

Matthew 23:1-12 | Jeffrey Smith

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 May 2025

Preacher: Jeffrey Smith

[0 : 00] Well, before I begin, I do need to give just a quick shout out to a couple folks. Shout out to my mom. I just want to say I appreciate all of the prayers and just asking of how she's doing this morning.

She did go back to the hospital, and so I think Teresa's with her now, and supposedly they're watching over YouTube. So, mom, love you, and we're praying for you. And it's also Mother's Day next weekend, so a little PSA, a little announcement for you folks that are like, wait, how much time do I have between now and then?

Also, good to see the Lemonyan family. It was just great celebrating your dad and your, you know, Frank yesterday. Yeah, it was just, it was really a neat thing to see, the celebration of his life and what he meant and just the foundation, the rock that he was for the family.

And so, yeah, just a beautiful thing. It's also another special day. Anybody know?

[1 : 15] It's Star Wars Day. It's Star Wars Day. And if you don't know what that is, it's May the 4th. May the 4th be with you. May the 4th be with you. It's also like Mike Tyson saying it, you know, with a little bit of the lisp.

And so, I thought, how could we take a Star Wars title and make it a, you know, a sermon title? So, we could change Return of the Jedi to Return of the Jesus, right?

The last Jedi could be the last Adam. Attack of the Clones. Maybe Attack of the Pharisees.

The one I love, though, and this kind of pertains to what we're looking at this morning, is when the Empire Strikes Back. When Jesus Strikes Back. And so, if you want to turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 23, we're going to continue on in our study of Matthew this morning.

If you skipped out last week because I was speaking, I tricked you. I got two weeks in a row. So, if you remember, we covered 22 verses 41 to 45, or 46, last week.

[2 : 31] And I kind of gave the broader picture of, this is where the tide is turning in Jesus' ministry, right? He introduces himself and calls his disciples.

But then around chapter 21, the tide begins to turn where the people, specifically the Jewish leaders, begin to reject Jesus. And there's the example of him being rejected by the chief priests when they start to question, like, what authority do you really have here?

In 22, he's rejected by the Pharisees. And they begin to try to plot as to how they can entangle him. And then later in 22, he's rejected by the Sadducees.

And they try to trap him. And remember they asked that very odd question about if a woman marries someone, and he dies, and does it over and over to the brothers. And you're like, remember, again, my point was just like that.

It's not a bad thing to question and challenge your beliefs and what you're seeing, but to do it in the right way. And obviously, the Pharisees and Sadducees were not questioning Jesus in the healthy kind of iron-sharpening iron way.

[3 : 46] They were doing it with the intent of trying to trap him and to try to get him to trip up a little bit. And so, if you recall, last week's message was, was Jesus finally kind of turning the tables on them?

And he says, let me ask you a question. Remember the question? Whose son is he? Who is the Christ? Whose son is he? And when you're saying this to supposedly the most learned men in this area of the Torah, of the Bible, like, that should be a layup.

And so, what do they say? They say, well, he's the son of David. And they're not wrong. They were not wrong. That is a correct answer. But what they were missing, and what Jesus makes a point of saying, is they didn't grasp the concept that the Messiah was not only the physical son of David, like, not only this root of Jesse, this error in that lineage, but he was also God's son.

And he was also divine in that nature. They were so focused on this, like, deliverance, this physical deliverance of Roman oppression.

And so, when Christ came to establish his kingdom, they rejected because they just couldn't grasp that this man could be the Messiah, both the son of David and the son of God.

[5 : 22] Like, those things just weren't resonating. I thought about this mental picture, and I'm going to throw out a term, and I'm curious if anyone knows what I'm talking about. If I say rope-a-dope, do you know what that means?

Okay, so rope-a-dope is like this boxing strategy. And I'm not a huge boxing guy, but I vividly remember this. There's specifically, there's several clips of this, but there's a famous one of Muhammad Ali, and he's implementing this boxing strategy against, I think, George Foreman. It's one of the famous fights. And the rope-a-dope was a boxing strategy where you're literally, like, leaning against the rope, and your opponent is just swinging on you, and you're just dodging. And part of the strategy is you're wearing your opponent out. And if you do it well, it works. If you don't do it well, I think you get knocked out. And Muhammad Ali, in this example, and there's been others that have done this, it worked out where the opponent was just swinging and swinging, and you watch boxing, and they just get exhausted.

And then the moment that the opponent is just too exhausted to throw another punch or defend himself against a punch coming in, that's when you go on the offensive.

[6 : 42] And that is kind of what I see. I don't want to say Jesus was in this boxing, fighting match with the Pharisees and Sadducees, but it feels that way. It feels like they're just swinging on with everything they got, and he's dodging them, and then he hits them with the punch.

Who is the Christ? And what does it say? It says in verse 46 of 22, and no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

He knocks them out. They don't have any response. And again, this is like the most basic of questions. Who is the Christ?

They should be able to answer this. And so that's when he goes, and this is where we're going to pick this up in chapter 23. This is when he turns to the crowd.

He's knocked out his opponent, and he turns to the crowd, and he turns to his disciples. So let's pick that up this morning. Let's start by praying. Heavenly Father, we thank you again for the morning. A lot going on.

[7 : 51] I do want to just, again, continue to lift up the Lomunian family and say thank you for them and their presence, and thank you for Frank. Thank you for just the celebration of his life yesterday, and I felt like it was just very glorifying to you.

His focus was on you. His focus was on carrying forth the legacy of the gospel and your word and knowing you, Lord, and I just can't think of a better thing.

Lord, I do also just lift up my mom and just thank you for her and love her, and just want to pray that you would be with her as she's in the hospital and just help her to get past some of the sick feeling that she's having.

And again, we just thank you for your word. And it's rich and it's powerful, Lord, and it's applicable, and we just pray that we can glean from it this morning again.

In your son's name, amen. Amen. You know, if I had to just say, what is the main point of the message?

[8 : 56] I'm just going to cut to the chase here, and it's not going to be like mind-blowing, so don't get too excited. The main point is Jesus telling the disciples and the crowds, don't be like them.

And he's kind of pointing that towards the Pharisees and Sadducees. Don't be like them. And it may be an obvious thing, but the reason why that is so important, and I want you to think about this in your own life, and think of an example of a time where you stepped into a new role, a new position, and you were replacing someone else.

I can think about it for work, for me. You know, I stepped into a new sales role at work one time, and there was a colleague that was kind of already doing the job, and my natural reaction was, okay, I've got to be like him.

I'm going to try to emulate him. And then pretty soon into it, I realized I'm not him. Why am I trying to be like him? There are things that are really positive that I can learn from him, but I'm my own person.

And when that kind of started to click, it was just much better, right? I wasn't having to try to emulate something that I wasn't. Well, here is a situation where I think the Lord is preparing his disciples to be the next set of leaders within the church.

[10:32] And historically, in a bad way, folks have looked to the Pharisees and Sadducees as these are our religious leaders, so I guess we'll just do what they do and act the way that they act, and that's kind of our model.

And Jesus is saying, don't be like them. He is establishing his disciples to go and take this message out to the world. Don't do it like them.

Okay, so what does he mean by don't do it like them? In a very just straightforward way, and you're going to see this, don't be arrogant. Don't carry it with such pride. There's a very popular Proverbs that says, everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord.

Don't be like that. Okay, so let's, if you have your Bibles, and I hope you do, let's look at Matthew 23. We're going to read 1 through 12.

It says, Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, the scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat. So do, and observe what they tell you, but not the works they do.

[11:43] That's an interesting statement. We'll come back to that. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

They do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad. We're going to come back to that word. Kind of an interesting one. And their fringes long.

And they love the place of honor at feast, and the best seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the marketplaces, and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.

And call no man your father on earth, for you have one father who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.

The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. A lot said there, but really a very common theme of what we're seeing here.

[12:57] So again, let's just look at the beginning. Then Jesus said to the crowds and his disciples. There's typically three groups that Jesus is addressing. He's either addressing his disciples, he's addressing the religious leaders, or he's kind of addressing general crowds.

It says, the scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, and so do, and observe what they tell you, but not the works they do. Let me just kind of define a couple things.

The scribes were these professional interpreters of the Torah. The Pharisees were more Torah theologians. I'm not going to get into a whole lot of detail into the nuanced differences there.

Let me just say, there were some scribes that were Pharisees, but not all scribes were Pharisees. And there were some Pharisees that were scribes, but not all Pharisees were scribes.

Some I read, it was kind of described, you could be a preacher, or you could be an evangelist. Some preachers are evangelists, some evangelists are preachers.

[14:06] It's not all preachers and all evangelists are all equal. Does that make sense? So if you're thinking of a Venn diagram, there is some overlap here, but it's not a full one-for-one. So he literally throws this question out to the Pharisees, who is the Christ?

They can't answer. And so he turns to the crowds and his disciples. And he starts to make these comments. And this is just before the famous kind of seven woes to the scribes and Pharisees, which we'll pick up next week or maybe the week after.

Moses' seat was traditionally this symbolic reference to the authority of Moses. Moses' house. However, it was found as they're doing archaeological, you know, digs and exploration that there was a literal seat in a lot of these synagogues.

It was typically a stone seat that was at the front. You know, so imagine this stone seat here. And typically, they would teach while they were sitting. So they would sit at the stone seat.

And it was a bit of a position of authority. And so, when Jesus said that the scribes and the Pharisees had seated themselves on Moses' seat, it really meant that they viewed themselves as carrying the same authority or possession of authority that Moses had.

[15:36] They were, they viewed them as Moses' like legal successors. So like Moses had passed down to them everything that he carried.

And so, real quick, note the irony of what Jesus says in verse 3. So do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do.

That's interesting. So it's interesting that Jesus would say, do what they say to do, but not the works they do. A lot of, a lot of what I saw as I was kind of digging into, you know, some of the commentary and resources on that, it was really meant to kind of call out the irony of this.

That, and let me just read kind of forward, and this will kind of explain some of this. For they preach, but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to bear and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

So Jesus is calling out the irony and the hypocrisy of what they're doing. They claim to have this position and authority of Moses, but all they're doing is just heaping heavy rules and regulations on these people.

[17:03] And it's a burden that they cannot lift. I think David mentioned it a couple weeks ago, there's how many commands in the Old Testament. 613. And it's one of my favorite games to play as I'm studying the Old Testament, or even just studying the Bible in general.

It's looking at all of the additional things that the Pharisees and Sadducees added to it. So they added on top of this 613, roughly 1,500 what they call like fencing laws or fencing rules, meaning these were like rules, rules, meant to set up kind of a hedge around the law.

Like how do we interpret the law? How do we apply the law to that time? And a lot of the law was around what? The Sabbath. You know, a lot of the law was around diet, but they really love to kind of like figure out the Sabbath, which to me is just so ironic, because I don't know if you talk to many folks, but that has become kind of a Christian hot topic among a lot of circles that I have some overlap in.

Christians love talking about what should we do for the Sabbath? How should we? We need a Sabbath better, Shabbat. You hear that a lot. And I'm like, okay, believe me, I'm all for rest.

Don't get me wrong. I'm all for taking a break. But it feels very reminiscent of how can we apply the law. Okay, let's set up a family, this is literally, I'm going to give you just how I hear it.

[18:38] Let's set up a family Shabbat, a family Sabbath. Okay, great. So then how do we do that? Okay, so now we're going to do a family dinner that has to be done on Sunday.

Okay, great. So can anyone else come? Okay, we will allow just our extended family to come to this dinner on Shabbat. Okay, I'm not making this up.

And so you start to see where I'm going. The rules are starting to be added. And that is what the Pharisees were doing. There was a rule, talking about one of my favorite things to do and looking at all these rules, there was a rule about how do you handle if your house catches on fire on the Sabbath.

Because it would be work for you to carry your things out. But they said, hey, we got to work around. You don't want your clothes to catch on fire.

You can't carry them out. But if you put your clothes on while the house is on fire, you're not working. You're just putting clothes on. So you got to quickly throw on all your clothes as the place is on fire and get out the door.

[19:45] There's a rule about you cannot travel more than I think three fifths of a mile from your house. So what would they do? A lot of things they would do. But the day before, if you had some food, maybe a loaf of bread or something, and you walked and you put it roughly three fifths of a mile away from your house, you could go from your house to where you left that bread the previous day and then get another three fifths of a mile from there because it kind of reset.

If you had food there, that was kind of like your house. It's like, what in the world? This is crazy. There's 1,500 of these additional rules.

This is not a light burden. This is a heavy burden. This is not for the purpose of how do we glorify God and use the law to separate ourselves and all the things that it was intended to do in some ways.

They're just adding to it. And I think about how different that is than what Jesus said in Matthew 11 when he said, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Could there not be anything more different than what the Pharisees were doing? They were making that burden as heavy as they could make it. And in five it says, for all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts, and the best seats in the synagogues, and the greetings in the marketplaces, and being called rabbi by others.

[21 : 25] But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. So let's go back to that weird word, phylactery. I had never heard of this, to be honest.

Anybody else ever heard of it? Okay. KJ, can you throw that picture of a phylactery up? I'm going to show the picture and we can talk about it. You see that thing on his head?

That is a phylactery. That is this small leather box. And what they would do, and this goes back to several passages in the Old Testament, but in Deuteronomy 6 it says, And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you arise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be on the frontals between your eyes.

So literally there was like parchments of scripture in this box and it would be worn on the forehead here. And they're making their phylacteries broad.

[22 : 37] It is just pure, to translate it to today's language, it is pure virtue signaling. You guys remember that term?

Virtue signaling. I mean, it's like when we were in the heat of COVID, that's what it was. Okay? I don't think the Pharisees and Sadducees are thinking, I just really, really want to honor the Lord and having the scripture so accessible to me that I can immediately pop it out of my box here and read it.

they are making a signal to those around them. Look how big this box is. It's giving me a headache. Okay? It's straining my neck to even keep this thing up.

It's so big. The tassels are so long. Look how good I am. I went down just a quick little memory lane here thinking about COVID and all of the fun virtue signaling we went through.

[23 : 40] I mean, the mask, wearing a mask just became such a virtue signal, didn't it? It was amazing. I wrote down all these things.

I'm not even going to say them. It's like making me angry just reading them. Remember just the fight over. You've got to put the mask over the nose.

It's got to be over the nose. If it's not over the nose, what are we even doing here? It's like, man, such virtue signaling. In verse 8, it says, but you are not to be called rabbi.

Rabbi literally meant my Lord. And it was used generally for outstanding teachers of the law, and most frequently it was used for the heads of these rabbinical schools.

And I think you'll see kind of a point that I want to make here that Jesus is telling these folks not to use these terms like father and instructor and rabbi, not in the literal sense of like, if you use that term on anyone else, you are dead wrong.

[24 : 56] he's using it in the sense of the way you guys refer to the Pharisees as rabbi or instructor father is wrong.

And he doesn't want his disciples to be taking on that same title. There's a really interesting kind of issue with titles in the church.

There's a title for this. There's actually a title for this issue with titles. It's called Clergy Lady Error. And it's also known as clericalism. And it's essentially in the church, it's when there's an exaggerated emphasis placed on the role of the clergy.

You know, so priests and bishops in the church and it's a detriment to the laity, the non-ordained members of the church. This can manifest an undue elevation of someone with a title.

[26 : 02] And it can kind of give a sense of privilege and entitlement to the clergy. And so that can be seen in a lot of different ways. For a church like Bethel, you don't really have titles necessarily, but you may come in and say, hey, who's the pastor?

Who's the youth leader? Who's the worship leader? And with that, you have kind of an idea in your mind of what that person should be doing or what their role is. And so I think Jesus is kind of leveling the playing field.

And he's saying, you're all brothers. Don't be asking to be called rabbi. Don't be calling others rabbi. Don't have people coming up to you father.

Father, can you interpret God's word for me? No, no. It's, there's a term I used to always hear at work, democratize. It is like leveling, like I said, leveling the playing field.

Everyone has access to the Lord directly. We're not having to go through a father. We're not having to go through a priest. We can go directly to Jesus. And today's religious leaders, you know, they covet, you know, in some way these honorary degrees that you can get.

[27 : 23] And, you know, maybe there's undue emphasis put on education and title and degree. Jesus was preparing these apostles to be the leadership over God's people.

people. They would take the role from which the scribes and Pharisees currently occupied, in a way. Going down in verse 9, it says, And call no man your father on earth, for you have one father who is in heaven.

Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

The term father, in this case, represents, you know, like a father in the faith. James Vernon McGee says, A father is a life giver. To call a man a father in spiritual matters is to put him in the place of God, as the one who gives spiritual life.

This is blasphemous. Only God, the father, gives life. So again, I'm not trying to be like nitpicky here on, if I hear one of you guys say the word father, that is it.

[28 : 37] You have learned nothing. No, that's not it. If you are referring to someone as father, with the thought of this person is, it has some saving power, some ability to spiritually save, that is wrong.

I'll just say that. Paul actually in 1 Corinthians 4, he says, for though you have countless guides in Christ, he's writing to this church, or these churches, you do not have many fathers, for I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

So again, Paul's using kind of the term of father himself, but he brought the gospel to these folks. He's not claiming to have saved these folks, he's not claiming to have the power of salvation, he's just saying, hey, I brought you the gospel.

So again, it kind of goes back to my main point. Do not read this as in, like, I cannot use these terms. Think of it broadly in the sense of who Jesus was telling these disciples and these crowds not to be like.

The Pharisees and Sadducees who loved the titles, who loved to be called these things, and therefore kind of elevated themselves and what they thought they could do.

[29 : 59] This topic of, like, Jesus telling the crowds and disciples to be humble, this one hits home for me, and now that my mom's watched, I can tell the story as well. And this is just kind of a broad thing.

There were many times growing up that, you know, if something went well, my mom would say, don't, don't get, don't, your head's getting too big, which was a challenge, because my head was physically big as well, and I had a big haircut, so it looked extra big, but what she also meant was like, don't get too, don't get too boastful, and don't get too prideful.

There is a, there is great wisdom in that, to staying humble, to being humble. And so Jesus is telling his disciples, I'm, you have learned directly from me these last few years.

You are now going to go out and be the spiritual leaders, but don't do it the way they did it. Don't be like them. No other person is worthy of being called instructor other than Christ.

If the most scholarly folks cannot answer the simple question, who is the Christ, and whose son is he? How can anyone but Jesus Christ carry himself, or carry, or how can anyone but Jesus Christ himself carry the honor of being called instructor?

[31 : 32] Humility. Matthew 18, 1 through 4 says, at that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? He called a child to him, and he placed the child among them.

And he said, truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

And whoever welcomes the one, such child in my name welcomes me. In Matthew 20, James and John, the mother, comes to Jesus, and what does she say? Hey, how do I get tickets to the right and left-hand side of you in heaven?

For my sons, right? We're all this way. We're all thinking, like, how can we position ourselves to look better, to appear better to others?

And Jesus says, but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

[32 : 39] There's a really interesting two quotes I want to read. Louis Barbieri, said, leadership positions should never be a goal in and of themselves, but should always be viewed as opportunities to serve others.

If you have an opportunity for leadership, if you're being considered for a leadership position, if one of the first thoughts you have is, man, this is going to look good on the resume.

I am going to update LinkedIn as soon as I get out of this thing, I want people to know, then that is the worst motivation. That's the worst reason to do that.

If your thought is, okay, if I'm in that role, how could I serve the church better? How could I help my family better?

Or whatever it may be, then you're on the right track. Matthew Henry says, honor is like a shadow which flees those that pursue it and grasp at it, but it follows those that flee from it.

[33 : 53] If you see your shadow and you're running after your shadow, it's going to run from you. That honor is going to run. But if your focus is not the honor, and it is in the other direction, it will follow you.

The musicians want to come to the front. I'll just conclude with this. I pray that this message from Jesus just lingers in our minds.

He exposed the pride and the hollowness of the Sadducees and Pharisees and these religious leaders. And it's not for the purpose of kind of that boxing match like I described.

He's not trying to knock someone out. The purpose of this is for his glory and it's this long term legacy of he's trying to instill this humility in the disciples.

You guys are about to go out and proliferate the greatest message that's ever been shared. here. You are taking the gospel to the masses.

[35 : 03] And here's the lesson. Don't do it like these guys. Okay? Do not do it for your self gain and glory and attention. And that's a temptation of ours to elevate ourselves to crave the titles and the recognition to talk a good game and not live it.

That's what I do. It's not right. let's remember this profound truth that Jesus unveiled. That true greatness in his kingdom is not found in titles and positions but in humility.

Christ was the ultimate authority. He came not to be served but to serve. And we're also to lay down our own pride and embrace this posture of a servant and do it in a genuine way.

I've talked to a few of these. Dave, I know we talked about this the other day. How do you act in a genuine way? We live in a world of just fake, phony, AI.

It drives me crazy. It's like we need to be genuine, authentic people. And what does that mean? That means admitting when you struggle.

[36 : 19] I brought up the story of Corrie Ten Boom and the hiding place last week. There's two stories where it really struck me. Corrie Ten Boom, this amazing woman who followed the Lord and was doing all these great things and had so much persecution for it.

I don't know if you caught it. There's a time towards the latter part of her stay in the concentration camp where she said, honestly, I'm just not feeling it. God's word is just, I'm feeling numb to it.

I feel distant from the Lord. It's just not carrying the same level of impact and draw that it once had. And this is coming from the woman that was just craving scripture and just gathering masses of women around her to read.

And then there were times where she's like, it's just not it. She struggled post-war with her ministry. If you remember, she had this outreach to folks that were traumatized by this.

That's awesome. But she struggled with, and I get it, coming across people that betrayed her. Like fellow countrymen that had betrayed her to the Nazis and her fellow folks that were doing the work with her.

[37 : 38] She's like, it was tough. There was a story where someone came up and shook her hand and she's like, I'm not even going to shake your hand. that's an authentic response. So I pray that we can leave here with this renewed commitment to authenticity.

To let our lives be characterized not by the breadth and the size of our phylacteries or the length of our tassels, love and sincerity of our actions.

Let us strive towards being doers of the word, not hearers, not legalistic, but constantly pointing back to the Lord, the one true father, the one true instructor, the one true rabbi, the one true Christ. may we cultivate hearts that are humble and spirits that are teachable and just lives that reflect the servant heart of our savior.

For in this humility we will find true exaltation to the eyes of God, to the Lord, bringing him glory.
Let's pray.

[38 : 56] Lord, we just come to you again and I pray with just humble hearts. I have fallen short so many times and I thank you for the grace that continues to carry me and all of us forward, Lord.

Without it we are nothing and without salvation we are nothing. Lord, we are totally reliant upon you and just as you were instructing your disciples and the crowds to not be like them, not to be like the Pharisees, not to be these just legalistic, overly zealous for the law folks that were missing the point.

I pray that we can just be focused on you, emulating you, the humility that you had, and may that then carry forth in just the gospel going forward.

Lord, others coming to know you, us as children of yours, Lord, getting to know you more and drawing closer to you. In your son's name, amen. Amen. Thank you.