



Chapter 23

It's easy to hate a hypocrite. Strictly speaking, a hypocrite can be defined as a “play-actor” or “role-player.” A hypocrite is a pretender. It's all well and good when a hypocrite dons a costume, takes the stage, and delivers her lines. It's all part of a show. It's another thing entirely, though, when a hypocrite is off-stage, but still acting nonetheless. He appears and even speaks one way, but the truth is something different.

Icebreaker:

1. How have you encountered hypocrisy in your life? In other words, when has someone said one thing and done another? What was the consequence of it?

Hypocrisy is an often-cited reason why people have given up church; however, a great irony is that perhaps no one hates hypocrisy more than the Head of the Church, Jesus. Welcome to chapter 23!

Verses 1-12

This chapter takes place in the shadow of the temple and is a continuation what began in chapter 21. In these first 12 verses, Jesus turns away from directly addressing the Pharisees in order to speak to the crowds and His disciples about the Pharisees and other religious leaders. It's not easy to tell whether Jesus is being sarcastic or serious in verse 3. It is possible that Jesus is commending the words of the Pharisees; however, His warning against following their actions is motivated by a textbook case of hypocrisy!

The Pharisees had created an extensive list of rules meant to interpret the OT laws, or Torah, but in so doing had needlessly burdened the people as taskmasters do to slaves. These leaders should have been helping the people encounter God, but were instead adding obstacles.

2. Rules can be helpful, but they can also be counterproductive. Can you think of examples of how churches or church leaders have added rules that end up smothering our faith rather than invigorating it? Talk about this in your group.

The leaders' hypocrisy comes into focus in verses 5-6. Like actors, they wear clothes that make them appear to be what they're not. Phylacteries were small boxes with verses inside of them, while fringes, or tassels, were cords worn on garments that were intended to remind the wearers to obey the Torah. Bigger boxes and longer fringes gave an appearance of greater devotion to God. It seems silly, but could it happen today?

3. Try to think of one or two ways Christians might be tempted to appear more devoted to God than we really are today? What kinds of things might people do to create the right spiritual “look”?

These leaders are looking for front-court seats and respectful titles. It's a pride-fueled sham to appear better than others. Jesus, though, uses verses 8-12 to reiterate themes we've seen throughout Matthew. As Grant Osborne puts it, “fame and attention must never be a goal”; rather, we must seek to live and minister with humility.

Verses 13-36

Jesus now addresses the leaders directly through seven “woe” passages. The word itself is an abrupt way of expressing sorrow and pain. Some have observed how these statements are polar opposites to the beatitudes (“Blessed are...”) of chapter 5. The first two statements follow naturally from verses 1-12. The leaders have misused the Torah by creating so many additional rules that those who attempt to follow their teaching will be lead astray. The Pharisees’ followers become even more entangled in false teaching.

The third statement in verses 16-22 draws out the leaders propensity for distinctions that would allow them to speak as though they had their fingers crossed. It’s a contrast to what Jesus instructed in 5:33-37. As Osborne point out, “all promises are made before the throne of God and will be judged by God.” Truthfulness is not a quality the Pharisees exhibit.

4. Truthfulness and integrity are essential to community. Have you worked or belonged to a community where truthfulness was lacking? What happened and how did you respond?

The fourth, in verses 23-24, reveals how the leaders went beyond the stipulations of the Torah in such a way that they ended up violating it! There was no requirement to tithe herbs and spices, although it also wasn’t a violation of the law. The problem is that their zealous insistence on the tithe wasn’t consistent with the “weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness.”

5. This is easy to criticize and to commit! In what ways are we vulnerable as Christians to overemphasizing what’s relatively insignificant while ignoring “weightier matters”?

The fifth “woe” statement, verses 25-26, is hypocrisy at its worst. The outward appearance is a total sham in comparison to what’s inside. Greed and self-indulgence are masked by the outer appearance of piety and devotion to God. This is restated in the sixth statement of verses 27-28. Tombs were whitewashed not to attract, but to keep people from accidentally touching them and becoming unclean according to Numbers 19:16. The religious leaders’ outward appearance—however clean it may look—is only a thin veil covering what’s inside.

6. Beautiful buildings; fashionable clothes; nice cars; enviable social media profiles... In what ways are we prone to making everything look great on the outside while hiding what’s internal? Have you seen this in your life?

The seventh and final “woe” ties the scribes and Pharisees directly to those in Israel’s past who murdered God’s messengers. They claim that by building tombs and monuments in honor of prophets and other righteous people that they would not have committed murder as their forefathers did. Jesus sees through the lie, though, since He knows what they are about to do to Him and those who follow after Him. A number of the early church’s missionaries will be slain in the likeness of their Master. The leaders, then, are participating in the very kind of disregard for God’s laws (ironically) that the leaders of generations past had as well. The blood of the OT martyrs is on their hands.

Verses 37-39

The heart of God is on vivid display in these verses! Righteousness is nonnegotiable, but so is love. There can be a tension in these, but we see how Jesus grieves over the state of Jerusalem. He longs to pour out His love on its people—including its wayward leaders—but their unrepentant sin can only bring judgment. The house (i.e., the nation, the city, and the temple) that once represented God’s presence is now abandoned.

7. People often talk about how difficult it is to reconcile God's wrath with His mercy. How does this chapter exhibit both, and does it help illuminate how the two relate?

This marks a turn away from Jesus's public ministry. He will now associate primarily with His disciples rather than with the crowds as He leaves the temple area.

Tying the Bow

This is certainly not a feel-good chapter! It's sobering to consider how far the leaders had strayed from God's ways because it's so easy for us to do the same. Who doesn't like to be honored and noticed and called by impressive-sounding titles? Who doesn't like to have a little "flexibility" in how we apply rules to others versus how we apply them to ourselves? Who doesn't want to create the impression that we've got it all together by shoving the dirty laundry of our lives into the closet before someone knocks on our door? It's so easy to get caught up in things that lead us toward a "woe" rather than a "blessed" (remembering the Sermon on the Mount).

8. Maybe the Holy Spirit is convicting you of some area of your life where you've donned a hypocritical "mask" that you need to confess and remove. If so, consider sharing this with your group or talking privately about it with someone.

Thanks be to God that His Son has made a way for us to become clean from the inside out!

9. Spend a few minutes together thanking God for the sacrifice that makes us righteous. Pray as well for each other, that you all would be the kind of people who live lives that are pleasing to him.