

23:1 The chapter is clearly in three parts. Verses 1-12 are spoken to the disciples and the crowds; then there are the seven woes against the Pharisees (:13-33), and finally a statement of the Lord's love toward Israel and the inevitable judgment of Jerusalem.

*To the multitudes-* The Lord's interchanges with the Sadducees and Pharisees in chapter 22 had been in the presence of the crowds, and He had thrown at least one question to them. Clearly He was seeking to use those dialogues to appeal to the watching audience. So often this is what happens in preaching work. It is those who are observing who are persuaded, rather than the protagonists of the discussion. The Lord realized this, and now consciously appeals to those onlookers.

23:2 *Sit in Moses' seat-* This appears to some to be a past tense: They sat themselves in Moses' seat, the place from where Moses taught [Jewish teachers sat to teach], i.e. they had in the past appropriated to themselves the authority or seat of Moses. This retranslation avoids the apparent difficulty of the Lord otherwise claiming that they had equal authority to Moses. In this case, His command "That observe and do" (:3) would need to be rendered as His observation rather than His command- 'Whatever they tell you to do, that you observe and do'. But it is also possible to understand the Lord to be teaching submission, for the moment, to the religious leaders- rather than rank revolution against them. For the time to rise up in literal protest was still not yet, rather does the Lord's teaching urge that the revolt He has in mind is purely internal, deep within the human heart and psyche. By bidding obedience to those men, He would have been appealing to Dt. 17:11: "And you shall observe to do according to all that they (the religious leaders) shall teach you".

23:3 *Therefore-* Because they were in the place of Moses, the Lord advised obedience to them rather than quitting the synagogue system. He told His disciples that the time would come when they would be cast out of the synagogues (Jn. 16:2). He clearly had no conception of guilt by association, acquired through religious association with those who taught and lived wrongly. For He goes on to roundly condemn the whole system of Judaism. Perhaps He hoped that the presence of His people amongst that system would be an influence for good upon at least some and a witness to the leadership. Or perhaps He knew that until the more public founding of the Christian church, those people had no realistic alternative but to continue attendance. For outside of the religious system they would spiritually flounder. Whatever, we never hear Him making a direct command to come out from the system until in Revelation we hear His call to come out of the latter day Babylon, which was likely an extension of His teaching in the Olivet prophecy to leave Jerusalem when she was besieged in the very last days. But this was therefore more of a call to self preservation rather than of religious separation because of differing principles. If He had intended separation for religious reasons, He surely would have called for it earlier. But He doesn't. The essential witness is made from our position embedded, at least externally, in this world.

Put together two scriptures in your mind: “You must obey [the Pharisees] and do everything they tell you”; and, “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees” (Mt. 23:3; 16:6). Surely the Lord is teaching that we should respect elders but never cease personally analysing what they teach for ourselves. Once we stop doing this, we start resigning our own personality and will be unable to follow our Lord personally, i.e. with our own persons. And then we will be ripe for being caused to stumble, if those elders we are listening to then offend us. For ‘we’, with all that we are, will have been dominated by them.

*Observe and do-* But soon the Lord would be sending the disciples out with the commission to teach the world “to observe [s.w.] all things that I have commanded you” (28:20). And this command became programmatic for the early church, whose integrity was to be judged on the degree to which they had kept / observed [s.w.] the Lord’s commands (1 Jn. 2:3-5; 3:22,24; 5:2,3; there are other allusions to the great commission in John’s letters, e.g. 3 Jn. 7). So clearly enough *His* commands and the need for loyalty to *them* soon replaced His word here in Mt. 23:3 about observing / keeping the commands of the Scribes. He may be employing an element of sarcasm, as if to say ‘It’s OK, you don’t have to put up with this much longer; in a day’s time, I shall be dead, the Law of Moses will be completed, you will be free. But for just another 24 hours, endure their tyranny’. Only afterwards would the disciples have appreciated what the Lord meant.

*Their works... they do not-* The Lord is making a purposeful paradox. Their ‘works’ were a not doing or working. Their sins of omission were counted by Him as a work. They, of course, prided themselves upon their works. But the Lord is saying that they actually did nothing- in His book. In this lies the tragedy of Christianity as mere religion. The works can be done, and yet in the Lord’s eyes, the essential works are not done. The Lord continues His play on this idea by going on to say that the works they do are done to be seen of men (:5). They did the works but because they were done towards men and not to God, they were not really done. If we have our reward of men, then we have no reward of God. Our works [s.w.] must be made manifest / revealed by the light of Christ, specifically in the cross, as to whether they are worked “in God” or not (Jn. 3:21). The mere doing of the work is not the basis of acceptability.

*They say, and don’t do-* The Pharisees did all the works, but in their hearts they never knew God, and finally went and did His Son to death. The Lord plays on the fact that ultimately, in God's eyes, they did no works at all: "Do not ye after their works; for they say, and *do not*" (Mt. 23:3).

We are left to imagine the anger of those zealous men. They *did* do works, as the Lord observed. But to Him, ultimately they did nothing at all. They had no genuine motives.

23:4- see on 23:25.

*Heavy burdens*- John appears to allude to this in saying that the true commandments are “not grievous” (1 Jn. 5:3, s.w. “heavy”). The fences created by men around God’s law are in fact higher than the actual Divine law. God’s laws have a creative intention, whereas human fences around them are totally negative in their intention. The Lord uses the same word later in the discourse, in stating that the ‘heavier’ matters of the law are justice, mercy and faith (:23). Yet even those things are not “heavy” (1 Jn. 5:3) in the sense that the regulations of the Pharisees were. The Lord’s burden is light compared with the weight of carrying unforgiven sin (11:30). The parallel between sin and heavy burdens is also found in David’s comment about carrying the weight of his unforgiven sin with Bathsheba (Ps. 38:4). The burden of sin was thus tied upon people by giving them religious rules which they were unable to keep due to human weakness, and because sin is partly a matter of conscience, it was still counted to the people as sin if they broke it. Therefore to enforce such rules upon people was effectively lading them with sin. This principle needs to be considered by those who ‘bind’ isolation from other brethren upon believers, or who ‘bind’ them to a single life after divorce.

*Hard to be carried*- The Lord sensitively commented that He had many things to command His disciples, “but you cannot bear / carry [s.w.] them at this time” (Jn. 16:12). In teaching others God’s requirements, we must be sensitive to human weakness, rather than present them with a whole set of Divine standards as a package and demand their immediate acceptance of it. The Lord still accepted the disciples, even though He had not asked them to do all the things He would like to have asked them to do. And there are likewise levels of discipleship for us too. The same word is also used about carrying the cross of Jesus (Lk. 14:27; Jn. 19:17). This is the ultimately hard to be carried burden. If people have signed up to carry this, who are we to seek to add to it by our demands upon them. James surely had the Lord’s teaching here in mind when he reasoned that neither the disciples nor the Jewish fathers had been able to carry the yoke of the Mosaic law (Acts 15:10). Any teaching that the Mosaic law must be obeyed [and there are plenty of Christians teaching this, sadly] is therefore seeking to bind a heavy burden upon men which will lead to their spiritual collapse and thereby to our own condemnation.

*Lay them*- The same word used about the cross being laid upon the Lord (Lk. 23:26), and the laying of the lost sheep on the shoulders of the shepherd (Lk. 15:5). As this is the Lord’s only other reference to anything being laid upon the shoulders, we may be intended to understand that

carrying the weight of the lost, seeking to save them, can be replaced by carrying the weight of worrying about obeying human regulations. So many spiritual lives and so much endeavor goes into keeping in with a social club based around the laws of men, when that energy could be far better used carrying the lost to salvation.

*Men's shoulders-* The laying of an unbearable weight upon the shoulders recalls exactly the language of the cross of Christ being laid upon Him. Instead of men carrying *this* burden, they can instead end up carrying the burden of obedience to human regulations. The focus changes to obeying human expectation rather than the effort involved in engaging with the crucified Christ. All such human laws, regarding fellowship practice, dress codes etc., are therefore likely to make men stumble and thereby bring condemnation to those who demand them. Legalism and human religion are a burden laid on men's shoulders. But the cross of Jesus is also a burden laid upon our shoulders (Mt. 23:4). The greatness of the demands of the cross free us from the burdens of man's legalism. But it's still a choice, between a cross and a cross. See on 3:11. As Moses "looked on their burdens" at age 40 (Ex. 2:11), so at the start of His ministry, our Lord assessed the weight of ours. His concern for our burdens in Mt. 11:30; 23:4 is perhaps a conscious allusion back to Moses' awareness of Israel's burdens, and his desire to deliver them, even though it cost him all that he had in this world.

*Move them-* Gk. 'remove' them. In His earlier teaching about this in Lk. 11:46, the Lord said they would not "touch" the burdens. The Lord by contrast used touch frequently in order to connect with sinful people and their conditions, and to thereby heal them. The Pharisees would not touch them for fear of contamination; they would not associate or engage with sinful people and the results of their sins. The Lord used His fingers to enter the ears of the deaf and touch the eyes of the blind, secreting unclean body fluid. This is the way to remove burdens- to engage with them. And yet closed table policies effectively do the same, by refusing association with those judged by latter day Pharisees to be too serious sinners. The fear of guilt by association is utterly selfish, and results in the burdens never being removed or made lighter for the person struggling to carry them.

*With one of their fingers-* The contrast is between the weight of the burdens on the shoulders of men, so great it crushed them; and the ease with which the law-makers could remove them with their fingers, perhaps referring to their ability to write things with a few strokes of the fingers which would remove those burdens. This is ever more true today- a few taps with a finger on a keyboard to change traditional demands on fellow believers, and burdens can be removed.

23:5 *Works they do-* See on :3 *Their works... they do not.*

*To be seen of men-* The same Greek word and teaching as in 6:1; the Pharisees did good deeds “to be seen of men” and therefore have no reward. But the warning of 6:1 is to us all. Too easily we can feel that these woes against the Pharisees are not relevant to us, but they were merely giving in to the same tendencies as are common to us all. John’s Gospel uses the same word for ‘seeing’ with regard to our ‘seeing’ Jesus in the sense of believing in Him. So the contrast is between those who look to Jesus, and those who want others to look to them. Widening and enlarging the religious symbols on their clothing was exactly in order to be seen by men. Our focus upon looking toward Jesus will make us less interested in how men look upon us.

*Enlarge-* Nearly all the descriptions here of what the Pharisees did are couched in language which is elsewhere used about spiritual things. The point being made is that they were living a religious life which was an inversion of what true spirituality, and especially the example of the Lord Jesus, are all about. The reason why so much attention is given to the Pharisees in the Gospel records is surely because their mentality is so typically human, and their failure is preserved as a warning to all who claim to be committed to the same God of Israel. The Greek word translated “enlarge” is elsewhere nearly always used about the need to “magnify” *God* rather than ourselves (Lk. 1:46 “My soul *magnifies* the Lord”; Acts 10:46; 19:17; Phil. 1:20).

*The borders-* The same word translated “hem” is used elsewhere only about the hem of the Lord’s garment which gave blessing and healing to others (9:20; 14:36).

23:6 *Chief reclining place at feasts-* The Lord had earlier used the very same words to describe how the attitude to places at feasts was directly relevant to placing at the Messianic banquet of the Kingdom. Those who now take the lowest places around the Lord’s table will be exalted, and those who took the high places will be demoted in “shame”, a term usually associated with rejection and condemnation (Lk. 14:7,8). Those who consider themselves as spiritually superior in the ecclesia will be demoted and that demotion may well be in terms of condemnation. Our attitude around the Lord’s table now will be directly relevant to our placement at the Lord’s table when He returns. Those who have taken for themselves the more glorious places will be rejected- that is the clear message.

*Chief sitting places in the synagogues-* They wanted to be publically seen as spiritually superior. The whole structure of church life, whereby some must have public roles, is such that people can fall so easily into a love of publicity. The Lord realizes this, and often removes His beloved from

such temptations. This explains the otherwise inexplicable way in which the Lord allows some of His most talented and capable servants to be removed from the public eye to serve Him in human obscurity.

Note that the Lord here is repeating almost word for word what He has previously said about the Pharisees in Luke 11. To repeat so much text twice in the Gospel records, and for the Lord to give identical word-for-word teaching on two occasions, shows how important these warnings are for all readers. This consideration alone suggests that we each have the same tendency as the Pharisees; they are but epitomes of our own deepest tendencies and desires.

*23:7 Greetings in the markets-* The Lord's reason for going to the market was to invite men to work in the vineyard and receive the penny of salvation (20:3); and His people sitting in the markets sought to persuade others of the need to respond to the Gospel (11:16). The Pharisees went to the markets to simply flaunt their external spirituality. Again, note how their behaviour was the very inversion of true spirituality.

*To be called of men-* This uses *kaleo*, the standard word translated 'call'. The Lord and His followers *call men* to the Kingdom from the markets (25:14; Lk. 14:16); rather than going to the markets to be *called something by men*. Again we see how the Pharisees' behaviour was a parody of true spirituality.

*23:8 Do not be called Rabbi-* The Lord was looking ahead to when those immature disciples would be the leaders of the new community He believed He was creating. He foresaw the day would come when their converts would naturally want to show them respect, and He warns against the use of titles as a sign of respect. But in this kind of thinking ahead, we have an insight into the great faith and hope the Lord had in His men; for they were so immature, and so far away from such positions of authority and leadership. But He has the same hopes for us too. His positivity is and was extraordinary. The whole vision was a huge challenge for the disciples- to learn that they would one day be the equivalent of the Rabbis in the new Israel the Lord was creating.

*One is your Master-* 'Rabbi' means 'master' and is from the Hebrew word *ab*, 'father'. This explains why having taught against using the title 'Rabbi', the Lord now speaks specifically about 'master' and 'father'. The greatness of Christ means that once it is perceived, then we will

naturally perceive that in the light of His excellence, we have no pre-eminence over each other; we are brethren, in Christ.

*You all are brothers-* Just because we are all brothers, actually something *more than physical brothers and sisters*, we are not to call any of us ‘Master’, because if we do, it will distract us from our personal looking to Jesus as Lord and Master. This is why anything that even suggests a personality cult built around leading brethren, no matter how wonderful they are or were, really must be avoided. For it takes us away from the one and only Lord and Master. Whatever leaders or organisers we have, we are to call nobody our ‘father’ in a spiritual sense. The wonder of our relationship with *the* Father ought to mean that we never do this. Above all, we are all brethren in Christ. John refers to himself as the brother of the congregation (Rev. 1:9), and the leading apostles were addressed as ‘brother’ just as much as anyone else in the ecclesia (Acts 21:20; 2 Pet. 3:15). There may be leaders among brothers (Acts 15:22), but we are still essentially brethren. The intimate inter-connectedness of the family must ever remain; which explains why Paul is called ‘Paul’ and not a longer form of address. Likewise I’d suggest that the practice of calling each other by our first names, with the prefix ‘brother’ or ‘sister’, is healthy; and, indeed, a privilege. Reference to a brother as ‘Dr.’ or ‘Mr.’ seems to me to be quite at variance with the family nature of our relationship. If the Lordship of Jesus is fully felt as it should be, then even those who become leaders in the congregation [the disciples, in the first instance] are to feel themselves as brethren with those they are leading. This brotherhood between leaders and followers is essential for true functioning of the body of Christ.

23:9 *Call no man... father-* Although the twelve called Jesus ‘Rabbi’, they perhaps didn’t respect Him initially as the *only* Rabbi -because the disciples were too influenced by Judaism. The Lord has to remind the disciples to call no man their rabbi or 'father' on earth, i.e. in the land, of Israel. The disciples were evidently still under the influence of Judaism and the religious world around them, and this background died hard for them. “Why say the scribes...?”, they reasoned (Mk. 9:11), implying that their view was of at least equal if not greater weight when compared with that of the Lord Jesus [as they also did in Mt. 17:9,10]. He had to specifically warn them against the Scribes in Lk. 20:45,46. 'Father' was a common title for the rabbis, who referred to their disciples as their 'sons'. The disciples clearly respected the apostate rabbis far more than He wanted them to. We can easily overlook the deep and awesome significance of calling our fellow believers “brother” and “sister”. As Paul so strongly stresses, the Lord Jesus created a new sense of family, of “social identity”. We can easily miss how radical this was in first century Palestine; just as we can miss it in our own context. In the Mediterranean world of the first century, families were supremely important. The head of the family exercised total control. For the Lord to teach that His followers should call no man on earth their father was extreme; and yet He said it and expected it (Mt. 23:9).

*One is your Father-* This appeal to the unity of God would've sat well with the Jewish audience. But like many who profess faith in the One God, they hadn't thought through the implications. If God alone and uniquely is our Father, then we are not to call men 'Rabbi', rooted as the word was in the Hebrew word *ab*, 'father'.

*In Heaven-* If there is a Father in Heaven, we don't need a spiritual father upon earth. The implication is that they considered that although indeed there was one Father in Heaven, Heaven is distant and we need a father on earth. The Lord is implying that the Kingdom, the rulership and essence of God in Heaven, is to be seen and felt on earth in our lives.

23:10 *Neither shall you be called-* The Lord has warned His people not to call their spiritual leaders by titles such as father or master, and now He addresses those who would become leaders, the nervous and wavering disciples, and urges them not to allow others to call them by these titles. Again, He foresaw how those weak men would soon be in a position where others would wish to give them these titles, and in so doing we have a window upon His hopefulness and vision, at a time when the material in His hands seemed so weak and immature.

*Masters-* The root word is used about leaders in the church: "Them which *have the rule over you*" (Heb. 13:7,17,24); "He *that is chief*" amongst the believers should be as the servant (Lk. 22:26); Paul was "the *chief* speaker" (Acts 14:17), Barnabas and Silas were "*chief men* amongst the brethren" (Acts 15:22). So the Lord is not teaching that there are not to be leaders; it is practically impossible in any case to have any community wherein all are identical and without leadership. But the Lord's point is that those in such positions should not be named as such, and should stop others calling them by such names. All in the community of faith should perceive Christ as the one ultimate Lord and Master, and in the light of that deep sense, all should see themselves as brethren on the same ultimate level with each other. One of the key factors in the apostasy of the early church was a failure to give due weight to the Lord's teaching here.

*Even Christ-* Perhaps this was added by Matthew in brackets, as it were, seeing that the Lord never baldly calls Himself "the Christ" in so many words.

23:11 *He that is greatest-* The Lord spoke distinctly in the singular. Not 'Those who are the great ones', but the specific individual who is the greatest. Surely He had Himself in view.

*Among you-* Again, this is distinctly relevant to the Lord Jesus personally. He was soon to repeat these words with specific reference to Himself: "He that is greatest among you... He that is chief, as He that serves... I am *among you* as He that serves" (Lk. 22:26,27). The idea of "among you" is an oblique reference to His humanity, as one of us.

*Shall be your servant-* The servant of Israel was the subject of Isaiah's servant songs, which came to their climax in the Lord's death upon the cross, prefigured by His washing the disciples' feet half naked as a servant, dressed as He would be at the time of His final death on the cross.

23:12 *Whosoever-* The singular “greatest” person in view in :11 was the Lord Jesus; He was speaking of Himself, and in a sense speaking obliquely to Himself as well as to His immediate audience. But He now teaches that all in Him must pass through the same path of humiliation and exaltation. The same words for ‘abase’ and ‘exalt’ are used about all believers, e.g. “Humble yourselves [s.w. ‘abase’] in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up [s.w. “exalt”]” (James 4:10; 1 Pet. 5:6). The Lord gave a parabolic example of what He meant when He also used the same words together about how the proud Pharisee would be “abased” and the convicted sinner ‘humbled himself’ and would later be ‘exalted’ (Lk. 18:14). The Lord’s path of humiliation and exaltation is therefore to be that of us all; and Phil. 2:4-12 clearly applies this to His whole life and supremely to His death on the cross and exaltation subsequently. “He *humbled Himself* (s.w. ‘humble’ and ‘abase’ here in Mt. 23:12)... unto death” (Phil. 2:8). He there is therefore no longer a mere historical event, but rather a living pattern with which we engage throughout the progressive humiliation which the Lord’s hand brings upon us, so that we might be exalted in due time. This, in one sense, is what the paths of our lives are all about- progressive humiliation under His mighty hand, both pushing ourselves down and being pushed down.

*Shall exalt himself-* Again relevant to the Lord Jesus, who was highly exalted because of His servanthood. But He was exalted by God, not Himself (Acts 2:33; 5:31 s.w.). And the very same word is used of the Lord's lifting up on the cross (Jn. 3:14; 8:28; 12:32,34). This was the true exaltation.

*Shall be abased-* This is the very same word used in the next clause: “He that shall humble [s.w. ‘abase’] himself...”. In the end, we are brought down. We are humbled by our own humanity and weakness. We either bring ourselves down, or God will bring us down. So we may as well humble ourselves so that we shall be exalted by God, rather than exalting ourselves so that God will eternally bring us down in condemnation at the last day. It’s humility, bringing down, either way. So certain is the connection between humility and exaltation that James 1:9 can say that the brother who is ‘abased’ (AV “of low degree”) *is* exalted- in the eyes of the God who sees outside of our time, for whom all live unto Him even now.

*Shall be exalted-* God recognized Mary’s “low estate” [humility] and exalted her above all women (Lk. 1:48), just as He would exalt His Son among men. The same Greek word is used in Acts 8:33: “In his humiliation [‘low estate’] his judgment was taken away”. It occurs too in Phil. 2:8: “He *humbled himself*”. In the cross, indeed throughout the seven stage self-humiliation of the Lord which Phil. 2 speaks of, He was living out the spirit of his mother. She taught him the

life and the way of the cross. Hence the way she insisted on being there at the end, and the comfort she would have given Him, and the love He showed by asking for the only one who really understood Him to be taken away, for her sake as well as His own. The Lord directly alluded to His mother's pattern of humiliation and exaltation by using the same word again here in Mt. 23:12: "Whoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself [s.w. be abased- we must either humble ourselves or be humbled, it's such a powerful logic] shall be exalted". Thus Jesus alludes to His mother's words in order to set her up as our pattern ["whosoever"]. And yet He Himself showed the ultimate obedience to her pattern in the death of the cross. For this and many other reasons, the Lord's mind was upon His mother in His time of dying. And according to the Messianic Psalms, He even asks God to have mercy upon Him *for Mary's sake* (Ps. 86:16; 116:16).

23:13 *Woe*- The Lord now utters seven woes, just as Isaiah had uttered seven woes after telling Judah the parable of the vineyard (Is. 5:8-6:5)- which the Lord had also recently done. Isaiah's woes were likewise uttered as a reflection of genuine Divine anger, but they were also a last ditch appeal to the Judah of Hezekiah's time to repent, lest the Assyrian invasion come and destroy them. Isaiah's woes largely concerned the extremely fleshly behaviour of Judah at his time; the Lord's woes concern religious hypocrisy of the apparently zealous, Torah-obedient Jews. The point is that religious hypocrisy, even if it involves careful obedience to some Divine principles, is just as wanton and fleshly as drunkenness and theft, the kinds of things criticized in Isaiah's seven woes.

*You lock up*- The same figure of the door of the Kingdom being shut [but by the Lord, not men] is found in 25:10. The similarity is such that we may be intended to understand the foolish virgins are those who were locked out of the Kingdom because of the Pharisees. Their lack of oil, of personal spirituality, was because their religious leaders had not inculcated this in them, nor any sense of their own fallibility and frailty- in that the reason they ended up locked out of the Kingdom was because they had not considered that their oil would likely fail. The Pharisees had "the key of knowledge" (Lk. 11:52) in a spiritually ignorant and illiterate society which depended upon them for knowledge of God's word. Likewise if the elders / judges of Israel had been wise, the entire people would have entered the land (Dt. 16:20). The whole of Israel would've stayed in the wilderness and not entered the Kingdom / land if Gad and Reuben hadn't initially gone over Jordan (Num. 32:15). Wrath would come upon all Israel if the Levites weren't encamped around the tabernacle (Num. 1:53). We really can cause others to not enter God's Kingdom by limiting their access to God's word [a sin of omission], or by making demands on them in the name of His Kingdom which are too heavy for them to bear [a sin of commission]. This imparts an urgency and eternal importance to all our interactions with others. No longer can we see the community of believers as a mere social club, nor the world around us as simply the dead furniture of our lives. We have their salvation or stumbling away from it within our power. This fact also denies us from assuming that whether we fail or not in our interactions with others, God will somehow make good our failures and save others anyway. He has delegated His work

into our hands, and to some extent the degree to which it prospers or fails is our responsibility. Otherwise the whole language of delegation of His wealth into our hands is somehow meaningless.

*Against-* Gk. 'in the face of', as if they slammed the door in the face of ones eager to enter the Kingdom.

*You neither go in yourselves-* If we believe that we ourselves will be there, we will spark off an upward spiral of positive thinking in the community of believers with whom we are associated. Think carefully on the Lord's words to the Pharisees: "For ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in" (Mt. 23:13). If we don't believe we will be there, we end up discouraging others.

*Nor allow those who are entering-* The Greek *aphiemi* translated "allow" more commonly carries the idea of loosing, setting free, and is translated 'forgive'. There may be a hint here at what the Lord also taught in chapter 18- that unforgiveness of others makes them stumble from entering the Kingdom. And the Pharisees with their endless demands upon men were indeed unforgiving. There is a sense in which we will enter the Kingdom at the last day (5:20; "Not every one that says Lord, Lord shall enter into the Kingdom", 7:21; 18:3; 25:10 s.w.), and yet in another sense we are entering now through the gates ("enter in at the narrow gate", 7:13; 19:17,24). Our lives now are on a path, a journey, which is entering the Kingdom. The significance of life and living could not be more intense.

Earlier when speaking these words, the Lord had said that the lawyers were 'hindering' those who were in the process of entering the Kingdom (Lk. 11:52). The same word is used about how the disciples 'forbad' children to come to Jesus (19:14) and about 'forbidding' baptism (Acts 8:36; 10:47). This is exactly how people can be hindered or not 'allowed' to enter the Kingdom today- by refusing them baptism because of some inadequacy of knowledge or behaviour, or because they are simply felt to be in a category [like "children" were by the disciples] who are inappropriate for the Kingdom. These reflections make us realize that the Pharisees were not a mere phenomenon in history, but have their direct equivalents today.

23:14 *Hypocrites-* They were totally fleshly people on the inside, but their acting involved the "pretence", the *prophasia* or actor's cloak, of making long prayers, appearing righteous on the outside. The Lord homes in upon such behaviour in the Sermon on the Mount- appearing to be spiritual when we are not is deeply angering to the Lord.

*Devour widow's houses-* I mentioned earlier that the language used here about the behaviour of the Scribes and Pharisees is elsewhere used about the righteous behaviour of the Lord and His followers; the Jewish leaders were living a religious life, but it was but a parody of true spirituality. The same words for “devour” and “house” are used of how the Lord Jesus was ‘eaten up’ or ‘devoured’ with zeal for His Father’s “house”. But by contrast the Scribes thought only of how they could devour the houses of widows, scheming how to get the house of a vulnerable single old woman left to them, and how they could devour that wealth upon themselves. We note that Mark and Luke conclude this section with the account of the widow who gave her entire wealth to the temple coffers (Mk. 12:42; Lk. 21:1). This was surely to add assurance that although her donation was misused, it was carefully noted by God to her eternal credit.

*For a pretence-* See on *Hypocrites*. The word was used about an actor’s cloak, and thus connects with the theatrical term ‘hypocrites’, play-actors. The Lord uses the same word in Jn. 15:22: “If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin; but now they have no *cloak* for their sin”. When did He come and speak unto the Jews about their hypocrisy? Surely here in Matthew 22. Although they did have a cloak for their sin before men, the Lord is saying in John 15 that they have no such cloak before Him.

*Greater-* There will be degrees of punishment, although it will be self-inflicted.

23:15- see on 17:12.

*You compass sea-* *Periago* is only elsewhere used in the Gospels of the Lord ‘walking around’ the villages around the sea of Galilee (4:23; 9:35). Again, their behaviour was a conscious inversion of His.

*You make him... the child of Gehenna-* The condemnation of anyone is partly their fault, and partly the fault of others. They stopped people entering the Kingdom (:13) and thus made them inherit condemnation. This is the danger of legalism. Despite such huge missionary efforts and apparent devotion, imposing legalism upon others leads to their condemnation and the worse woe, therefore, upon the missionary. They made the person be condemned in that they had made him a proselyte. The same Greek word is used both times for “made”. By becoming a proselyte, the person became responsible to judgment and would be condemned. Here is proof enough that knowledge makes responsible to judgment. The Jews didn’t give men the good news of Christ and God’s grace; rather they gave only partial knowledge of the whole picture, of God’s demands upon men. They persuaded men to enter covenant relationship with Him, undertaking to keep His commandments, whilst not explaining grace and the love of God. And thereby they made those people condemned. This is just as easily done today in the preaching of a one-sided message which lacks any real Gospel, or good news of salvation by faith and grace.

*Twofold more-* Again we see the idea of degrees of punishment. The Lord has just said that the Pharisees would have greater condemnation than others (:14), and now He says that their converts would have double even that. Perhaps the implication of that is that these proselytes were not mere passive converts, but were inspired by the example of their teachers to be even more extreme in their legalism and lack of true faith. A case could be made that the Hellenistic Jews who persecuted Paul so fiercely were in fact Gentile proselytes. Reflect too how Saul was more obsessed against Christians than his teacher, the Pharisee Gamaliel. This is all so true to human observation, that the converts of legalists become typically even more fanatic than their spiritual fathers.

23:16 *Blind guides-* Their blindness was a major source of criticism (:16,17,24,26). Paul uses the language of blind guides of the blind to the Jewish Christian believers in Rom. 2:19- showing again that the mentality of the Pharisees is likely to be a problem for us all; we are failing to get the point if we read these woes upon them and feel somehow isolated from those men by time and culture. Their blindness was self-inflicted, otherwise it would not have been cause for rebuke. If someone doesn't want to see God's ways, then they never can see them, because the darkness in which they have chosen to mentally move has blinded them. This is true for those who do not live in love (1 Jn. 2:9,11), homosexual sinners who go so far in their perversion that they conclude they were born gay [blindness indeed], and those who are blind to God's existence [because they have chosen such darkness].

*It is nothing-* They were saying that an oath could be taken but breaking it was no problem if one 'only' swore by the temple. Jews swore by the temple because of their belief at the time that the temple was eternal. Because they broke their oaths and considered the temple to effectively be dispensable, therefore the Lord goes on in chapter 24 to predict the destruction of the temple.

*The gold-* On the basis that that men swore by the greatest thing they could (Heb. 6:13,16), we have here an insight into their mind. For them, gold was paramount, for they were materialistic (Lk. 16:14). And it was even more important than the temple and the God who dwelt there.

*He is bound-* This suggests that some oaths were binding and others were not. And thus a scale of honesty was created, whereby human words themselves were not significant, but were only given value according to how much they were underpinned by oaths. The Lord therefore taught that all such swearing was to be outlawed for His people (5:34-36). The word *opheilo* is used often in the Gospels but always in the context of the debt owed to God for human sin (18:28,34; Lk. 7:41; 16:7; 17:10), and the debt of others to us for their sin against us (18:30; Lk. 11:4). Instead of judging to what degree others are bound / obligated to us for their sins, we are to frankly forgive, just as God frankly forgives our debts.

23:17 *Greater-* The idea was that men swore by the greatest thing they could, which means that if they are going to swear at all, they should swear by God (Heb. 6:13,16). However, Jews didn't

like to swear by God, and so they had a whole range of things by which they swore- despite the fact that Dt. 6:13 clearly stated “You shall fear Yahweh... and shall swear by His Name”. An oath by the temple was “nothing”, but by the gold of the temple was even more. They were thereby effectively introducing a whole range of possible levels of honesty. Which the Lord had cut right through by insisting that our yes must be yes, without any oaths (5:34-36). James alludes to this by saying that “Above all things... swear not” (James 5:12). The importance of absolute truthfulness and not grading the honesty of our words is so important that James urges us to this “above all things”. Truthfulness with God, with others and within ourselves, is paramount. It is a reflection of our experience of God’s total and genuine forgiveness of us. In the forgiveness context, this spirit of truthfulness is what allows us to genuinely, from the heart forgive others not in word only but in feeling and reality.

*That sanctifies the gold-* By so saying, the Lord reduced ‘gold’ to a mere metal of no intrinsic holiness outside the context of God’s service. The Pharisees, as many believers today, had isolated aspects of their religion and glorified them in themselves, forgetting the wider context. Thus it may be that a sister focuses on one particular aspect of service until it is out of all context, a brother may obsess about a specific Bible teaching out of all perspective with the rest of God’s revelation and intentions. But it’s doubtful that the temple of itself sanctified the gold within it- that isn’t a Biblical idea. See on :19 *The altar that sanctifies the gift.*

23:18 *By the altar-* Their desire to define everything led them to downplay the significance of the altar because they were so concerned with the value of the sacrifice placed upon it. And yet Ex. 29:37 pronounced the altar to also be holy. Their penchant for definition led them to ignore the clearest statements in the Law they claimed to read, study and love to obey. Having spoken three times in the same section about “the altar” and “the temple”, it cannot be incidental that the Lord goes on to say that they had effectively slain Zacharias “between the temple and the altar” (:35). He is demonstrating that despite their hypersensitive interpretation of these things, they had committed sacrilege in those very places.

*The gift-* Again we have an insight into how the Pharisees thought. Gifts to the temple were all important to them, because those gifts were effectively their income.

23:19 *Blind-* The fact the Lord rebukes them for their blindness shows that blindness is in this sense their choice. I would suggest that much erroneous understanding is a result of people choosing not to understand, rather than having some genuinely excusable intellectual blockage.

*The altar that sanctifies the gift-* The Lord had earlier taught that a gift brought to the altar was unacceptable if the offerer was not first reconciled to his brother (5:23,24). But as so often, He uses their reasoning and for a moment, argues as if it were true. If they considered that the altar sanctified the gift, then effectively there was a unity between the sacrifice and the altar. To draw a distinction between oaths made by the altar and those made by the sacrifice upon it was

therefore utterly a false distinction. The Lord could have argued that oaths should only be made by God, in line with Dt. 6:13. Or He could have reiterated His position that our yes should mean yes, and therefore there was no need for any swearing by anything (5:34-36). But we note *how* He argues here- He uses their wrong ideas and works with them to demonstrate ultimately how they were misplaced and wrong. He does the same in using the language of demons. Instead of a bald declaration of truth, He worked with people from where they were. Far too often, bald declarations of truth are presented in a way which can only alienate, and is more for the benefit of the speaker than the audience. It all comes down to whether we genuinely wish to lead a person onwards, for their benefit; or whether we are involved in the whole interchange for our own self-justification and benefit.

23:20 The Lord is criticizing the distinction made by the Jews between swearing by the altar, and swearing by the sacrifice; or swearing by the temple, and swearing by the gold placed in the temple treasury. If a man swore by the temple or by the altar, those things could not be taken up if he was found to be telling untruth. But if he swore by the sacrifice or donation of gold he had made, those things could be seized.

23:21 *And by Him...*- The Lord's point here and in :22 was that effectively, the Pharisees were doing what they were trying hard not to do, i.e. swearing by God. And yet Dt. 6:13 had commanded that oaths should be sworn by God, and Lev. 19:12 implies that too, in warning against swearing falsely by God. There is no suggestion that oaths were to be sworn by anything else. This was the point of the commandment not to take the Name of God in vain (Ex. 20:7). Abraham swore by God (Gen. 14:22,23); the formula was typically "as Yahweh lives" (Jud. 8:19). The Jews tried to avoid this, placing the sacrifice, gold, temple and altar in some kind of varied scale of solemnity. But the Lord's point is that effectively, they were swearing by God. The lesson is that all such careful, legalistic attempts to place a respectable distance between God and ourselves in the matter of honesty are foolish and irrelevant. In reality, the Jews were breaking one of the ten commandments, by taking God's Name in vain. And this was the very commandment they were so careful to apparently obey by not even mentioning or pronouncing the tetragrammaton. The Lord's earlier command in 5:34 not to swear could be read as meaning that people were not to swear by the things they were swearing by at the time (heaven, earth, Jerusalem, your head), but only by God. But seeing God knows all things, the Lord is saying that our yes should be yes, for effectively all that we say is said before God.

*That dwells therein*- The Lord goes on to say that the house of the Lord was no longer God's house but "your house", and it was 'left desolate' (:38). The glory had departed from it, just as God's shekinah presence is depicted in Ezekiel as progressively departing from the temple. And yet again the Lord is using their own beliefs against themselves. If they believed that God still dwelt in the temple, then the gold in its treasury, the altar and sacrifices were all equally

connected with Him. Note that “Him that dwells” in the sanctuary / Most Holy (Mt. 23:21,35 RVmg.) could be a reference to an Angel who dwelt there- see Ps. 78:60.

23:22 *By Heaven*- To draw a distinction between swearing by Heaven and swearing by God personally was purely academic. Earlier the Lord had clearly stated that there is practically no difference between Heaven and God: "Heaven... is God's throne" (5:34). We note, however, that Matthew often uses "Heaven" as a synonym for God, using language in a way which makes concession to Jewish sensitivities, even though they were mistaken. The use of the language of demons for unexplained illnesses is another example. The Lord could have simply quoted from the Old Testament, as Stephen did: "Heaven is My throne" (Acts 7:49). But instead He works with the false distinction they were making to show it to be false, instead of head on confronting them with the error of their thinking by Biblical quotation. And in that He sets us an example. The Lord's point is that all oaths are before God because He sees all things. The distinctions being drawn by the Pharisees were pathetic efforts to distance man from God in terms of personal responsibility to Him. Whilst we may shake our heads at their intellectual vanity and desperation, we practically do the same within the deepest levels of human psychology. For we too can assume that somehow God is not present, we are not held to be utterly truthful, because of some get out clause of our own creation and imagination. But His omnipresence means that there are no such separations to be made, nor distances to be placed, between God and man. We are directly responsible to Him, in His presence. See on :26.

*Him that sits thereon*- A clear invitation to conceive of God as a personal corporeal being having specific location.

23:23 *You tithe*- The Greek can equally mean to both take or receive tithes. They demanded and perhaps paid themselves tithes on absolutely everything.

*Mint, dill and fennel*- These plants grew on windowsills, and a tenth of their 'crop' would've been very light in weight. The lightness of the 'crop' is contrasted with the 'heavier' things which were required of believers. Again, the Lord could've deployed convincing Biblical arguments that the tithe was to be paid from harvested crops, and given to the Levites / priests- not the Pharisees. For they were not the same as the priests. There is no hint in the Mosaic legislation that a tenth of such things was to be given to support the livelihood of the priests. But the Lord goes along with their position- and doesn't say they should not do this. Rather He lifts the issue to a higher and 'heavier' level. In engagement with those who wilfully misunderstand Scripture, it's easy to present a strictly Biblical case which demolishes their position. And the Lord could so easily have done this in the matter of tithing kitchen herbs. But He doesn't. He simply raises weightier issues and principles.

*You have omitted*- The Greek *aphiemi* occurs three times in this verse; clearly a word play is

intended. For the Lord concludes the sentence by saying: "... and not to leave [*aphiemi*] the other undone [*aphiemi*]" . And He uses it again at the end of His speech: "Your house is left [*aphiemi*] unto you desolate" (:38), and there would therefore not be left [*aphiemi*] one stone upon another in that temple / house (24:2); not one part of the masonry would be omitted or overlooked, every stone would be thrown down. They had omitted the weightier matters of justice etc., thinking they were justified in this because they did not omit to tithe kitchen herbs. But the Lord is saying that effectively they *had* omitted "the other", the tithing of kitchen herbs; they had omitted what they had omitted. The double use of *aphiemi* in the last clause is to give the sense of how totally they had omitted [*aphiemi*] "the other", the tithing of kitchen herbs. So although they did tithe them, effectively they had not done so. Because they had omitted the weightier matters of justice, mercy and faith. So they tithed, but they did not tithe. Just as we can pray, but not pray; think we believe, when we do not; forgive, when we do not really; read God's word, when we do not really do so [as the Lord often pointed out to them in saying "Have you never read...?", when clearly on one level they had read]. Omitting justice, mercy and faith meant that their tithing of the small stuff was also omitted, in God's final view of them. The spiritual life is intended to be all encompassing, it's not a case of a series of specific obediences to a long list of specific commandments, whereby our omission of the heavier issues is compensated for by our commission of the lighter issues. And this again is a challenge to us all; for surveying God's expectations of us, we can so easily cut ourselves slack in some areas because we feel we are being obedient in others. Thus the failure of the Pharisees in this becomes not something to merely shake our heads at, but a challenge to our deepest internal reasonings in our own walk before God.

*The weightier matters-* The heavy burdens tied on men by the Pharisees were in fact relating to the lighter matters [s.w. :4 "heavy burdens"]. Clearly the Lord saw there was a variation in God's requirements, ranging from light to heavy. This of course was and is anathema to any legalistic mind, who sees obedience to specific statements as paramount. The Lord is trying to show that life before God is lived in a spirit of life in which omitting the weightier matters means that specific obedience to the lighter matters is thereby rendered void.

*Justice, mercy and faith-* These were "matters of the Law", these were what the various specific commandments of the Mosaic Law sought to inculcate. Why these three matters? Mercy is part of justice, in that justice must be shown with mercy if we have any awareness of our own moral frailty (James 2:13); just as God integrates mercy with justice in His judgment of men. Mercy and justice are what David praises God for (Ps. 89:14; 101:1). God's judgment of men is connected with His mercy (Is. 16:5; 30:18), and human judgment of situations must likewise be a mixture of justice and mercy (Hos. 12:6; Zech. 7:9). But to exercise these things requires faith-faith that God's judgment of us and others is mixed with mercy. For those like the Pharisees with no sense of their own sins and experience of God's judgment-mercy, this was all a foreign language, just as it is for the many self-righteous legalists of today. Our calling is to reflect God's

mixture of justice and mercy on the basis of our own experience of it, and this was the intention of the entire legal apparatus of the Mosaic law.

*Faith-* Faith is something which ought to be 'done', the Lord is teaching. Faith never exists alone. James argues that there is no essential difference between faith and works. 'Faith' is not just credulity or a vague feeling of hope, but an active, driving force. There is "the work of faith" (1 Thess. 1:3; 2 Thess. 1:11). Knowledge and faith are paralleled in John's thought (Jn. 8:32 cp. 14:1; and 6:69 cp. 11:27)- in stark contrast to this world's emphasis upon works rather than faith. Hence Isaiah's appeals to *know* and *believe* Yahweh (43:10); and the Lord's parallel of 'little faith' with little understanding (Mt. 16:7,8). *Pistis*, one of the NT words for 'faith', is translated in the LXX as both 'faith' (e.g. Dt. 32:20; Prov. 12:22) and 'truth' (Prov. 12:17; 14:22; Jer. 5:1). Indeed, another word used in the LXX is 119 times translated 'truth' and 26 times 'faith'. There is a connection between true knowledge of the Gospel and faith. And this faith is the basis for our works. We don't just learn the propositions of the one faith before baptism, and forget them. The triumphant spiritual life *lives them out*.

23:24 *Blind guides-* That they were "guides" is a repeated reason why the Lord condemns them. This is because they were leading others to condemnation. We play a larger part than we currently can ever imagine in either the salvation or stumbling of others, and this fact of itself should impart to all our interactions a seriousness and intensity. On one hand, deeply sensitive to whether a course of action will cause another to stumble, and on the other, ever reaching out to others with the possibilities of the Kingdom and forgiveness.

*Strain out a gnat-* Gnats lived on camels, so this is a picture of how extremely these highly religious men had utterly missed the point. And remember that they were members of the ecclesia of their day, the people of God. Amos 6:6 (LXX) condemns a similar Israel as those "which drink strained wine". The Pharisees would've been shocked by this direct association made between them and apostate Israel of Old Testament times. The context of Amos 6 is about the forthcoming destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple for the sake of the materialism of Israel's leaders.

23:25 *You make clean-* The Lord Jesus is described using the same word as making others clean (8:2,3; 10:8; 11:5). The Pharisees were concerned with making *themselves* look clean externally. Again, they are a parody of the Lord. He was concerned with making *others* clean, and really

clean. This tension, between making ourselves look clean and making others clean, is highly relevant to us all. For there is such a thing as being spiritually selfish.

*The outside-* The tension between outside and inside, along with the idea of cleanliness, is to be found in the Lord's earlier teaching in Mk. 7:15,18. Nothing on the *outside* can defile a man, it is the *inside*, the thoughts, which must be cleansed. If we ask *why* there is a desire for good appearances externally, the answer may not simply be 'so as to look good to others'. It can also partly be a recognition of our own inner defilement and our sense that we ought to be doing something about it. Peter explores the same tension in 1 Pet. 3:3, teaching that a woman should not focus on *outside* [s.w.] adorning, but not on *internal* attitudes. He's not saying that 'outward adornment' is wrong of itself, but rather that her focus should be on *inner* spirituality rather than focusing on the *external* to the exclusion of the *internal*. Thus obsession with external cosmetic issues, and literal cosmetics, can likely be a running away from internal issues which need serious addressing. So often pedantic attitudes to externalities conceal insecurity, and in spiritual terms, that insecurity is a reflection of disbelief that the inner conscience has been cleansed of sin in Christ.

*The cup and the plate-* The plate and cup refer to the Pharisees personally. The picture is of silverware being cleansed and shining outwardly, whilst it contains unclean things within. "Even so *you also* outwardly appear righteous" (:28). And Lk. 11:39 is clearer: "*Your* inward part is full of ravening [Gk. 'extortion'] and wickedness [Gk. 'plots']". They were ever scheming how to get money out of people. But why choose these two items as examples? The presence of the article both times, *the* cup and *the* plate, suggest they have specific relevance. The Gospels were written as the handbook for the early Christian converts and ecclesias. They would largely have been recited or read at the breaking of bread meetings. It's hard therefore to avoid the reference to the memorial cup and plate of the communion meetings. And again, the warning comes so close to home. The memorial meeting is the time to look within, at the likely wickedness within us, rather than appearing in our Sunday best and making ourselves shine externally.

*Excess-* The Greek suggests complete lack of restraint. And here is the paradox. The most rule-governed people were actually without any sense of restraint. Obedience to rules, and elevating rules, does not of itself mean we are restrained. It can mean the very opposite.

Time and again Paul warns his brethren not to behave like the Pharisees did in various incidents in the Gospels (e.g. Mt. 23:4 = Acts 15:10; Mt. 23:25 Gk. = 1 Cor. 7:5, where Paul is saying 'If

you lust inwardly but outwardly appear to have rejected marriage for the sake of the Gospel, you're like those condemned Pharisees). Let it be noted that the danger of Pharisaism, of spiritual hypocrisy, of adopting a hard line on issues which in essence we too fail in, was a great theme with Paul.

*23:26 Cleanse that which is within-* What was within them was a ravening (7:15) for material gain and plotting to obtain it (Lk. 11:39), extortion and lack of self-restraint (:25). There was of course no prescription in the Mosaic legislation for cleansing internal attitudes. But the Lord's command for them to cleanse these things surely suggests they were to think harder about what the sacrificial blood of cleansing might represent. The argument of Heb. 9:9-14; 10:2,22 is that the blood of Mosaic sacrifices could not cleanse from such internal conscience of sin- but the blood of Christ can. The Lord's command for them to "cleanse" their inner parts could therefore find no opportunity for fulfillment within their legal framework. But the language would've recalled David's need to be cleansed in the inward parts after his sins relating to Bathsheba (Ps. 51:2). His request for cleansing was met by God's direct operation on his heart, because as he was aware, there was no prescribed sacrifice which could address his need. The scribes and Pharisees were surely intended to realize that they must ask God for special cleansing; and yet they knew that blood played some role in cleansing. Therefore they were intended to come to the conclusion that God could indeed cleanse them, but through some special sacrifice. The priests and Pharisees who later converted to Christ perhaps followed this path of logic to where the Lord intended it to lead (Acts 6:7; 15:5). His hopefulness in people finally paid off- setting us a great example.

*That the outside of them-* There is a jarring element of unreality here. Cleaning the inside of a cup doesn't make the outside clean. But that is the jump of faith required. The inside is the outside- in God's eyes. This reasoning continues the theme that 'God sees all things' which the Lord has developed in :22; see on 23:22 *By Heaven*.

*23:27 Whitened sepulchres-* A month before Passover, the graves were painted white so that the pilgrims coming to keep the feast would not be defiled. This was therefore something fresh in everyone's minds, for the Lord was speaking at Passover time. Earlier the Lord had used the opposite figure about them: "You are as graves which appear not, and the men that walk over them are not aware of them" (Lk. 11:44). It was as if they had not whitened / cleansed themselves before Passover as was required. And so again we see the idea that they led men into defilement.

*Appear-* S.w. 6:16 "That they may *appear* unto men to be fasting".

*But within are full-* The idea of being inwardly ‘full’ of unclean thinking is found likewise in :25: “*Full of extortion and excess*”. Only from God’s perspective is this apparent. We tend to perceive elements of spirituality and also of unspirituality co-existing within a person. But ultimately, in God’s judgment, the inner heart is either fully for Him or against Him, dead or alive in spiritual terms. They are full of “*all uncleanness*”. The language is in absolute, total terms.

*Bones-* Perhaps a reference to the spiritually dead house of Israel being likened to dead bones in Ez. 37:1-11, awaiting the coming of the spirit of the new covenant.

23:28 *Outwardly appear unto men... within-* This is the language of 1 Sam. 16:7. Man looks on the outside, but God looks within. And within the Pharisees was not a pretty sight.

*Within... hypocrisy-* We would imagine that the language of hypocrisy was more relevant to their outward appearance than to their internal state. But they were hypocrites *within*, meaning that they deceived their own selves within, wearing masks within their own hearts to deceive themselves that they were actually righteous. The Lord Jesus perceptively commented that hypocrisy is something which is *within*- it's about acting out a role *inside* ourselves, a split personality *within* a person, whereby they kid themselves they are someone whom they are not. Their real self and their shadow self are in conflict deep within their minds, in their own self-perceptions they act one way when their real self is something different. And this all goes on *within* the human mind. Hence Paul speaks of hypocrisy being essentially a lie which is told within the mind, and parallels it with a conscience which no longer functions properly (1 Tim. 4:2). The Lord's definition of hypocrisy therefore concerned an internal state of mind- and He warned that this is a yeast which inevitably spreads to others (Lk. 12:1). Thus Barnabas was carried away into hypocrisy by the hypocrisy of others (Gal. 2:13). Although it's so deeply internal, the dissonance between the real self and the portrayed self that goes on *within* human minds somehow becomes a spirit which influences others. And that's how society has become so desperately hypocritical. James 5:12 gives some good practical advice in all this- our yes should mean yes and our no should be no, or else we will fall into hypocrisy (Gk.- AV "condemnation" is a terribly misleading translation). James seems to be saying that we can guard against falling into the hypocritical life and mindset by ensuring that our words, feeling and intentions are directly and simply stated, with meaning to the words, with congruence between our real self and the words we speak.

*Iniquity-* The Greek *anomia* means literally ‘not law’, without law. These religious scrupulous legalists were in fact moral anarchists, with no law. This is the great paradox of legalism, to the point that it could be argued that legalism is in fact a cover for internal moral lawlessness. This

would explain the otherwise staggering moral hypocrisy, double standards and depth of moral failure observed in the lives of so many legalists. Their external legalism is a cover for their own internal moral anarchy and lack of law and self-restraint.

*23:29 You build- Oikodomeo* means not only to build but carries the sense of ‘to confirm’, and is also translated in the NT in this sense. On one hand, building the tombs of the prophets was a sign of respect, but the Lord read it negatively, as if by doing so they were confirming the decision to murder them made by their forefathers. We have here an example of where the same action can be judged positively or negatively by the Lord; and this of itself disproves the mentality of salvation by works. Because it depends with what motive or background attitude the works are done, and this decides whether the work was an act of righteousness or a sin. And this is a further warning against the impossibility of judging another’s works. For we fail to see those background, internal attitudes behind the work. See on 23:30 *Our fathers*.

*Garnish-* The same word is soon to be used of how the temple was ‘garnished’ (Lk. 21:5), and the Lord predicted its utter destruction. In the Lord’s teaching, it is the inner mind which must be “garnished” (12:44), the lamp of our own spirituality must likewise be “trimmed” (s.w.; 25:7). Again we see a tension between the Lord’s focus upon the internal, and their attention to the external.

*The righteous-* The same word has just been used in :28, where the Lord observes that the Pharisees tried to “appear righteous unto men”. And they accordingly made a great show of tending the graves of “the righteous”. The implication is therefore that they saw righteousness in terms of imitating ‘the righteous’ who had gone before them. The whole thrust of the New Testament is concerning imputed righteousness, not attaining righteousness in the eyes of others by our own imitations of men. The idea that righteousness involves modelling some past religious leader of our denomination is not at all dead in these days.

*23:30 Our fathers-* The Lord takes their use of this phrase and reasons that they were thereby calling themselves the descendants of those who had killed the prophets, and were therefore guilty. That may seem a very harsh analysis and judgment. But the Lord has the power to see meaning in words for good or for bad. All *we* hear are the words, and we cannot judge words alone, because we cannot see the background motivation behind them. See on 23:29 *You build*.

*The blood-* Blood is here put by metonymy for ‘death’, and this explains how the term “The blood of Christ” refers not so much to the red liquid of His blood, but to His death.

23:31- see on 15:2.

*Witnesses against yourselves-* The rejected are witnesses against themselves (Is. 44:9). Herein lies the crass folly and illogicality of sin. Jeremiah pleaded with Israel: "Wherefore commit ye this great evil against your souls [i.e. yourselves], to cut off from you man and woman... that ye might cut yourselves off" (Jer. 44:7,8, cp. how Jerusalem cut her own hair off in Jer. 7:29). In the same passage, Yahweh is the one who does the cutting off (Jer. 44:11); but they had cut themselves off. Likewise as they had kindled fire on their roofs in offering sacrifices to Baal, so Yahweh through the Babylonians would set fire to those same houses (Jer. 32:29). And note the present tense of the Lord's words here. In that the judgment process is now ongoing, we *are right now* witnesses against ourselves when we sin. And we are not only witnesses, but also the judge who pronounces the verdict of condemnation: for the sinner is condemned *of himself* (Tit. 3:11). In this lies the illogicality of sin and the utter blindness of man to the implications of his actions before God. They right now fulfil or live out the judgment of the wicked (Job 36:17).

*That you are the children-* Again, this seems an example of imputing iniquity. Their usage of the term "our fathers" was taken by the Lord to mean that they 'allowed' or [Gk.] 'had pleasure in' the murder of the prophets (Lk. 11:48). But the same words "our fathers" are used by Paul to describe his faithless Israelite forbears- and he is not condemned for it (1 Cor. 10:1; Acts 28:25). Clearly, the same words can be used by men with different background meanings, and this is seen by God and His Son. But all we hear are the words- we cannot therefore judge them.

*The children-* The idea of being a 'son of' someone or something meant to be in agreement with them, or to be a disciple of them.

23:32 *Fill up-* The language of the iniquity of the Amorites filling up to a point where they would be cast out of Canaan (Gen. 15:16). The Lord is saying that the Jewish legalists were no better than the Gentile inhabitants of the land, and they would be cast out of the same land, to make way for a new Israel, largely comprised of Gentiles. God is not insensitive to sin; the account builds up to a point where He will openly act. The question is whether the Lord was commanding / encouraging them to 'fill up' this measure of sin by going ahead and crucifying Him, or whether He was merely commenting that they were filling up that measure of sin which would bring Divine judgment. If He is encouraging them to go ahead and fill up the measure of sin required of them, then we have here another insight into how the Lord as it were provoked His own final arrest and death, in the sense that He consciously gave His life rather than having

it taken from Him. His parody of a triumphant entry into Jerusalem so broke and disappointed Jewish expectations of Him that it could be argued that He was purposefully moving the crowds to turn their misplaced love for Him into hatred, and join forces with the Jewish leadership in killing Him.

The comparison between them and the Gentile Amorites is part of a wider theme, in which those among God's people who break their covenant with Him, He sees as the world. Thus Moses prophesied of an apostate Israel: "They have dealt corruptly with [God], they are no longer his children because of their blemish; they are a perverse and crooked generation" (Dt. 32:5 RSV). These very words are used by Paul regarding the Gentile world (Phil. 2:15). Likewise Is. 42:1,2 concerning Christ's witness to the *Gentiles* is quoted in Mt. 12:19 regarding His witness to an apostate Israel. Israel were to be made like "the top of a rock" just as Gentile Tyre would be (Ez. 24:7; 26:4). Pharaoh's heart was hardened to bring about God's glory, but Paul uses the very same language, in the same context, to describe what was happening to an apostate, Egypt-like Israel (Rom. 9:17). Korah and his company were swallowed by the earth, using the very language which Moses so recently had applied to how the Egyptians were swallowed by the earth at the Red Sea (Ex. 15:12).

*The measure of your fathers-* The Lord elsewhere uses the figure of a measure to describe final judgment. With the measure we measure, it will be measured to us in that day (7:2). So the Lord could be urging them to go ahead and fill up the required level of sin to bring about on *them* the judgment due to their fathers. For this is His teaching in :35- that judgment for all the righteous blood shed by Israel's leaders was to come upon that generation. This may appear to contradict the principle that the sons shall not suffer for the fathers' sins. But the Lord seems to be saying that there is also another dimension to the picture, and that is the principle of imputed sin to those who repeat the sins of their fathers.

23:33 *Generation of vipers-* A clear reference to them as the seed of the serpent (Gen. 3:15).

*How can you escape the condemnation...-* The Lord's whole attitude to Israel showed that they could be saved from condemnation, even at the very last minute. And this was clearly His will. So rather than seeing this as spoken in anger as the final invective against a deeply wayward nation, I am inclined to see this as spoken with a voice cracking under the passion of wanting to save the beloved who hates their Saviour. And surely there was a rhetorical element to it. How they could escape it was to ditch their plans to crucify Him. And the Lord goes straight on in 24:16 to say that even when judgment started to come upon Jerusalem and the temple, they could "escape to the mountains" (s.w.). This was how they could literally escape the coming condemnation; which suggests that surely the Lord did have an appealing, rhetorical sense to His question here. The similarity with that clause in the Olivet prophecy is really a marvel of grace. They who deserved instant death were being given grace upon grace, every chance to change the

outcome of their wicked ways. Further, the Lord is quoting here from the words of John the Baptist: “O generation of vipers, who has warned you to flee [s.w. “escape”] from the wrath to come?” (Lk. 3:7). “All Jerusalem”, including the Scribes and Pharisees, had initially heard John approvingly. The Lord is surely saying that the way to escape the coming condemnation was by doing what John had taught- to repent and accept Jesus as Messiah and Saviour from sin. Again, the Lord’s quotation of John’s words confirms that He is speaking rhetorically and seeking their repentance and salvation, even at that late hour.

23:34 This certainly sounds like a quotation from extant literature; Lk. 11:49 introduces it with: “Therefore also said the wisdom of God”. The Lord Jesus was indeed “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24), and so it could be that the Gospel writers were pointing out that these words of Jesus were a proof text amongst their persecuted converts. Certainly the Lord’s words here would’ve been a good mission statement for the early church. Or it could be that the Lord is quoting some now unknown text with approval. There can be no doubt that every part of the verse has direct relevance to the first century witness to the Jews. The source of the quotation is therefore of secondary importance; the Lord places it in His own mouth, at any rate, in predicting the outcome of the great commission. And yet clearly enough, at the time He spoke these words, that bunch of mixed up, largely secular men, who misunderstood so much, who knew so little, and whose ideals were so misplaced, were far from being the preaching machine which the Lord’s words imply here. We can take one simple lesson from this- He had a profound hopefulness in people, a hopefulness which against all odds so often paid off. We, by contrast, tend to be highly cynical of people because we fail to see what they might turn into in spiritual terms.

*I send unto you-* A reference to the sending of the great commission. The Lord’s desire was that the worldwide witness began at Jerusalem (Lk. 24:47), and Paul’s interpretation of the commission was clearly that it involved being sent *firstly* to the Jews, and then to the Gentiles.

*Prophets-* The secular disciples were the equivalent of the prophets in the old Israel. There may be particular reference to the New Testament prophets, those who had the Spirit gift of prophecy. Lk. 11:49 adds: “Prophets and apostles”. Clearly the witness of the early Christians is in view.

*Scribes-* The Lord was talking to the scribes (:29), telling them that He was sending “scribes” to them. And those scribes were men amongst whom were the illiterate and who therefore didn’t know the text of Scripture that well. Their qualification was that they had known God’s Son. The Lord is here comparing and contrasting the old and new in the starkest possible terms.

*You shall kill-* As Stephen and James (Acts 7:59; 12:1,2).

*And crucify-* The Lord implied this would be Peter’s fate.

*Scourge-* Fulfilled Acts 22:19-24; 2 Cor. 11:24,25.

*In your synagogues-* The punishment of synagogue scourging could only be applied by the Jews to official synagogue members. The fact Paul experienced synagogue discipline by beating with rods shows that he too chose to be a member (2 Cor. 11:24). The Lord spoke as if His followers would remain within the synagogue system until they were forcibly expelled (Jn. 16:2). In all this we see a distinct lack of any ‘guilt by association’ mentality with the Lord. He did not ask His followers to break religious association with those who were both morally and doctrinally astray, but rather to remain in those associations until they were cast out. Notice again how the Lord refers to *your* synagogues, just as *God’s* house became “*your* house”.

*Persecute them-* By Paul, who was himself later “persecuted” by the Jews (s.w. 2 Cor. 4:9; Gal. 5:11; 6:12).

*From city to city-* Fulfilled in Acts 14:19; 17:13.

23:35 *That upon you-* One would’ve expected God to be so hurt by the death of His Son that judgment came immediately upon those responsible. But instead, the Lord predicted that the judgment would come only after the Jews had further persecuted the apostles as they went out to fulfil the great preaching commission to the Jews. This apparent delay was not because God was not hurt or not angry. He was. But His patient love and desire for human repentance, to give them yet more chances, was simply greater. The delay was so that the Lord could send out the apostles of :34 to appeal to Israel for repentance. But they had been given final appeal after final appeal. And still God waited for their repentance. With what eagerness must He have watched for response to the preaching to them, and with what generous provision He would’ve provided for all those who wished to make that appeal to the Jews. And nothing has changed to this day. The idea of blood coming upon, *epi*, a person clearly meant ‘guilt for their death’. Soon the Jews were to be using this very term in asking for the blood of Jesus to be ‘upon’ them (27:25). Because Jesus was the personification of God’s prophetic word and thereby the summary of all the prophets, their desire for *His* blood to be upon them was effectively taking upon themselves the blood of the prophets.

*All the righteous blood shed-* This stands for ‘*judgment for* all the righteous blood shed’. Note how language is being used here. The sin is put by metonymy for *the judgment for* the sin. Sin is its own judgment. To sin is to ask for judgment / condemnation. In this lies the utter lack of logic in any sin. And iniquity was added to their iniquity (Ps. 69:27- a specific prophecy of the Jews who killed Jesus), just as righteousness can be imputed.

*Abel-* If that generation were guilty of Abel’s murder, this associates them with Cain. The Jewish false teachers are likened to Cain (1 Jn. 3:12; Jude 11); and the Lord says that the Jews seeking to kill Him are the sons of the one who was a “murderer from the beginning” (Jn. 8:44). Cain was the first murderer.

*Zachariah son of Barachiah-* Or, Baruk. The prophet Zechariah would fit this description, but there's no record of him being murdered. Josephus in *The Jewish War* 4.5.4 speaks of a Zacharias ben Baruch who was assassinated by the Zealots in the Sanhedrin. But he was not a prophet, and this event was still future. And he wasn't killed in the temple. However, there was a prophet Zechariah who was stoned to death in the temple (2 Chron. 24:19-22). He was the son or grandson of Jehoiada, so it's feasible he was the son of a Baruk. The Hebrew Bible ended with 2 Chronicles, and so the mention of this murder would form an appropriate inclusio with the first murder, of Abel. All the murders of the faithful, from the first to the last as recorded in the Hebrew Bible, were going to have their judgment exacted from the generation who crucified God's Son.

*Between the temple and the altar-* See on :18 *The altar*. The mention of this detail would perhaps be because the Lord has just spoken of their wrong attitude to both temple and altar (:20,21). He is saying that effectively they had desecrated temple and altar- when they claimed such deep reverence for them. Their mercenary focus upon the gold of the temple and the gifts placed upon the altar was to such an extent that they had robbed the actual temple and altar of their holiness. This was no better than killing a righteous prophet in the holy place.

*Whom you slew-* The murder was counted to them, in the sense that the blood of those martyrs was "required of this generation" (Lk. 11:51). Sin, like righteousness, can be imputed as part of the downward spiral which operates as the opposite of the upward spiral in spiritual life.

*23:36 Shall come upon this generation-* Even in this prediction of terrible judgment there is grace. Because the AD70 judgments didn't come until nearly 40 years afterwards. Male lifespans in first century Palestine were estimated at an average of 29 years by J.D. Crossan, basing his research on tomb inscriptions and analysis of bones from graves. So the actual 'elders' who were responsible for the Lord's death likely died in their beds rather than in the Jewish-Roman war or the final holocaust in Jerusalem. I can only explain this on the basis of God's grace prolonging that final coming of judgment, in the earnest hope that Israel would yet repent. In the context of AD70, this would appear to be the teaching of 2 Peter 3. We would expect those men to have fairly soon received their judgment in this life. They will be judged- at the last day. But it would seem that God's desire to judge them was in tension with His desire to give Israel the maximum opportunity for repentance. We can only draw a sharp breath at God's grace. Another approach would be to understand that the threatened judgment upon that generation simply didn't happen in their lifetimes. The entire Divine program was delayed until the last days, when that generation shall be resurrected and receive their judgment. The events of AD70 were simply a foretaste and prefigurement of the final judgment at the Lord's second coming.

*This generation-* A phrase often used by the Lord in Matthew concerning those who heard and dealt with Him. It is surely the same generation in view in 24:34: "This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled". *This* generation is used elsewhere by the Lord concerning those

right in front of Him. It is the same “this generation” in 23:36 as in 24:34. The Lord doesn’t, therefore, mean ‘The future generation which shall exist and see these things will not pass until all is fulfilled’. He is saying that the generation, *this* generation, would not pass until all was fulfilled. The fact all wasn’t fulfilled simply in that generation shows that there was a major delay or change in the Divine program. And the reason for the delay was not simply that Israel hadn’t repented, but because God’s loving patience was still awaiting their repentance- and He so wished them to repent.

23:37 *O Jerusalem*- It was “this generation” which killed the prophets (:35), so why does the Lord specifically talk here about the children of Jerusalem? “Daughter of Zion” was an Old Testament term used for the faithful remnant in Jerusalem. But the way the Lord talks of gathering Jerusalem’s residents under His wings is surely because He had a clear vision before Him of how the city would be burnt. For a hen typically gathers her brood under her wings to protect them from a barnyard fire; or perhaps with the intention of being burnt first to preserve the life of her brood as long as possible. And these were the Lord’s feelings to the “Jerusalem” which rejected Him and sought His life; He wanted to save them, to buy them some more time at least (as reflected in the parable of the worker who doesn’t want to cut the tree down immediately). But they didn’t want to know. It was and is all so tragic.

*Kills... stones*- The allusion is to the parable of the husbandmen, who killed and stoned the servants / prophets sent to them (21:35).

*Stones*- The punishment for apostasy (Dt. 13:10; Acts 7:59). It was their wilful religious misunderstandings which led them to such violence in practice.

*How often would I have gathered your children together* - He lamented over a Zion that sought only to hurt and murder Him. Yet not so many verses later in our Bibles we hear the Lord using the same word in saying that at His coming, the elect would be "*gathered together*" unto Him (Mt. 24:31). He so often had earnestly desired the coming of His Kingdom there and then; to gather His people unto Him. But they would not. It must have been unbearable to be such a sensitive person in such a hard and insensitive, dehumanizing world. “How often...” suggests that there were specific times in His ministry when it would have been potentially possible to gather together Zion’s children in one and begin the Kingdom. But they refused.

*As a hen*- We see the Lord’s humility here in comparing Himself to a female, humble, farmyard animal- and not a proud lion. Many of the descriptions of Christ in the parables are taken from Old Testament passages describing the feelings of *God* towards Israel, showing the truth of this in the first century context when Israel were still God's people. Thus the Lord's description of Himself as a hen wishing to gather the chicks of Jerusalem is based on Is. 31:5: "As mother-birds flying, so will the Lord defend Jerusalem" (Heb.). Lk. 13:8 could suggest that Christ's attitude to

Israel was even more patient than that of God Himself; yet because their feelings to Israel are identical, the implication is perhaps that the Son enables and thereby persuades the Father to be even more patient with us than He would naturally be! See on 15:13.

*Under her wings-* This is a classic Old Testament figure, of the faithful taking refuge under the wings of God's cherubic care. The gracious desire of the Lord to save even those who crucified Him is the essence of God's saving care in the Old Testament.

23:38 *Your house-* The temple had always been called "The house of Yahweh". But now it is was theirs, as the "feasts of the Lord" become the "feast of the Jews". The Lord's table became *their* table (Ps. 69:25,22). They had hijacked God's institutions, just as men today have hijacked the Lord's table and imposed their own guest list and rejection policy upon it. Likewise the Lord called the law of God through Moses as now being "*their* law" (Jn. 15:25). The breaking of bread ritual practiced by the Corinthians was eating their *own* supper and therefore their gatherings were "*not* to eat the *Lord's* supper" (1 Cor. 11:20).

*Desolate-* The Greek word is used many times and always in the sense of a wilderness. This is the fulfilment of Hos. 2:3, where God through Hosea had threatened to make His beloved "a wilderness". This is the link with the Olivet Prophecy in chapter 24, which develops this theme of the desolation of the temple and a desolating abomination which was to be placed there. Clearly, therefore, the primary intention of the Olivet prophecy was to the Jewish generation and temple in which immediate context the Lord was speaking. The fact the prophecy clearly has latter day applications and did not completely fulfil in AD70 shows that there was a change of plan, as has often happened in the Divine program, with prophecies being delayed and reapplied in their fulfilment.

23:39 *Not see Me-* The same words are used in 13:14, "You shall not perceive / see" Christ. Previously, they had 'seen' Christ as Messiah, realizing that this was the heir, and desiring therefore to kill Him. But now the Lord was giving them over to the blindness of their hatred. They would not knowingly crucify God's Son. But He was saying that He now was going to stop them 'seeing' / perceiving Him for who He was, so that they would crucify Him. And they would only again perceive Him as God's Son all too late, when at the day of judgment they uttered the words of Messianic welcome "Blessed is He that comes...". And yet even in this terrible judgment there was interwoven a possibility of hope. They would only perceive Him again as God's Son *when*, or, *until the time that*, they recognized Him as Messiah in the Messianic words "Blessed is He that comes...". Once they made that repentance, they would again perceive / see Him. However, it could be argued that that is axiomatic. The thrust of the Lord's words is surely

that in the day of judgment, all too late, they would perceive Him again as He is in truth. But all too late.

*You shall say-* When they are appointed their portion with the hypocrites and there is wailing and gnashing of teeth, *then* shall the Kingdom be likened unto the five wise and five foolish virgins. *Then* the rejected will understand the principles of that parable, crystal clearly. Members of the ecclesia of Israel will say "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord"- but be rejected. Likewise the Egyptians, fleeing in the mud from Yahweh as they vainly hoped against hope that the returning waters wouldn't somehow reach them... they came to know Yahweh (Ex. 14:18). It could well be that this knowing of Yahweh involves a desperate recounting of their sins, seeing that one of the purposes of condemnation is to make men aware of their sinfulness and the depth of God's grace.

*Blessed is He that comes-* When Jerusalem sees Jesus again, they will be saying: "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord". This would suggest they are waiting for Him. And these words being taken from the Passover hallel, it could be that the Lord returns to them at Passover time, when they traditionally expect Him. Indeed, Jerusalem will not see the Lord *until* they say "Blessed is he..."- as if the time of His return depends upon their 'seeing' / perceiving Him beforehand.

