

Homiletics Analysis: Matthew 23

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Matthew 23 constitutes Jesus' most sustained and concentrated public confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees, delivered in the temple courts during the final week before His crucifixion. The chapter opens with Jesus addressing the crowds and His disciples, warning them to observe what the Pharisees teach while refusing to imitate what they do — for they are practitioners of performance, not of obedience. Seven “woes” follow in sequence, each indicting a specific pattern of religious hypocrisy: shutting the kingdom against others while refusing to enter themselves; making converts who are twice as damned as their teachers; constructing elaborate oath-systems that obscure God while honoring the gold of the temple; tithing with precision while neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness; cleaning the cup's exterior while the interior remains full of greed and self-indulgence; appearing righteous outwardly while being inwardly full of lawlessness and death; and building the tombs of the prophets while being the sons of those who killed them. Each woe follows a recognizable structure: address (“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!”), description of the behavior, and exposure of its inward reality. The chapter closes with an unexpected movement — Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, expressing genuine grief over the city that kills prophets and stones those sent to her, and announcing judgment in the form of the temple's desolation and His departure until Israel's corporate acknowledgment of Him at His return.

This Text — Intent:

God's intent through this passage operates at multiple levels simultaneously. For the Pharisees themselves, the passage is a final confrontation — a last prophetic witness before judgment falls. For the crowds and disciples (the immediate audience Jesus addresses in vv. 1–12), the intent is diagnostic and preventive: Jesus is exposing a pattern of religion that looks like faithfulness but functions as its precise opposite, so that they — and all subsequent readers — can identify and resist that pattern in themselves. For the reader of Matthew's Gospel, the passage functions as the culminating exposure of what human religion produces when it is powered by the desire for human honor rather than the fear of God. The closing lament reveals that even this confrontation is not mere condemnation — God is not gloating but grieving. The intent of the whole chapter is to confront self-justifying religion at its roots, expose it as a form of death dressed in the garments of life, and drive the reader toward the only righteousness that is not performance — the righteousness of the kingdom, received rather than manufactured.

Subject Sentence: Jesus exposes religious performance as the inversion of true righteousness and grieves over those it has destroyed.

Primary Claim: God is confronting the most dangerous form of unbelief — not irreligion but hyper-religion — where the machinery of faithful practice conceals a heart that has replaced God with the approval of men, and He is calling every reader to search their own religion before His searching gaze.

Interpretive Evaluation

The relationship between the Woes and the Beatitudes (Matthew 5): Many interpreters note that Matthew 23's woes form a structural counterpart to the Beatitudes of Matthew 5 — "blessed are" versus "woe to you." This is a genuine literary observation with homiletical force: the Beatitudes describe the character of those who inherit the kingdom, and the Woes describe the character of those who not only forfeit it but actively block others from it. This reading is worth *acknowledging* and retaining, as it sharpens the contrast between kingdom righteousness (inward, God-oriented, received) and Pharisaic righteousness (outward, human-oriented, performed).

Whether this passage is anti-Semitic or inappropriately harsh: A significant contemporary interpretive concern — raised especially in post-Holocaust scholarship — is whether Matthew 23 encodes or enables anti-Semitism. This requires careful evaluation rather than dismissal. The Reformed reading insists on several important clarifications: (1) Jesus Himself is Jewish, as are His disciples and the crowds He addresses; (2) the Pharisees are indicted not as Jews but as hypocrites — the critique is theological and moral, not ethnic; (3) the lament over Jerusalem (vv. 37–39) establishes that Jesus' posture is grief rather than contempt; (4) Paul's parallel argument in Romans 2 applies identical categories to Jewish and Gentile self-justification alike. The text *refutes* any ethnic reading. At the same time, preachers must be alert to homiletical pitfalls that allow this text to function as an excuse to attack Jewish people rather than examine Christian religious practice. The proper application is consistently inward and self-examining, never outward and accusatory toward others.

Dispensational treatment of vv. 37–39: Dispensational interpreters read "you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (v. 39) as a reference to a future national conversion of ethnic Israel preceding or accompanying the Second Coming, building on Romans 11:25–27. Reformed interpreters generally read this as either (a) a reference to those among Israel who will come to faith through the preaching of the gospel across redemptive history, or (b) a reference to the forced acknowledgment of Christ at the final judgment. The stronger Reformed reading acknowledges genuine ambiguity here: the text may contain a real if partial anticipation of a future recognition, without requiring a Dispensational Israel/Church framework to explain it. What the text

unambiguously asserts is that the temple will be desolate and that Jesus is departing — judgment is coming and it is connected to Jerusalem’s rejection of the One sent to her. The primary claim of vv. 37–39 is grief and departure, not detailed eschatological sequencing.

Whether the Woes are primarily descriptive or primarily warning: Some interpreters treat the Woes as purely condemnatory — final verdict, no appeal. A more careful reading recognizes that prophetic “woes” in the Old Testament tradition (Isaiah 5, Amos 5-6, Micah 2) typically function as warnings still addressed to those who might hear and turn, even when judgment is near. The lament of vv. 37–39 supports this reading — Jesus’ grief is genuine, which presupposes that a different response was possible. The Reformed reading holds both: these are pronouncements of judgment that are simultaneously a final call to recognition and repentance. This is not contradictory — it reflects the pattern of all prophetic confrontation.

The “Moses’ seat” (v. 2) and the command to obey the Pharisees: Jesus’ instruction to “do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do” (vv. 2–3) has generated interpretive difficulty. Does Jesus endorse Pharisaic teaching? The Reformed reading is that Jesus is acknowledging the Pharisees’ legitimate teaching office (they occupy Moses’ seat — i.e., they read and expound Torah) while refusing to endorse their practice. The instruction is limited to their teaching of Torah, not their traditions or applications, and it is immediately qualified by the exposure of the gap between what they teach and how they live. This is not an endorsement of Pharisaic tradition but an acknowledgment that even hypocritical teachers can transmit true content — a sobering point with application for the church.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 29:13** — *“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me”* — the Old Testament diagnosis of precisely the pattern Jesus exposes; the Woes are the New Testament fulfillment of this prophetic indictment.
- **Romans 2:17–29** — Paul applies the identical analysis to Jewish religious confidence: having the law and teaching the law does not substitute for keeping the law; true circumcision is of the heart. The structural parallel confirms that Matthew 23 is not a critique of Judaism per se but of a universal human pattern of self-justifying religion.
- **1 Samuel 16:7** — *“The LORD looks on the heart”* — the theological grounding for Jesus’ inside/outside distinction throughout the Woes; God’s mode of evaluation is categorically different from human evaluation.
- **Luke 18:9–14 (Pharisee and Tax Collector)** — the parable that performs in narrative what Matthew 23 performs in prophetic confrontation; the one who prays

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner” goes home justified, while the one who catalogs his religious accomplishments does not.

- **Jeremiah 7:1–15 (Temple Sermon)** — Jeremiah’s confrontation at the temple gate announces the same pattern: the people trust in the temple while practicing injustice, and God announces its desolation. Jesus’ lament and desolation announcement in vv. 37–39 consciously echoes this; Matthew 23 is Jeremiah 7 reaching its eschatological fulfillment.

Aim: To lead readers to examine their own religious practice at the level of motive and inward orientation, diagnosing where the desire for human approval has colonized what presents itself as devotion to God.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	Jesus addresses the crowds and disciples: acknowledge what the scribes and Pharisees teach from Moses’ seat, but do not imitate their practice — they teach but do not do.	Audience shift from ch. 22 (debates with leaders) to crowds/disciples. “Moses’ seat” = authoritative teaching role.
4	They bind heavy burdens on others but will not lift a finger to help carry them.	Contrast between demanding leadership and servant leadership (cf. 11:28–30).
5–7	They perform all their deeds to be seen by men — broad phylacteries, long fringes, seats of honor, greetings in the marketplaces, titles of respect.	The diagnosis: religious performance is driven by the desire for human honor, not God’s.
8–12	Counter-instruction: do not be called rabbi, father, or instructor — you have one Teacher, one Father, one Instructor (Christ). The greatest among you will be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled.	The kingdom alternative to Pharisaic honor-seeking; echoes 20:26–28. The greatness-through-service principle is the antidote to the honor-seeking pattern.

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
13	Woe 1: They shut the kingdom of heaven against people — neither entering themselves nor allowing those entering to go in.	The most comprehensive indictment: religious leadership that actively prevents access to God.
14	<i>(Verse absent in many manuscripts — likely textual addition)</i>	Devour widows' houses / make long prayers. Many critical editions omit. Note textual uncertainty.
15	Woe 2: They travel land and sea to make one convert, then make him twice as much a child of hell as themselves.	Missionary zeal in service of a corrupted religion produces worse outcomes than no religion.
16–22	Woe 3: Blind guides who construct oath-distinctions — swearing by the temple is nothing, but by the gold of the temple is binding; by the altar is nothing, by the gift on it is binding. Jesus exposes this as inversion: the temple sanctifies the gold; the altar sanctifies the gift.	The elaborate oath-system creates legal loopholes that function as sanctioned lying. Honors the material, dishonors the God behind it.
23–24	Woe 4: They tithe mint, dill, and cumin while neglecting the weightier matters of the law — justice, mercy, faithfulness. These they should have done without leaving the others undone. “Strain out a gnat and swallow a camel.”	Note: Jesus does not abolish tithing — “without neglecting the others.” The critique is of precision in minor matters alongside complete failure in major ones.
25–26	Woe 5: They clean the outside of the cup and plate while the inside is full of greed and self-indulgence. Clean the inside first — then the outside also will be clean.	Inside/outside distinction is the structural key to all seven woes. The sequence matters: inward transformation produces outward conformity, not vice versa.
27–28	Woe 6: Like whitewashed	The most visually arresting

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
29–32	tombs — outwardly beautiful, inwardly full of dead men’s bones and uncleanness. Outwardly righteous to men, inwardly full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Woe 7: They build and decorate the tombs of the prophets while claiming they would never have participated in killing them — thereby testifying against themselves as sons of those who murdered the prophets. “Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.”	image. Whitewashing tombs was a Jewish practice to warn travelers of ritual impurity — the image perfectly captures visible religion concealing inward death. The generational indictment: they are not better than their fathers but are completing the pattern. Building tombs honors the dead while perpetuating the spirit that killed them.
33–36	Climactic confrontation: “You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” God will send prophets, wise men, and scribes; they will kill, crucify, flog, and persecute them. All the righteous blood from Abel to Zechariah will come upon this generation.	“Brood of vipers” echoes John the Baptist (3:7) and Matthew 12:34. This generation = those who reject the Messiah and fill up the measure. The reckoning is historically imminent (70 AD).
37–39	Lament over Jerusalem: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” The house is left desolate. Jesus will not be seen again until “you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”	The shift from confrontation to grief is the hermeneutical key to the whole chapter. God does not condemn without grief. The hen/brood image is among the most tender in all of Scripture.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–12	The Anatomy of Hypocrisy: Description and Counter-Pattern
2	13–15	Woes 1–2: Blocking Others and Corrupting Converts
3	16–24	Woes 3–4: Oath-Casuistry and Distorted Priorities
4	25–28	Woes 5–6: The Inside/Outside Inversion
5	29–36	Woe 7 and Climax: Sons of the Murderers, Judgment Coming
6	37–39	The Lament: Jerusalem, the Desolate House, and the Departing King

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Jesus exposes religious performance as the inversion of true righteousness and grieves over those it has destroyed.

Primary Claim: God is confronting the most dangerous form of unbelief — not irreligion but hyper-religion — where the machinery of faithful practice conceals a heart that has replaced God with the approval of men, and He is calling every reader to search their own religion before His searching gaze.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine what your religious practice is actually performing for. [Mind/Belief] The Pharisees were not lazy or irreligious — they were exhaustingly, visibly devout. The question Jesus exposes is not “are you practicing?” but “for whom?” Broad phylacteries and long fringes are not wrong in themselves — they become wrong when they are calibrated for an audience. The reader must ask, with genuine honesty: When I pray, serve, give, or attend — is the operative question “what will God think?” or “what will people think?” These questions produce different behaviors in private that they don’t produce in public. The pattern of the Pharisees is not external to the Christian — it is a standing

possibility within every practicing believer, and it cannot be identified by looking at the practice itself, only by examining the heart beneath it.

2. Stop constructing religious performance that substitutes for inward transformation.

[Will/Behavior] Jesus' most structurally important point in the Woes is the sequence: the inside must be cleaned first, and then the outside will also be clean (v. 26). The Pharisaic error is not merely that they have dirty interiors — it is that they have replaced interior transformation with exterior performance, and called the substitution faithfulness. For the Christian reader, the concrete implication is this: identify where you are attempting to solve an inward problem with an outward behavior. The greed and self-indulgence Jesus names in v. 25 are not solved by more careful tithing of mint and cumin. They are solved by repentance toward God and trust in Christ's righteousness — and that repentance will then produce right practice. Reverse-engineering the sequence (performing your way to an interior) is the Pharisaic project, and it does not work.

3. Let the grief of the lament break any remaining hardness in your heart.

[Affections/Worship] The movement from the Woes (vv. 13–36) to the lament (vv. 37–39) is the hermeneutical heart of the chapter. Jesus does not close with condemnation — He closes with grief. “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.” God is not a detached judge delivering verdict — He is a shepherd who has watched the sheep refuse to be gathered, and the grief is real. The reader who encounters this passage primarily as a critique of Pharisees and not as a window into the heart of God toward religious obstinacy has missed the point. Sit with this image: Christ, arms extended in the posture of a mother hen, the city that kills prophets refusing to come. That is the God who confronts you in this passage. Let that grieve you rather than harden you.

4. Refuse the honor-systems of religious community that function as substitutes for God's approval. [Affections/Worship] Jesus' counter-instruction in vv. 8–12 is not merely a rule against using titles — it is a diagnosis of the entire honor-economy that the Pharisees inhabited and that religious communities consistently reproduce. The desire to be called “rabbi,” to have the best seat, to be greeted with respect in public — these are not trivial vanities. They are signals that the community has constructed a human approval system that is functioning where God's approval should function. For the contemporary believer, this takes many forms: positioning within a church community, name-recognition in ministry, platforms and credentials and endorsements. None of these are wrong in themselves. They become Pharisaic precisely when they become the metric of validation — when being known by the right people matters more than being known by God. Jesus' remedy is structural: whoever exalts himself will be humbled; whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Trust the upward movement to God, not to the community's honor system.

5. Guard against precision in minor religious matters that coexists with neglect of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. [Will/Behavior] The fourth Woe is the most practically diagnostic for contemporary religious life. The Pharisees were not neglecting their tithes while attending to justice — they were doing both wrong simultaneously, with extreme

precision in one and complete negligence in the other. Jesus does not abolish the tithe (“these you ought to have done”); He insists that the weightier matters of the law — justice, mercy, faithfulness — cannot be skipped while the minor matters are executed with scrupulous care. The contemporary form of this error is recognizable: careful observance of Sunday attendance, small group participation, and giving percentages alongside systemic indifference to the poor, the exploited, and the vulnerable in one’s community and world. Faithfulness is not the precision of the smaller discipline. It is the integration of the smaller discipline with the larger claim.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Matthew 23 is one of Scripture’s most concentrated treatments of the doctrine of the heart and its relationship to religious practice. Jesus teaches here that external religious observance is not merely insufficient without inward reality — it is actively dangerous, capable of functioning as a sophisticated substitute for the very thing it claims to express. The passage establishes that God’s mode of evaluation is categorically inward: He is not impressed by phylacteries, tithes of garden herbs, or tomb-decorating. He looks at the cup’s interior. It also establishes that the most severe judgment is not reserved for those who reject God openly but for those who construct religious systems that block others from finding Him. The closing lament reveals an equally important theological truth: God’s confrontation of human sin, even at its most searching, is not divorced from grief. The God who pronounces seven woes is the same God who extends His arms over Jerusalem like a mother hen. Justice and compassion are not in tension in the character of God — they are integrated expressions of His covenant faithfulness toward those He will not give up without witness.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Matthew 23 is essential reading for the Reformed doctrine of total depravity, specifically its operation in the most religious human beings. The Pharisees are not a cautionary tale about other people’s religion — they are the illustration of what human religious capacity produces when unrenewed by grace: comprehensive, disciplined, socially celebrated religion that is, at its heart, a form of self-worship. The passage grounds the Reformed insistence that justification cannot be earned by religious performance — not because the performers are obviously wicked but because even their most impressive performance is aimed at the wrong audience and driven by the wrong motivation. It also supports the Reformed emphasis on the covenant of grace as the ground of acceptance: the righteousness God requires is not produced by the one who fears men’s judgment but received by the one who fears God alone and trusts in Christ’s righteousness. The lament over Jerusalem carries covenant-historical weight: Jerusalem is being addressed as God’s covenant people, the recipients of all the prophets, the city of

David — and their rejection of the Messiah is the culmination of a long covenant failure that will bring the old covenant order (centered on the temple) to its end. Matthew 23 is the theological prelude to Matthew 24's announcement of the temple's destruction — the desolate house is the covenant institution that has become an instrument of the very idolatry it was meant to oppose.

Main Takeaway

Your religion can be your greatest danger. The Pharisees were not the godless — they were the godly, by every external measure available. Jesus looked at them and saw whitewashed tombs. The question He is pressing on every reader of this passage is not “are you religious?” but “what is your religion actually for?” — and specifically, “whose approval are you actually seeking?” God is not fooled by broad phylacteries or precisely tithed garden herbs. He looks at the cup's interior, and He calls every reader to look there too, before He does.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching the Woes as a critique of Jewish people rather than a diagnosis of universal religious hypocrisy.** This is the most serious and potentially most damaging pitfall. Jesus is not condemning Judaism — He is confronting a pattern of religious self-justification that is as present in Christian churches as in first-century Pharisaic Judaism. Every application generated from this passage must be consistently inward and self-examining. Any use of the text that produces a “we are not like those Pharisees” posture in the congregation has not just misapplied the text — it has reproduced the Pharisaic error in the act of discussing it.
- **Missing the lament as the hermeneutical key to the whole chapter.** Sermons that treat Matthew 23 as pure confrontation and stop at verse 36 have read half the chapter. The lament (vv. 37–39) is not an appendix — it is the revelation of the heart beneath the confrontation. Without it, the Woes can be preached in a tone of divine contempt that the text does not actually support. Jesus is not contemptuous of the Pharisees — He is grieved by them. That distinction matters enormously for the tone and posture of exposition.
- **Turning the applications into a moralistic checklist that replicates the Pharisaic error.** The supreme irony of preaching Matthew 23 poorly is that it produces in the congregation the very pattern it purports to critique: a list of behaviors to perform or avoid, calibrated for the approval of others (in this case, the preacher's approval). Applications must consistently drive inward — to motive, to heart-orientation, to the question of whose approval one is actually seeking — not outward to observable behaviors that can be performed without transformation.

- **Neglecting the counter-pattern in vv. 8–12 as a positive alternative.** Many expositions of Matthew 23 are organized entirely around the Woes and treat vv. 1–12 as mere introduction. But vv. 8–12 contain Jesus’ positive instruction — the kingdom alternative to Pharisaic honor-seeking. “The greatest among you shall be your servant” is not incidental. It is the prescription that the seven Woes are diagnosing the absence of. The sermon needs both the diagnosis and the remedy, and the remedy is not “try harder to be humble” but “stop seeking the wrong audience’s approval.”
- **Treating the Woes as roughly equivalent when they are structurally graduated.** The seven Woes are not simply a list — they move from the comprehensive (shutting the kingdom) to the precise (oath-distinctions, tithe-precision) to the visual (whitewashed tombs) to the historical-climactic (sons of the murderers). The progression matters: each Woe probes deeper into the inside/outside inversion, arriving at the most devastating exposure in Woes 5 and 6 (the cup, the tomb). Preaching that treats all seven as equally weighted will flatten the argument’s own movement.
- **Extracting the “tithing mint and cumin” passage (vv. 23–24) as an argument against careful financial giving.** Some interpreters use Jesus’ critique of tithe-precision to argue against detailed financial stewardship. This misreads the passage completely. Jesus explicitly says “these you ought to have done” — the tithe of the garden herbs is not wrong. The error is doing it while neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness. The text cannot be used to weaken the case for financial faithfulness — it is a case for integrated faithfulness, not against precision in lesser matters.