

# Jesus Criticizes Unjust Leaders

July 8 • Bible Study Guide 6

**Bible Background • MATTHEW 23**

**Printed Text • MATTHEW 23:1–8, 23–26 | Devotional Reading • LUKE 14:7–14**

## Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson we will: **EXPLAIN** the difference between just and unjust actions; **REJECT** becoming like the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees; and **EXPLORE** ways to implement just leadership in our own lives.

## In Focus

Brandy was distraught after saying goodbye to the guest speaker her church had invited to speak this weekend. Kevin was still cleaning up from the events of the weekend and noticed her. “Are you okay?” he asked her, setting down his broom.

“I just had a weird conversation with our speaker over lunch. I shared a story with him about a girl I’d spoken to who I was able to lead to Jesus, and how she went home and flushed her drugs down the toilet.”

“Wow, that’s powerful!”

“That’s what our speaker thought,” Brandy continued. “He then asked me if I’d sell him that story so he could tell it as if he was the one who spoke with her. He said he likes sharing stories like mine, but in the first person so he can use them to inspire people in his messages. When I questioned him about it, he said it’s just part of being a public speaker.”

“What?” Kevin exclaimed. “That ain’t right!”

“I know. Could we talk about it when everyone leaves? I’m really rattled.”

“Sure,” Kevin said. “But we’re here by ourselves, though. You know we have that church policy about two people of the opposite sex not being alone in the building with each other.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “Well, maybe we could just lock the door and not make it that big of a deal. It’s a silly rule, anyway.”

*Jesus gave His sharpest criticism to hypocrites. Sometimes being aware of our own hypocrisy is a difficult thing. How do we make sure we are not involved in hypocritical actions?*

## Keep in Mind

“The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not” <sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>(from **Matthew 23:2–3**).

## Words You Should Know

**A. Hypocrites** (**Matthew 23:23**) *hupokrites* (Gk.)—One who answers, an actor, a pretender.

**B. Cleanse** (v. 26) *katarizo* (Gk.)—To clean of physical dirt and stains, or in a moral sense.

## Say It Correctly

Anise. **AH**-niss.

Cummin. **CUE**-men.

## KJV

**Matthew 23:1** Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples,

**2** Saying The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat:

**3** All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.

**4** For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.

**5** But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments,

**6** And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues,

**7** And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.

**8** But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren.

**23** Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.

**24** Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.

**25** Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess.

**26** Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.

## NLT

**Matthew 23:1** Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,

**2** "The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses.

**3** So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don't follow their example. For they don't practice what they teach.

**4** They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden.

**5** "Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra long tassels.

**6** And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues.

**7** They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called 'Rabbi.'

**8** "Don't let anyone call you 'Rabbi,' for you have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters.

**23** What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things.

**24** Blind guides! You strain your water so you won't accidentally swallow a gnat, but you swallow a camel!

**25** What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence!

**26** You blind Pharisee! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too."

## The People, Places, and Times

**Scribes and Pharisees.** The Hebrew Scriptures had been preserved for centuries by God and humanity, being passed down from one generation to another, with various people in authority responsible for them. For example, what began in Moses' generation was passed down to Joshua's generation. In turn, various kings, priests, and prophets kept watch over these divine words, even through conflicts and captivity with other

nations. During the era Jesus walked the earth, the scribes and Pharisees were among the religious leaders people looked to for communication and interpretation of the Scriptures.

**Two Kinds of Authority.** When Jesus spoke to these leaders, it was noted that He spoke with a deeper authority. While He ministered among people who knew Scripture by memory and passionately debated the intellectualism of their conclusions, Christ somehow knew the “truth under the truth” intimately. It’s why in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), He revealed the larger value that trumped the traditions the Pharisees had been promoting. For this reason, Jesus said that His “yoke” (or true teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures) was light in comparison with the interpretation of the Pharisees, who manufactured authority by creating their own traditions.

*What can we recommend as a way to hold religious leaders accountable for their teachings?*

## Background

The ancient world was famously filled with deep symbolism, especially with each culture trying to assert itself over the others. While the Romans and Greeks were known for their stunning architecture, the Jews were passionate about telling God’s story through their places and objects of worship. The Jewish religious leaders in the first century furthered this by finding stories and truth in the Scriptures that they could turn into something tangible. In some instances, it was an unintended saving grace for the people.

For example, the “seat of Moses” is historically understood to have been a physical place that the Pharisees and scribes sat upon when they gathered together. Much like modern courtrooms all have an area set aside for a judge to sit down and preside, this “seat of Moses” represented how the Pharisees had inherited the succession of religious authority on God’s behalf through the institutions established under Moses.

The Pharisees had many forms of tangible symbolism that they enjoyed, from the details of how they dressed to publicly showing off their spiritual practices before others. Time and time again, Jesus could be found rebuking them for getting off track, and warning people to beware as they present themselves before these leaders. We see this in [Mark 12:38–40](#) and [Luke 20:45–47](#) as they parallel a rebuke to the scribes, adding a condemnation that they “devour widows’ houses.” It would seem our challenge isn’t to become cynical toward people in spiritual authority nor to wait for them to fall, but to use even their flaws to dig deeper at where God is at underneath all of the hypocrisy, and to show us the takeaway in our own lives.

*How can focus on external symbolism separate us from God?*

### At-A-Glance

1. The Authority God Creates [\[SEP\]](#)([Matthew 23:1–4](#))
2. The Authority Humanity Promotes [\[SEP\]](#)(vv. 5–8)
3. The Authority Eternity Reveals (vv. 23–26)

## In Depth

### 1. The Authority God Creates ([Matthew 23:1–4](#))

Jesus begins a scathing criticism against the scribes and Pharisees. He basically lets the crowd and His disciples know that the scribes and Pharisees talk a good talk, but don’t walk a good walk. Not only did they not do what they taught, but they also oppressed others with their religious demands.

God wants our actions to match our words. The reason why the scribes and Pharisees were accused of living hypocritical lives is because they focused on minor things and did not simply obey what God has plainly revealed. Just like the scribes and Pharisees were concerned about minor things at the expense of major things, so too can we become distracted by a leader’s flaws and miss the purpose behind why God has put that authority into our lives through that person.

*Why do we criticize and stand in judgment of our leaders but disregard our own flaws?*

## 2. The Authority Humanity Promotes (vv. 5–8)

The Pharisees only furthered this hypocrisy by relying on their “script” of tradition and added laws to inflict a tone of authority over people. Even their clothing reflected an over-the-top “rock star” persona, including vibrant colors of costly clothing, ointments that made them smell unique, jewelry that caught the attention of others, enlarged objects they wore on their heads, and detailed fringes on the corners of their shawls. They would argue they were basing such things on interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures, but Jesus felt the display had become louder than the Lord they were attempting to put on display.

*What false displays do we need to point out and remove in our lives and the church?*

## 3. The Authority Eternity Reveals (vv. 23–26)

Jesus warns the Pharisees that their current run at having authority over people means that they will be held to a greater accountability in the grand scheme of things. Their consistency with tithing, as important as it was and is, was never meant to overshadow the larger values of healthy judgment, generous mercy, and contagious faith. We are just as accountable as the Pharisees regarding what we do with the charge God has given us. We are called to simply love God and love others. By adhering to this law of love, we can explain the difference between just and unjust actions. Then we will avoid becoming like the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees. Through the Spirit we can become just leaders.

*Can you explain what it means to “but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God”*  
*(Micah 6:8, KJV)?*

### Search the Scriptures

1. Jesus points out how the Pharisees have made it a burden for people to follow God. What do you imagine was their reaction to this ([Matthew 23:4](#))?
2. What do you think is the difference between when something spiritual is a primary issue versus a secondary issue (v. 23)?

### Discuss the Meaning

Hypocrisy isn’t just an individual matter, but one that affects countless others. When we’re blind to how our positions of authority affect others, it’s like poisoning a water source that others will drink out of. In what ways has this been true of others whose actions affected you, and how have your actions made it harder for someone else to see God?

### Lesson in Our Society

It’s more common to distrust leaders than to put our trust into following them. Perhaps some of the political drama that’s played out over decades is responsible for this, but we can add to the damage when our reaction swings so hard toward skepticism that we overlook the beauty in the authority God has established over us ([Romans 13:1–7](#)). Sometimes in our attempt to protect ourselves against blind trust, we stop trusting altogether. Jesus points out that the Pharisees’ actions should not be followed, but the Law of Moses is absolutely valid. This means that we cannot just throw away the Word of God and the standards that He has plainly laid out for us. Whenever a leader points us toward this standard, that is commendable. Man will have failures. Ultimately, Jesus is the true and just leader that we need to follow.

*When choosing a leader (political, religious, organizational), can we assess how trust is a factor in our selection?*

### Make It Happen

- List three examples of good leadership and contrast them with three examples of bad leadership.
- If you know someone who is leading well, give them a word of encouragement.
- Write in your journal about which things in your spiritual life are major and which are minor.

### Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

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## Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

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## More Light on the Text

### Matthew 23:1–4, 23–26

**1 Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, 2 Saying The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: 3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.**

The Pharisees were the largest of the three major religious groups in Palestine at Jesus' time, the others being the Sadducees and the Essenes. A lay organization, they feared Jewish sins were delaying the coming of the Messiah. They hoped to prevent such sins through strict interpretation of the Law. This interpretation acted as a "hedge" or "fence" around the Law to keep the people from breaking it. For the Pharisees, the consequence would not simply be divine punishment of the offender, but also divine judgment against the whole people of Israel.

Jesus uses this moment to talk about the scribes and Pharisees, and the level of adherence His followers should give to their teachings. He describes the teachers as sitting in "Moses' seat." Some scholars have said that this term was an important seat in the synagogue. Others say this is a figurative expression. It is meant to highlight that the scribes and Pharisees believed their tradition to be rooted in Moses and the Law. This is what gave them their authority to teach others. They believed they were continuing the legacy of Moses.

Because of this authority, the people were to follow their teaching. But, Jesus warned, the people were not to follow their example, because they did not follow their own teaching. This is in opposition to what many of the Pharisees believed at the time. The common sentiment among the scribes and Pharisees was that a person was to first focus on knowing what the Law says before they obeyed it. However, they would not outright say that a person should not obey the Law or that obedience was not important.

**4 For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.**

The image of someone tying or binding up heavy burdens fits the Pharisees and scribes' method of instruction. These instructions were "grievous to be borne" (Gk. *dusbastaktos*, **doos-BAS-tak-toce**), or intolerable. What is interesting when examining the Pharisees' way of teaching is that they load men with heavy burdens—strict and legalistic interpretations of the Law—but will not carry these same burdens themselves. Here, Jesus is pointing back to His statement "they say, and do not" (v. 3).

**5 But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments,**

The Pharisees' goal in doing anything is not obedience to God, but the applause of men. Jesus highlights that they make larger their phylacteries (Gk. *phylakterion*, **fi-lak-te-REE-ahn**) or prayer-bands. These were small boxes that had a leather strap. These boxes included Scripture that was recited during the morning and evening prayers. The leather strap was used to tie the phylacteries to the left hand or to the forehead. Not only did they widen their phylacteries, they also made their fringes (Gk. *kraspedon*, **kra-spe-DAH**N) longer so as to be seen by others. The fringes that Jesus speaks of are the tassels which all Jews were required to wear on the end of their clothing. These tassels were intended to be reminders for them of God and a way to meditate on His glory.



It is ironic that instead of focusing people's attention on God, they are more focused on being seen and recognized as religious.

### **6 And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues,**

Seating position was very important in the ancient world. Ancient evidence indicates that people were not pleased when placed in seats for those of lower status. This was especially true at banquets. The Pharisees desired the uppermost (Gk. *protoklisia*, **pro-to-KLEE-see-ah**) rooms, or the places of honor, at the reclining table of the banquet. They also desired the chief seats (Gk. *protokathedria* **pro-to-ka-the-DREE-ah**), or seat of preeminent honor, in the synagogue (Gk. *synagogue*) or assembly. The synagogue was more than just an assembly; it was a building where the Israelites and those who trusted in the God of Israel would gather to worship. The synagogue was created to teach the Law to all of Israel as a reaction to their neglect in obeying the Law, which led to their exile. No one knows exactly when the first synagogue was created, but by the time of the first century, they were prevalent throughout the Greco-Roman world where the Jews had been taken into exile.

Seating arrangements in the synagogues of the first century do not show seating rank; however, a seat of preeminent honor would more than likely be in the front of the synagogue assembly. This was the area closest to the bema, the platform where the Law would be read. Important dignitaries would be given chairs while the other hearers would sit on mats.

### **7 And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.**

Greeting and saluting others was a very important thing in Jewish and Greek cultures. Specific rules dictated how to greet different types of people on different occasions. In Jewish culture, to not greet a person who was well versed in the Mosaic Law was offensive. The scribes and Pharisees wanted to be greeted in the marketplaces, which were the most populated places in any town at the time. This would increase their fame and pride as people would know not only who they were, but that they were important, pious men. This is indicated by the title of "rabbi." This word is actually a borrowing from Aramaic and means "my great one." Eventually the term meant "teacher." The scribes and Pharisees prided themselves on being teachers of the Law for the masses.

### **8 But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren.**

Jesus warns that no one is supposed to be called "rabbi" because there is only one Master (Gk. *didaskalos*, **dee-dah-ska-LAHS**). This word means teacher and in this context signifies the role of the rabbi as a master in the sense of the Mosaic Law as well as over his pupil. In contrast to contemporary Western forms of education, the rabbinical teaching style placed a lot of weight on following the teacher's example and instruction. As such, one could be called a "master" of the students.

The only one who is to be called master, and who actually is the Master, is Christ. Here, Jesus says that He is the Master. Although He has not yet proven to be Christ by His resurrection, the disciples who have witnessed Him affirm this as His identity ([Matthew 16:13–21](#)). With these words, Christ levels the playing fields. There are not many masters—only one. There is no hierarchy among believers in the kingdom of God. All those who follow Him are brothers and sisters.

### **23 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.**

This is the fourth woe in Jesus' famous seven woes to the Pharisees ([Matthew 23:13–30](#)). "Woe" (Gk. *ouai*, **oo-AYE**) is an expression of grief, pity, or concern that has its origin in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. It can be considered prayers or even a curse. In this context, it can be translated as a warning, such as, "What great disaster will come to you." Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees, although He does not mean all of them. Later rabbinical literature makes clear that many Pharisees also condemned what Jesus condemned in these woes. There was no tolerance for hypocritical behavior.

Hypocrite (Gk. *hupokrites*, **hoo-po-kree-TASE**) was a term employed for the actors in Greek drama who wore masks. Eventually it became a way to describe a two-faced person. In this sense, the Pharisees and scribes wear the mask of religiosity in their scrupulous tithing, but neglect the "weightier matters." Jesus actually encourages

them to tithing their spices, but also to not forsake justice, mercy, and faith. It is not that what they are doing is wrong, but that they have pursued the good only to neglect what is best.

**24 Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.**

Jesus continues His scathing criticism of the scribes and Pharisees. They are blind (Gk. *tuphlos*, **too-FLOCE**) guides. The use of the word “blind” here does not refer to physical blindness, but means “not able to understand.” They are leading others while they themselves are not able to truly understand the purpose of the Law. They strain at gnats and swallow camels. Here Jesus uses hyperbole to highlight their approach to the Law. Straining a gnat indicates that they treat minor details as major. Swallowing a camel indicates that they treat major issues as minor.

**25 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. 26 Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.**

Next, their behavior is exposed as backward and not in line with true religion. They clean the outside of the cup, but the inside is full of extortion (Gk. *harpagē*, har-pah-GAY) and excess (Gk. *akrasia*, **ah-kra-SEE-ah**). The word for extortion means a violent acquisition of goods or wealth, such as raping or pillaging. While the word for excess meant a general lack of ability, but more specifically, a lack of self-control. The Pharisees basically failed at being model examples of teachers of the Law and instead had shown they were self-indulgent and greedy sinners who used religion as their means of gratification.

# Daily Bible Readings

## MONDAY

Visual Reminder of the Commandments  
(Numbers 15:37–41)

## TUESDAY

Jesus Fulfills the Law and Prophets  
(Matthew 5:17–20)

## WEDNESDAY

Craving Attention While Cheating Widows  
(Luke 20:45–47)

## THURSDAY

Doing is More Important Than Speaking  
(Matthew 23:5–12)

## FRIDAY

Keeping People Away from the Kingdom  
(Matthew 23:13–15)

## SATURDAY

Blind Guides Confuse Meaning of Oaths  
(Matthew 23:16–22)

## SUNDAY

Jesus is Critical of Scribes and Pharisees  
(Matthew 23:1–4, 23–26)