice made upon it. The altar is the established meeting place between God and man, and our altar is Jesus Himself and His work on the cross.

i. Having never been separated from God the Father by sin, Jesus Himself needed no altar. "He had a free and glorious relationship with His Father." ("Study Guide for Matthew 23 by David Guzik - Blue Letter Bible") It was the freedom of Adam before the fall – or even more so, because Jesus had a *history* of relationship with His Father that Adam did not know.

ii. It is worthy to think of the greatness of the Old Testament altar:

"· The *purpose* of the altar is significant: it sanctified what was put upon it, and it sustained and bore up the sacrifice until it was consumed." ("Enduring Word Bible Commentary Matthew Chapter 23")

· The *location* of the altar is significant: it shows that we come to Jesus and His atoning work first.

"· The *shape* of the altar is significant: it is square and perfectly proportioned, stable and unshakeable." ("Enduring Word Bible Commentary Matthew Chapter 23")

· The *horns* of the altar are significant: they show the power of God inherent in Jesus.

· The *position* of the altar is significant: it is not raised but is low enough for all to approach; it has no steps that would reveal human flesh.

· The *appearance* of the altar is significant: it is smeared with the blood of sacrifice. ("Study Guide for Matthew 23 by David Guzik - Blue Letter Bible")

"· The *material* of the altar is significant: it is brass, forged in the fire and able to endure the judgment of the flames." ("Enduring Word Bible Commentary Matthew Chapter 23")

c. **He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it:** Jesus reminded them that every oath is binding, and God holds the oath-maker to account, even if they excuse themselves.

Vss. 23-24 - These religious leaders carefully give ten percent of their crops, even the tiniest herbs. This was not wrong, as it means applying the law of Moses to the tiniest details of their lives. However, the other details of the scribes and Pharisees' teachings left enormous aspects of God's law unresolved. Their emphasis was on legalism, technicalities, and wooden literalism. Instead, they should have put equal emphasis on justice, mercy, and faithfulness. This error is as

absurd as using a screen to clear insects out of drinking water, while swallowing a massive animal (Matthew 23:23–24).

Vss. 25-26 - The scribes and Pharisees are committed to their public image; they go to great lengths to "look good" to other people. "However, their spiritual state is one of hypocrisy and death." ("What does Matthew chapter 23 mean? | BibleRef.com") This is like wiping the outside of cups and dishes while leaving the insides filthy. Echoing His other teachings on the subject (Matthew 15:11), Jesus tells them to clean inside first and the outside will follow (Matthew 23:25–26).

Vss. 27-28 - Using a second, even more graphic analogy, Jesus contrasts the Pharisees' and scribes' outer appearance with their inner spirits. "Grave sites in that era were often covered in lime, and some had decorative objects." ("What does Matthew chapter 23 mean? | BibleRef.com") These were appealing to the eye but did not change the decay and death under the surface. In the same way, the hypocrites in Israel's religious leadership used pious outward actions to cover inner hypocrisy and lawlessness (Matthew 23:27–28).

Vss. 29-36 - Jesus concludes the "woes" by showing that the Pharisees claim to honor the prophets of old, but they are just as guilty as their own forefathers who persecuted and killed messengers from God. God's measure of wrath eventually reaches a tipping point. For that reason, Jesus declares that this generation of Israel's religious leaders will suffer the consequences of the many righteous people unjustly killed throughout their history. Far from changing their ways, this hateful persecution will continue in the years after Jesus is crucified and raised from the dead (Matthew 23:29–36).

Conclusion:

Matthew 23 ends with Jesus' lament over Jerusalem. Speaking from His divine perspective, He mourns over how He would have protected the people, but they refused (John 5:39–40). This is the end point of Jesus' public ministry. "The following chapters contain extensive teachings given to the disciples, but no more public lessons or encounters." ("What does Matthew chapter 23 mean? | BibleRef.com") There will be no more opportunities for people to hear directly from Him. "Worse, the city will soon experience horrific wrath as the protection of God is removed (Matthew 24:1–2)." ("What does Matthew chapter 23 mean? | BibleRef.com") The next time the people of Jerusalem will see Jesus, openly, will be when He returns (Revelation 19:11–15) as a conquering Judge and King (Matthew 23:37–39).