

# “THE PROSECUTION OF FALSE TEACHERS”

*Matthew 23:13-33*



**Theme:** The poison of self-righteousness will be condemned regardless of how attractive it appears.

## I. THE CHARGE OF IMPEDING SALVATION – *23:13-15*

### A. *THE PREVENT ACCESS TO HEAVEN - vv. 13-14*

1. In the previous section, Jesus provided His opening statement in the arraignment of the hypocrisy of the false teachers in the spiritual leadership of Israel.
2. He moves from the arraignment directly to the prosecution in the section that we consider here, uttering a series of “woes” to the “*scribes and Pharisees.*”
3. “woe” [οὐαί] – is a word that captures a difficult connotation – mixing great visceral sense of anger and pity; a dogmatic condemnation and indictment mixed with deep grief and despair.
4. He concludes that their integrity has been devastated even as demonstrated earlier, thus He refers to them as “*scribes and Pharisees*” and then uses the term “*hypocrite*” appositionally.
5. “*hypocrite*” [ὑποκριτής] originally meant to “answer or reply” and was used to refer to the dialogue used in shows and acting and then came to mean “deceitful pretense” or “putting on a show.”
6. The first of Jesus charges is that the false teachers “*shut off the kingdom of heaven from people.*”
7. Instead of making “*the kingdom of heaven*” available to sinners, they slam the door.
8. Their sinister influences on others – drawing men away from God’s provision of Messiah to a self-righteousness – results in “*you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.*”
9. The main problem is that such legalism, externalism, and self-righteousness produces a delusion of favor with God – when the

reality is that they are devoid of God's righteousness – cp. *Romans 10:3*.

10. They dismissed any need for repentance, grace, salvation, God's Word, and a Savior – thereby hindering any reconciliation with God.
11. *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation”*<sup>71</sup> – further demonstrates how they selfishly involve even the most innocent in their departure from true piety.

**B. THEY PROMOTE ACCESS TO HELL – v. 15**

1. Instead of leading people toward “the kingdom of heaven,” they rather cause those who follow them to become damned.
2. We are told *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around 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.”*
3. Throughout the history of Israel, their interest was to distance themselves from anyone outside of the Jewish race – tentatively accepting anyone who would come to them, but rarely extending themselves to reach out to others (consider the difficulty of getting Jonah to go to Nineveh).
4. However, by the time Jesus came, a movement had grown of attempting to convert others, most likely motivated by the desire for more revenues.
5. As is commonly the case, *“proselytes”* who “buy in” to a worldview often become even more zealous than those who convert them.
6. In their fanaticism and absolute persuasion of the validity of their new-found religious convictions that it becomes even more difficult for them to see the truth.
7. It is in this way that they become *“twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.”*

---

<sup>71</sup> This verse is not found in the better manuscripts and is probably a cross-reference included by a copyist – taken from Mark 12:40 or Luke 20:47 where it is certain in the text.

## II. THE CHARGE OF INTERFERING WITH SANCTIFICATION – 23:16-28

### A. *THEY TWIST TRUTH TO PERSONAL ADVANTAGE* – vv. 16-22

1. The next major charge is that the false teachers fail to honor the Word of God, but twist it for a variety of reasons.
2. First, they twist the truth to personal advantage by manipulating God's Word to provide the freedom to do as they pleased – *“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’”*
3. This illustrates a “double standard” for swearing – their concern was not for truth, but for the evasion of it when it suited them.
4. A person was free to be dishonest as long as he only swore by the temple and not by the gold in it.
5. If you wanted to be sure that someone was telling the truth, you wouldn't accept an oath *“by the temple,”* but required that they *“swear by the gold of the temple.”*
6. Such “double standards” is trickery and rationalized dishonesty – a godly person will always tell the truth with his word as his bond – cp. [Matthew 5:34-37](#)
7. Jesus denounces this – *“You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, this is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.’ You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.”*
8. Jesus declares that their chicanery, trickery, insincerity, duplicity, deceit, and manipulations are preposterous and deplorable – declaring that their real problem is that they feel unaccountable to God and are therefore *“fools.”*

**B. THEY TWIST TRUTH TO PERVERT ACCOUNTABILITIES – vv. 23-24**

1. Second, Jesus charges them with twisting the truth to avoid accountability to major violations by touting extreme devotion in incidental matters.
2. Jesus says: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.”*
3. The reference to tithing *“mint and dill and cummin”* demonstrate that they had gone beyond what was required – since these were minor kitchen spices and not considered part of the farm produce from which a tithe was required – cp. [Leviticus 27:30](#)
4. They had extended their “legalistic obedience” to the smallest plant grown in window boxes, but were indifferent to basic evidences of true righteousness *“justice and mercy and faithfulness.”*
5. Jesus states: *“these things are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.”*
6. He is not blessing their legalism, but rather stating that a concern about the external practice of tithing ought to be accompanied by the internal presence of God’s character and virtue.
7. Being caught up in the minutiae generated by legalism distracts a person from the absence of true righteousness – and thus Jesus provides an analogy – *“You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel”* – both of which are unclean!

**C. THEY TWIST TRUTH TO PRIORITIZE APPEARANCES – vv. 25-28**

1. Third, Jesus charges them with twisting the truth in order to make themselves look good.
2. He declares: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence.”*
3. Their concern was for the way things appeared, emphasizing propriety externally which inwardly they were motivated by both “robbery and self-indulgence.”

*“robbery”* [ἀρπαγή] refers to the seizing of property or to

## *The Gospel According to Matthew*

“extortion” – squeezing wealth from someone by applying pressure.

- a. *“self-indulgence”* [ἄκρασία] refers to the lack of self-control resulting in unrestrained self-gratification.
4. They sought to project an image that would allow them to take advantage of others.
5. Jesus denounces this and declares: *“You blind Pharisees, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also”* – everything is defiled when uncleanness is present.
6. Likewise, Jesus declares their infatuation with externals continues: *“Woe to 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.”*
7. Their defilement corrupts everything that they come into contact with – even as when one touches a corpse.
8. His diagnosis is clear: *“So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”*

### III. THE CHARGE OF IDENTIFYING WITH SLAYERS – *23:29-33*

#### A. *THE ASSERTION OF INNOCENCE* – vv. 29-30

1. Jesus uses a brilliant segue from how they defile others like corpses with which someone comes in contact to how they sought to distance themselves from the treachery of previous generations.
2. As a means of honoring those who had been sent by God but killed by their wicked forefathers, they had sought to ceremonially make amends by decorating tombs, thus portraying themselves as more righteous than they.
3. Jesus sees through it and declares: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous.”*

## *The Gospel According to Matthew*

4. They asserted: *“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.”*
5. Both by their actions and words, they assert that they were above such treachery and malice toward God’s messengers.

### **B. THE AFFIRMATION OF GUILT – v. 31-33**

1. However, at the very time of their assertions, they were aggressively plotting to kill Jesus.
2. Thus Jesus denounces their hypocrisy – *“So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.”*
3. In one of the final words that Jesus speaks to these false teachers who were plotting to kill him and says: *“Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers”* – the final and ultimate act of defiance against God and His messengers would be their murder of Jesus Himself.
4. Here Jesus here continues to push the Pharisees toward their act of treachery in putting Him to death by commanding them to do what their heritage and character leads them to do.
5. Jesus summarizes their condition by uttering what was essentially a curse: *“You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?”*
6. They were evil and poisonous and would therefore experience certain condemnation.