

John Wesley's Explanatory Notes - Matthew 23

by John Wesley

John Wesley's sermon on Matthew 23 critiques the hypocrisy of religious leaders and emphasizes the need for true humility and faith in God.

Scripture: Matthew 14:11, Matthew 20:26, Matthew 23, Luke 11:49

Topics: "Hypocrisy", "True Religion"

Description

John Wesley expounds on Matthew 23, where Jesus criticizes the Pharisees and scribes for their hypocrisy and failure to embody the true spirit of the law. He highlights their outward displays of piety, such as wearing phylacteries and broad fringes, while neglecting justice, mercy, and faith. Wesley emphasizes that true religion is not about mere external observance but about the inner transformation of the heart. He warns against the dangers of self-exaltation and the consequences of leading others astray. Ultimately, Wesley calls for humility and genuine faithfulness to God, contrasting the empty practices of the religious leaders with the authentic relationship God desires with His people.

Transcript

XXIII. 1. Then - Leaving all converse with his adversaries, whom he now left to the hardness of their hearts.

Verse 2. The scribes sit in the chair of Moses - That is, read and expound the law of Moses, and are their appointed teachers.

Verse 3. All things therefore - Which they read out of the law, and enforce therefrom.

Verse 4. Luke 11:46.

Verse 5. Their phylacteries - The Jews, understanding those words literally, It shall be as a token upon thy hand, and as frontlets between thine eyes, Exodus 13:16. And thou shalt bind these words for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes, Deuteronomy 6:8; used to wear little scrolls of paper or parchment, bound on their wrist and foreheads, on which several texts of Scripture were writ. These they supposed, as a kind of charm, would preserve them from danger. And hence they seem to have been called phylacteries, or preservatives. The fringes of their garments - Which God had enjoined them to wear, to remind them of doing all the commandments, Numbers 15:38. These, as well as their phylacteries, the Pharisees affected to wear broader and larger than other men. Mark 12:38. 8,9,10. The

Jewish rabbis were also called father and master, by their several disciples, whom they required, 1. To believe implicitly what they affirmed, without asking any farther reason; 2. To obey implicitly what they enjoined, without seeking farther authority. Our Lord, therefore, by forbidding us either to give or receive the title of rabbi, master, or father, forbids us either to receive any such reverence, or to pay any such to any but God.

Verse 9. See note ... "Mt 23:8"|.

Verse 10. See note ... "Mt 23:8"|.

Verse 11. Matthew 20:26.

Verse 12. Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be humbled, and he that shall humble himself shall he exalted - It is observable that no one sentence of our Lord's is so often repeated as this: it occurs, with scarce any variation, at least ten times in the evangelists. Luke 14:11; .

Verse 13. Wo to you - Our Lord pronounced eight blessings upon the mount: he pronounces eight woes here; not as imprecations, but solemn, compassionate declarations of the misery, which these stubborn sinners were bringing upon themselves. Ye go not in - For ye are not poor in spirit; and ye hinder those that would be so.

Verse 14. Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47.

Verse 16. Wo to you, ye blind guides - Before he had styled them hypocrites, from their personal character: now he gives them another title, respecting their influence upon others. Both these appellations are severely put together in the 23d and Matthew 23:23,25. 25th verses; and this severity rises to the height in the 33d verse. The gold of the temple - The treasure kept there. He is bound - To keep his oath.

Verse 20. He that sweareth by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon - Not only by the gift, but by the holy fire, and the sacrifice; and above all, by that God to whom they belong; inasmuch as every oath by a creature is an implicit appeal to God.

Verse 23. Judgment - That is, justice: Faith - The word here means fidelity.

Verse 24. Ye blind guides, who teach others to do as you do yourselves, to strain out a gnat - From the liquor they are going to drink! and swallow a camel - It is strange, that glaring false print, strain at a gnat, which quite alters the sense, should run through all the editions of our English Bibles.

Verse 25. Full of rapine and intemperance - The censure is double (taking intemperance in the vulgar sense.) These miserable men procured unjustly what they used intemperately. No wonder tables so furnished prove a snare, as many find by sad experience. Thus luxury punishes fraud while it feeds disease with the fruits of injustice. But intemperance in the full sense takes in not only all kinds of outward intemperance, particularly in eating and drinking, but all intemperate or immoderate desires, whether of honour, gain, or sensual pleasure.

Verse 26. Ye build the tombs of the prophets - And that is all, for ye neither observe their sayings, nor imitate their actions.

Verse 30. We would not have been partakers - So ye make fair professions, as did your fathers. Chapter Overview

31. Wherefore ye testify against yourselves - By your smooth words as well as devilish actions: that ye are the genuine sons of them who killed the prophets of their own times, while they professed the utmost veneration for those of past ages. From the 3d to the 30th verse Matthew 23:3-30 is exposed every thing that commonly passes in the world for religion, whereby the pretenders to it keep both themselves and others from entering into the kingdom of God; from attaining, or even seeking after those tempers, in which alone true Christianity consists. As, 1. Punctuality in attending on public and private prayer, verse 4-14.

Matthew 23:4-14 2. Zeal to make proselytes to our opinion or communion, though they have less of the spirit of religion than before, verse 15.

Matthew 23:15 3. A superstitious reverence for consecrated places or things, without any for Him to whom they are consecrated, verse 16-22.

Matthew 23:16-22 4. A scrupulous exactness in little observances, though with the neglect of justice, mercy, and faith, verse 23, 24.

Matthew 23:23,24 5. A nice cautiousness to cleanse the outward behaviour, but without any regard to inward purity, verse 25, 26.

Matthew 23:25,26 6. A specious face of virtue and piety, covering the deepest hypocrisy and villany, verse 27, 28.

Matthew 23:27,28 7. A professed veneration for all good men, except those among whom they live.

Verse 32. Fill ye up - A word of permission, not of command: as if he had said, I contend with you no longer: I leave you to yourselves: you have conquered: now ye may follow the devices of your own hearts. The measure of your fathers - Wickedness: ye may now be as wicked as they.

Verse 33. Ye serpents - Our Lord having now lost all hope of reclaiming these, speaks so as to affright others from the like sins.

Verse 34. Wherefore - That it may appear you are the true children of those murderers, and have a right to have their iniquities visited on you: Behold, I send - Is not this speaking as one having authority? Prophets - Men with supernatural credentials: Wise men -Such as have both natural abilities and experience; and scribes -Men of learning: but all will not avail. Luke 11:49.

Verse 35. That upon you may come - The consequence of which will be, that upon you will come the vengeance of all the righteous blood shed on the earth - Zechariah the son of Barachiah - Termed Jehoiada, 2 Chronicles 24:20, where the story is related: Ye slew - Ye make that murder also of your fathers your own, by imitating it: Between the temple - That is, the inner temple, and the altar - Which stood in the outer court. Our Lord seems to refer to this instance, rather than any other, because he was the last of the prophets on record that were slain by the Jews for reproving their wickedness: and because God's requiring this blood as well as that of Abel, is particularly taken notice of in Scripture.

Verse 37. Luke 13:34.

Verse 38. Behold your house - The temple, which is now your house, not God's: Is left unto you - Our Lord spake this as he was going out of it for the last time: Desolate - Forsaken of God and his Christ, and

sentenced to utter destruction.

Verse 39. Ye - Jews in general; men of Jerusalem in particular: shall not see me from this time - Which includes the short space till his death, till, after a long interval of desolation and misery, ye say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord - Ye receive me with joyful and thankful hearts. This also shall be accomplished in its season.

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