

(Matthew) ch.23:7-24:11

by Zac Poonen

Jesus teaches that humility, mercy, and love are essential in our lives, and that we must avoid becoming Pharisees by neglecting the weightier provisions of the law.

Duration: 48:58

Scripture: Matthew 23:23-24, Matthew 23:37-39, Matthew 24:2, Matthew 24:23

Topics: "Second Coming", "Faithfulness"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of not neglecting the big things while focusing on the small things. He criticizes those who strain out a net but swallow a whole camel, metaphorically speaking. The speaker also encourages listeners to be faithful in their own circumstances, rather than judging others. The sermon then transitions to Jesus' teachings on the future and his second coming, warning against deception and the signs that will precede his return. The speaker concludes by mentioning that chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel focuses on how to be prepared for Jesus' second coming.

Transcript

Let's turn today to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 23. We were considering in our last study, towards the end of it, how Jesus was against his disciples, using any type of religious title. And that's very important, because we may think that's a small thing, whether we use titles or not, but the Word of God says, Don't lean upon your own understanding, but trust in the Lord with all your heart.

In other words, it's better to follow what God's Word says and not use our own reason to consider whether something is important or not. Jesus said, The one who disobeys the smallest commandment and teaches other people that that's trivial is going to be considered the least in the kingdom of God. But the one who keeps and teaches others to keep will be considered great in God's kingdom.

And so, it's very important for us to consider this passage. In Matthew 23, in verse 7 onwards, he speaks about the Pharisees' loving, respectful greetings in the marketplaces, wanting to be called Rabbi. And he said, You shouldn't be called Rabbi, because only one is your teacher.

You are all brothers. Don't seek for any title. And don't call anyone on earth your father.

He's talking about the religious title father. Of course, we have physical earthly fathers, and to call them daddy or father is right. But here he's speaking about a religious title.

Only one is your father. God is your father. And as a religious title, we must not call anyone father or allow ourselves to be called by that title by anybody else.

That's contrary to God's word. It's contrary to the teaching of Jesus. Now, it's very interesting that as far as we know, in that particular time, there was no religious leader among the Jews who was wanting to be called father.

That was a prophetic word concerning the future. As Jesus looked into the future, he knew that there'd be a whole lot of religious priests and leaders who'd want other people to call them father. And Jesus spoke against that and said, do not call anyone on earth your father.

How many people take that seriously? People say, oh, we don't want to offend someone. But then you're going to offend God. You're going to offend Jesus, whose word is very clear.

Do not call anyone by that religious title. For God is your father. And there we can see the blasphemy of people who want to be called holy fathers, etc.

Do not be called leaders. It's amazing. You seek to be known and called as a leader? Even that, Jesus said, avoid.

One is your leader, that is Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. So, Jesus said that we had a right to be known only by two titles.

Verse 8, brothers. Verse 11, servants. Every one of us can be brothers and servants of others.

And if you want a title, choose either or both of these two. Brother and servant. Any other title is contrary to the teaching of Jesus and exposes us to Phariseeism.

If this matter of titles was a very small thing, as some of us think, then Jesus wouldn't have spent so much time explaining it to the disciples and the Holy Spirit wouldn't have wasted all those verses putting it down in Scripture. It's because man doesn't like to face up to the reality of what Jesus has proclaimed, that he uses his own reason and says the use of titles in Christendom is a trivial thing. It's not trivial, brother.

It's serious because it's disobedience to the word of Jesus. Many don't like to face it. That's because many don't like to face the truth.

They're far more interested in avoiding offense to men than in avoiding offense to God. They're far more interested in pleasing men than in pleasing God and therefore they never arrive at the truth. There's so much compromise in Christendom today that people gloss over the commands of Jesus.

Yet Jesus said, Go into all the world and make disciples and teach them to obey every single thing I've commanded you. That's what we read in the last verse of Matthew. And this is one of the things written in Matthew.

Teach them to do every single thing that I've commanded you. And that's the purpose of a program like this. To teach people to do every single thing that Jesus commanded.

Further, Jesus said in verse 12, And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled. He went on to say that the use of titles is a way of exalting yourself. And if you continue along that way, God will humble you finally.

And of course we can exalt ourselves in other ways. There are many ways of exalting ourselves in pride. The way you despise somebody else, that would be pride too.

You may not have a title, but you can despise somebody who has and then you've exalted yourself. And then God has to humble you. It's so easy for pride to come in.

That if we don't look at Jesus and keep ourselves in humility, we shall exalt ourselves. We can say just like that in the world there is a law of gravity that keeps pulling us down. In the spiritual realm we can say there is a law of anti-gravity that keeps pulling us up.

So that we want to exalt ourselves and appear more spiritual than we are and all of that. And God humbles such people. And whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

The way to be exalted by God is to go down and humble yourself. What men think of you is absolutely unimportant. What God thinks of you is all important.

In fact, that's everything. If God sees that you're humble, He will exalt you. If you humble yourself, He will exalt you over sin.

That's the first thing we need to be exalted over, not over people. I hope none of us have a desire to be exalted over people. The first thing we need to be exalted over is the lust in our flesh that we don't serve them.

We've been slaves and we've been ruled by our lust for so many years. And they have ruled us and controlled us. Now God says we can be exalted over them.

Sin shall not be the ruler over you. You shall be exalted. But how shall we come to that exaltation? By humility.

Because God gives His grace to the humble. And He went on to say further to the Pharisees in verse 13 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! Hypocrites! Because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men, you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. This is another characteristic of the Pharisees.

That they do not allow others to hear the truth. They themselves didn't want to hear the truth that Jesus preached. But they wanted to discourage other people from coming and hearing that truth as well.

And you find that's the mark of Pharisees even today. That even though they are not interested, they do not seek. They do not seek themselves.

And they do not allow others to enter that kingdom. They do not want others to be exposed to the truth that will set people free from sin. You do not allow those who are entering to go in.

How many people there are like that today who are not interested in a message that leads to godliness and hinder others from receiving that message also. That's another characteristic of Pharisees. And Jesus called them hypocrites.

Further we read in verse 14. Jesus said, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! Hypocrites! Because you devour widows' houses. Even while for a pretense you make long prayers, therefore you shall receive greater condemnation.

What were they doing? Poor widows who were living in their houses. They would turn them out if they were not able to pay the rent one month. They were unmerciful.

And for a pretense to cover it all up, they made long prayers. They would be unmerciful to helpless widows. God is the God of the widows.

And many times in the Old Testament we read that God is on the side of the helpless. And if you have power over someone, beware. Because you are in great danger if you use that power to exalt yourself and try to cover all that up with long prayers.

God is not interested in long prayers if there is not a life of mercy behind that long prayer. If you are not merciful to people who are weaker and more helpless than you are, all your long prayers count for nothing. There is a lot of difference between being religious and being spiritual.

A lot of people don't understand that difference. A lot of people think that to be spiritual is to go for a lot of meetings and pray a long time and know a lot of the Bible. But Jesus exposed that type of religion as hollow if it was not backed by a life of mercy and goodness and humility in our attitude to other people.

All that is useful only if it's backed up by a life of godliness. Otherwise, it's religiosity not spirituality. And the thing about the Pharisees was that they were religious.

Think of this. It says in verse 15 that Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he becomes one you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. Who are these people traveling across sea and land? Do you know that these Pharisees were missionaries? That means they gave up their jobs in order to serve the Lord.

One would think that someone who gives up his job to serve the Lord must be making a tremendous sacrifice. But Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of these Pharisaical missionaries when he said, You people travel land and sea to make one convert. Well, what type of convert have you made with all your sacrifice? You've made a convert just like yourselves.

You've made another Pharisee. You fellows are bound for hell, he said, and you've made another person double a child of hell. Why is he called double a child of hell? He was already a child of hell to start with, before you met him.

But now, even though he's not really converted, you've told him he is. And he's become double a child of hell because he imagines now that he's converted when he's not. He imagines that he's on his way to heaven when he's on his way to hell.

He was safer earlier on when he was on his way to hell and knew it. Now he's in a more dangerous condition because he's on his way to hell, but he thinks he's going to heaven. It's a very dangerous condition to get into.

Pharisees are in the world today as well. And we have to be careful that we're not deceived by them, and we don't end up like that ourselves. Let's turn today to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 23, and verse 16.

Continuing our study of how Jesus was exposing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and showing them that they were not really spiritual, but only religious. And the profit for us here in studying this chapter is because it's possible for us, for any one of us who's pursuing righteousness to become a Pharisee. In fact,

I am convinced that the greatest danger that faces Christians pursuing righteousness is the danger of becoming Pharisees.

The godless man who lives out in the world a debauched, sinful life is never in danger of becoming a Pharisee because he's so obviously a sinner. You know the story of the prodigal son. The father had two sons.

And which of those two sons do you think was more in danger of becoming a Pharisee, the elder one or the younger one? Certainly not the younger one. The younger one is such an obvious sinner that even worldly people saw him as a sinner. The one who was in danger of becoming a Pharisee was the elder son.

The one who appeared to be so holy and appeared to be so religious and was at home and obeying his father. But in God's eyes he was worse than the younger son. Because ultimately at the end of the story, what do you see? You find that the younger son is inside the house and the older son is outside.

The beginning of the story is the other way around. The younger son is outside and the elder one is inside. Well, the story ends with exactly the opposite.

Those who are first are lost and those who are lost are first. And so we are in danger of being Pharisees when we pursue righteousness. If we pursue righteousness without mercy towards others, we're going to be Pharisees.

If we pursue righteousness without humility, we're going to be Pharisees. If we pursue righteousness without love, we're going to be Pharisees. And this is where Satan can deceive people.

Where they think they've got righteousness. But dear friend, check yourself. Do you have mercy in your life towards others? Are you able to forgive others who wronged you? Do you have humility in your life? Do you have love? Otherwise, all your righteousness is Phariseism, actually.

Verse 16. Woe to you blind guides. You see, these Pharisees were not only hypocritical themselves, they were proclaiming their doctrine to others as we saw in verse 15 in our last study.

They were missionaries who traveled across land and sea to make converts, but they were still Pharisees. And they were preaching to others. They were blind guides.

They did not have light. Why were they blind? Was it because their doctrine was wrong? Certainly not. Their doctrine was correct.

Why were they blind then? They were blind because their doctrine was not backed up by their life. They did not see their need. And there are many like that today.

We got to be careful that we don't end up like that ourselves. Not seeing our own need. Then we are blind guides.

And they said to people, whoever swears by the temple, that's nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he's obligated. You fools and blind men, Jesus said to them, which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And whoever swears by the altar, you say, that's nothing, but whoever swears by the offering upon it, he's obligated. You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore, he who swears, swears both by the altar and by

everything on it, and he who swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by him who dwells in it.

And he who swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by him who sits on it. You see, the Pharisees had a great delight in splitting hairs over doctrinal issues. And they made their own laws, which Moses never gave.

And that's another characteristic of the Pharisees, that they've got certain additional traditions, which are not in Scripture. And there are people like that today as well, who've got some particular church tradition, which is very sacred to them. If you don't keep that, you're not accepted.

And that's the mark of a Pharisee. And that's what Jesus was speaking about here. And he said, you blind guys, you don't understand.

If we don't understand spiritual truth, in this particular case, it was a question of distinguishing between the temple and the gold and between the altar and the offering on it, it doesn't apply to us, because we don't swear in any case. Jesus said you shouldn't swear at all. If you say yes, that's yes.

You don't need to swear at all. If you say no, that's no. But in those days, they swore, because most of the time they told lies.

And so they had to swear to say at least now I'm speaking the truth. And when a man has to swear, it's actually an indication that he's generally speaking a liar, but now he's going to speak the truth. But a true Christian is one who doesn't have to swear, because he's going to speak the truth all the time.

He's learned his yes is yes, and his no is no. But these Pharisees there, the principle we learn here in this passage is that they wanted to split hairs in something that was taught in Scripture. And that's the lesson we can learn for ourselves from this passage.

Beware of those who try to split hairs, and get into arguments over silly little differences of terminology. If we have the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit will alert us to such splitting hairs, so that we don't get into futile arguments and speculations. Paul particularly warned Timothy against that danger.

Verse 23 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, Jesus said, for you tithe, mint, and dill, and cumin. These were little things that they grew in their vegetable garden. They knew that God had commanded the tithe, and so they not only gave a tithe of their produce from their large fields, you see, the mint and dill and cumin was not produced in the large fields, they were produced in their kitchen gardens.

And those who were not very straightforward just gave tithe of what they produced in their large acres of ground, but didn't care too much about the things that were produced in their kitchen garden. They didn't give one-tenth of that to God. But these Pharisees were very careful there.

They said, Oh, we have to be very exact in paying our tithe. We must also count one-tenth of the mint and the dill and the cumin that we have grown in our kitchen garden, and give ten percent to God. And when you do that type of thing and you speak about that type of thing, people think you're very holy, because you're so careful about these meticulous little things.

But, he said, you have neglected the more important things, the weightier provisions of the law such as justice, mercy, and faithfulness. He's not saying that these other things are unimportant. No, he said that

very clearly in verse 23.

These are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. In other words, don't neglect the others. Those small things are also important, but it's no use taking care about these small things if you neglect the big things.

You blind guides, he said in verse 24, you strain out a gnat and you swallow a camel. Imagine that. People who are trying to sift out a gnat with a sieve, and on the other side, they swallow a whole camel without even realizing it.

And they are teaching people to strain out gnats, and they are swallowing camels wholesale on the side. That's how blind they were. And that's happening even today in Christendom.

People who are so meticulous about small little things, and here on the other side, they're so unmerciful to somebody, and so unrighteous in some money matter, and so without goodness and love in their life. Yeah, these are blind guides who are straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel. Now, be careful that we don't end up like that ourselves, because there's a tendency towards that in our flesh.

To appear holy before men by straining at gnats, and speaking about small little things. Now, let me emphasize again what Jesus said, that these small things are not unimportant. He said, you don't have to neglect these small things, but you must do the weightier things first.

In other words, Jesus is not against your straining at a gnat. He said, all he said was, first get rid of the camels, and then we'll take care of the gnats. That's what he was saying.

The camels are more dangerous than the mosquitoes. So it's no use getting rid of the mosquitoes if you're swallowing camels. That's the point.

In other words, mercy, love, humility, goodness, righteousness, justice, these are more important than whether you've paid your tithe exactly. Of course, in the New Covenant, there is no commandment to pay the tithe. Jesus was speaking to the Jews and the Pharisees, who were still under the law of Moses.

The New Covenant was not established until the day of Pentecost. So until that time, you still had to pay your tithe. But today, there is no command to pay the tithe.

Today, the command is that we should give cheerfully. It is the quality of our giving that matters today, not the quantity. And God loves a cheerful giver, that when we give cheerfully, whether it's one percent or twenty percent, that's up to you.

The important thing is that you give joyfully and cheerfully. But at that particular time, Jesus did say that they were to pay the tithe, because the New Covenant had not yet been established. Verse 25.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they're full of robbery and self-indulgence. You see, this was the root of the problem. They were only concerned about the outside of the cup.

In other words, they were only concerned about what men thought about them. What do other people see on the outside? That was the only thing they were concerned about. And inside, they were full of robbery and self-indulgence.

In other words, they were robbing God of what God wanted in their inner life. They were self-indulgent means they were self-centered, thinking only about themselves. Their whole life was centered around themselves and their families.

And they were full of that. And Jesus exposed it. And he said, You clean the outside of the cup.

Inside, you're full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, he said, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside also may become clean. He didn't say that you have to clean the outside.

He said when you clean the inside, the implication of verse 26 is the outside will automatically be clean. For example, here is an outside commandment. Do not commit adultery.

Here is the inside commandment. You must not lust after a woman even in your heart. But if you stop lusting after a woman in your heart, the outside is automatically taken care of.

You'll never commit adultery on the outside if you take care of the inside. That's an example. The outside commandment is don't commit murder.

The inside commandment is don't get angry. You take care of the inside, the outside is taken care of automatically. So Jesus emphasized, take care of the inside, and that's all you need to take care of.

And the outside will automatically become clean in every area. Let's turn today to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 23 again, and verse 27. Continuing our study about what Jesus said about the scribes and Pharisees in this chapter, and we saw how this chapter is valuable for us because every one of us is in danger of becoming a Pharisee and a hypocrite.

And the one who thinks that he is not in danger of becoming a Pharisee is the one who is probably a Pharisee himself already, or is most likely to become a Pharisee pretty quickly. For let him who thinks he stands take heed, lest he fall. Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.

Even so you too outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Outwardly you appear righteous to men. That's what they wanted.

That's what they sought. And that's what they got. But inwardly they were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

They didn't have mercy. They didn't have goodness. You are like whitewashed tombs, he said, which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.

A tomb looks very nice on the outside, polished granite perhaps, but underneath is stinking bones and the remains of a dead body. And think that a religious person can be like that. Outside so attractive and inside spiritual death.

Like the Lord told the leader in the church in Sardis in Revelation chapter 3 verse 1. You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. You think we are in danger of that? The one who realizes he's in danger of that is the one who's likely to escape that danger. The one who thinks that he is not in such a danger is the one who's likely to be in that state already.

Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. Verse 29. For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous and say, if we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.

Consequently, you bear witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers. It's very easy to think that if I was in that circumstance, I would not do that.

How many people there are like that? If you were living in the days of Martin Luther, would you have stood up against the corrupt Christendom of his day for the truth of justification by faith? If you are honest, if you are a compromiser today, the chances are even if you were living in that day, you would have been a compromiser. It's very easy to think today, yes, I believe in justification by faith and I stand for God like Martin Luther or like John Wesley or like anybody else. The point is not what you would have done in another day and age, but what are you doing today? Are you compromising today? It's very easy to criticize somebody else who lived in another generation.

The question is, are you living in the light that God has given in our generation? Martin Luther lived 400 years ago and the light of God was not as clear across the world as it is today. It's pointless comparing yourself with him. He was faithful in his generation.

Wesley was faithful in his generation. Today, are you faithful in yours? That's the important thing, according to the light you have. It's easy to think that if I was in that brother's circumstance, I would not do that.

That's not for you to judge, brother. The question is, are you faithful in your circumstance? You know how it is in a football match. You have 22 people out there in the field and you have 20,000 spectators watching them.

And among those spectators, you find some people saying, he shouldn't have kicked the ball there. He should have kicked it here. All the experts are sitting on the grandstands watching, criticizing.

But the people out there on the field are struggling to play. Who are the better ones? These experts who criticize the people struggling on the field or the players on the field? It's obvious. Those players on the field are the best footballers, otherwise they wouldn't be on the field.

The others are just critics who probably don't know how to play any football themselves. It's exactly like that in Christendom too. It's very easy to criticize another brother who is seeking to live for God.

And you haven't made the same sacrifices yourself, you don't have the same life in God yourself, and you can criticize him. It's very easy to criticize another brother who's having a ministry. Maybe he's made a mistake here and there, but you haven't done anything.

There's a saying that the only one who doesn't make a mistake is the man who never does anything. You sit doing nothing, you'll never make a mistake. But God has seen the heart of those people.

Be careful that you don't spend your days criticizing others, saying, I would not have done that if I were in his place. This is what Jesus was exposing. The hypocrisy of that type of life.

He wants us to judge ourselves. You don't have to judge that other person to see what he should be doing. Judge yourself.

And he went on to say, the mere fact that you say that those were your fathers who did it, proves that you're the sons of those who murdered the prophets. And he said in verse 32, fill up then the measure of the guilt of your fathers. He says, you may think that in that day you would not have stood against Isaiah or Jeremiah or Elijah, but the fact is that the prophets whom God sends in your day, you stand against them.

And Jesus was the prophet in that day, and the Pharisees stood against him. They didn't have light on that. It's very easy to think as to what you would do in some other circumstance, in some other time, in some other situation, if you were in some other brother's place.

But the Lord says, think of your time and your generation and your place, how you would do it. Don't worry about how another brother is bringing up his family. You ask yourself how you're bringing up yours.

Don't bother about how another brother treats his wife. How do you treat yours? That's always the important question. How am I behaving in the circumstance in which I am? Not how would I have behaved in some other situation, in some other person's place.

That is also one of the dangers of Phariseeism, always thinking that you would have done it better if you were in somebody else's place. The answer is you would not have. If you're not faithful where you are, you wouldn't be faithful in some other situation.

You serpents, you brood of vipers, the strongest words that Jesus used to denounce a group of people. Serpents, brood of vipers, the most deadly, poisonous snakes alive. Think that Jesus called Bible-believing, Bible-preaching people a brood of vipers, because they didn't have a life.

They were hypocrites. Their life was only on the surface. How shall you escape the sentence of hell? The judgment of hell, because of their hypocrisy.

Jesus condemned the hypocrites more than he condemned any other type of sinners. Women caught in adultery, murderers who hung with him on the cross, one of them anyway was forgiven. Prostitutes were forgiven, but hypocrites, Jesus reserved his strongest words of denunciation for them, teaching us that hypocrisy is the number one sin in God's list of sins, and spiritual pride is a very close second to that.

All the other sins come after hypocrisy and spiritual pride, because these were the two characteristics of the Pharisees. Never forget that. Never think that any sin as serious as the sins of hypocrisy and spiritual pride.

Therefore the Lord says in verse 34, I'm sending you prophets and wise men and scribes. Some of them you'll kill and crucify because you want to keep the false prophets who tickle your ears. Some of them you'll scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on the earth.

From the blood of righteous Abel who was killed because he stood for the truth by his own brother to the blood of Zachariah the son of Berechiah whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I say to you, all these things shall come upon this generation. He told the Pharisees, you are in the footsteps of Cain.

Way back there in the beginning there were two ways. The way of Abel and the way of Cain. The way of Abel was the way of spirituality.

The way of Cain was the way of religiosity. And right down from that time, right up till Jesus' time and we could say, right up until our time there have been people who have gone in these two ways. One the way of spirituality, in the footsteps of Abel, in humility and brokenness.

And the other the way of Cain, the way of religiosity, of hardness and pride and self sufficiency along with religion. And Jesus divided between the two and showed that one was leading to life and the other was leading to hell. The way of sinfulness and debauchery is obviously going to hell.

That that's not as dangerous as the way of religiosity which leads to hell because that appears to be spiritual. The greatest need in our day is to discern between spirituality and religiosity. And then we see these wonderful words in verse 37.

Tender words of Jesus who after calling people vipers and serpents he says, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her. How often I wanted to gather your children together the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings and you were unwilling. Tender words.

He longed to gather them. He didn't want to send them to hell. He longed to gather them out of this hypocrisy to salvation.

But they were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate. Once it was the father's house and Jesus said, Now it is your house.

You can run it as you like. It's desolate. From now on you will not see me until you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

That Jewish generation will not see Jesus again until he comes a second time, the time of resurrection. And that's a warning for us as well. Let's turn today to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 24.

And Jesus came out from the temple and was going away when his disciples came up to point out the temple buildings to him. And he answered and said to them, Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, Not one stone here shall be left upon another which will not be torn down. In Matthew 24 and 25 we read about Jesus speaking about the future, about his second coming, about the tribulation that will precede his second coming, about the persecution against his disciples and how false prophets will arise and many, many signs concerning the second coming.

We can say it's chapters that deal with prophecy. Chapter 25 deals with how we can be prepared for that coming. But it's very interesting to see where Matthew 24 comes.

Matthew 24 comes between chapter 23 and chapter 25. And that's the right place it should come in. In other words, it's no use studying prophecy, which is what Matthew 24 is all about.

If we don't understand Matthew 23 to be free from hypocrisy and phariseeism and if we are not interested in the truths in Matthew 25, which deals with how we can be spiritually prepared for the second coming of Christ. Now the reason I mention this is that many people are interested in Matthew 24 who are not so interested in Matthew 23 or 25. And that's very unhealthy.

It's very dangerous because you can have an interest, an unhealthy interest in prophecy. And I want to warn you against an unhealthy interest in prophecy. How does it become unhealthy? When you're not sufficiently interested in freedom from hypocrisy, when you're not interested in purity and goodness and humility and love and in following Jesus in your daily life and you're still interested in prophecy, then your interest in prophecy is unhealthy.

No, Matthew 24 comes between Matthew 23 and Matthew 25. And if you want to understand it in its correct perspective, read it as a chapter in the middle of Matthew 23 and 25. It's exactly the same when it comes to spiritual gifts.

When you read 1 Corinthians 12, 13 and 14, you can have an unhealthy interest in spiritual gifts. For example, 1 Corinthians 12, 1 Corinthians 14 and forget about the fact that 1 Corinthians 13 comes in the middle and that's all about love. And if you have gifts without love, it's worthless.

It could be the other way around. You could have such an interest in love that you despise spiritual gifts. Well, that's equally wrong.

Because 1 Corinthians 13 comes in between 1 Corinthians 12, 1 Corinthians 14 would deal with gifts. Very wonderful to see the balance in Scripture. And to take verses out of context and chapters out of context is the surest way to go astray.

Whenever you read a verse, read it in its context. Whenever you read a chapter, read it in its context. Read what goes before and what goes afterwards.

Particularly when you come to the Epistles. Remember that an Epistle is like a letter. And when you get a letter, say you get a letter from your father, you don't suddenly turn to page 12 and read that.

You understand page 12 only if you have read the pages before page 12 and the pages after page 12. It's only in the context of the whole letter that you can understand a chapter or a verse. That's a fundamental principle of understanding Scripture.

And if you neglect this principle, you're going to go astray. And so, Matthew 24 must never be taken by itself. It's preceded by this tremendous warning in Matthew 23, many warnings against hypocrisy, Phariseism, spiritual pride.

When we have taken those warnings seriously, when we have allowed Jesus, who desires to gather us like a hen gathers her chicks, as we read in Matthew 23:37, we submit to that and come to Him. Then we are prepared to understand something about prophecy. And Jesus spoke here about the time when this beautiful temple will be torn down.

And He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, verse 3, and the disciples came to Him privately and said, Tell us, when will these things be? What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age? And Jesus answered and said to them, See to it that no one misleads you. When is the temple going to be destroyed? When will these things be? Jesus spoke about the destruction of the temple. And the disciples asked Him three questions.

When will these things be? That is, the destruction of this temple, this temple which I see here now in front of me. That's what the disciple is asking. And secondly, what will be the sign of your second coming? And what will be the sign of the end of the age? You see, these are three different times altogether.

The temple was destroyed forty years after Jesus' ascension in the 70th year A.D. His second coming is still in the future, very close now, but the end of the age is going to be at the end of the millennium and the end of the thousand years when eternity begins, which we read off in Revelation chapter 21 and 22. So these are three different periods altogether. And they asked Him concerning all three, and Jesus gave an answer, and we need to understand that these answers that Jesus gave were to these questions.

And the very first thing that He said concerning His second coming and prophecy in relation to the future is very interesting. This is the very first thing that He said in verse 4, See to it that no one deceives you. The first warning He gave was against deception.

There's going to be a tremendous amount of deception in the last days. For many will come in My name saying, I am the Christ, and will deceive and mislead many. Imagine that there are going to be people who are going to come to earth and say, I am the Messiah.

They're going to get people to follow after them They're not going to lead people to be joined to the head of Jesus Christ. They're going to get people to be joined to them. Another warning He gave was you'll be hearing of wars and rumors of wars.

See that you're not frightened, for those things must take place. For that's not the end, for nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. What do we read in the newspapers these days? Exactly what Jesus said there.

Rumors of wars and wars. Nation against nation, kingdom against kingdom. And that's happening all around us.

And it's no use praying that these things won't happen, because Jesus said these things will happen. But He did say, don't get frightened. If you're a child of God, the hairs on your head are numbered.

You are of more value than many sparrows. Nothing can touch you till God permits it. We need to be established in that faith in these last days.

And further He said there will be, verse 7, there will be famines and earthquakes. That's another thing we read in the newspapers these days. Famines somewhere, people dying of famine, not just in tens and hundreds, but in thousands, and tens of thousands, and hundreds of thousands.

Shortage of food, earthquakes with tens of thousands people being buried alive. These are all going to take place. And it's going to increase as we approach the end.

When we see these things happen, the word of God is, don't be frightened. Don't be frightened. Don't be afraid.

The hairs on your head are numbered. And He said all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs. And when you see these things, that's not the end, that's just the beginning.

It's the beginning of the end, let's say. It's like that. It's the beginning of the end.

And that's what excites us. That these things are an indication that our bridegroom is coming. And if we are ready, we shall be taken up for that marriage.

And here is something else that's going to happen during the last days. They will deliver you up to tribulation. Christians are going to be delivered up to tribulation.

Many people think we shall escape tribulation, that Jesus will take us out of it. But that's not what He taught here. He said they will deliver you up to tribulation, not deliver you out of it.

You shall go into tribulation. They will kill you. You will be hated by all nations on account of My name.

Now, some people say that's referring to the Jews. It cannot be, because the Jews are not hated on account of the name of Jesus. No.

They may be hated for other reasons, but here it says you will be hated by all nations on account of My name. That's referring to the disciples of Jesus. That all nations, not just some.

There are Christians hated in some nations today, but not in all yet. But you will be hated by every nation if you're a true disciple of Jesus. Of course, if you're a compromiser, nobody will hate you, but if you're a true disciple of Jesus, you'll be hated by all nations, and they will kill you.

Jesus never promised that we shall escape tribulation and escape persecution. But He did promise that He would give us peace and grace in the midst of tribulation. John 16.33 says, In the world you shall have tribulation, but in Me you have peace.

Be of good cheer. Don't get discouraged. And at that time, when that happens, verse 10, many will fall away.

Many will be caused to stumble. And they will betray one another and hate one another. Now, falling away means that they were standing in the truth and then fell away.

It's like when you talk of a backslider. A person who's not converted can never be a backslider, because he's never had a forward slide in his life at any time. It's one who has taken a step forward for Christ, who backslides.

One who has become a Christian only can backslide. One who's born again. And when it says many will fall away, it's not referring to the heathen, it's referring to believers who will fall away and lose their salvation.

They will betray one another, and they will hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. This is the main warning that Jesus kept on repeating.

You'll be deceived. Be careful. Dear friends, those are the days in which we're living now.

We're coming up to those days more and more, and deception is rampant. Be careful to be rooted in the Word. Be careful to be established in love.

And be careful to be prepared for persecution, so that when it comes, we shall not be surprised that we shall receive grace from God in that time to stand true for the Lord.

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