

- *Read through the text and check out whether the Lord is speaking to you about something you must place before Him; such as personal ambition or your control over other people. The only way forward is openness before the Lord.*
- *Pray for the leaders of the church, and ask the Lord to root our Pharisaism in all its forms, whether the church be established or free, or of whatever foundation, ancient or modern.*

Final Prayer

Place Your Spirit in our hearts, Lord Jesus Christ.; for You alone can guide us to be fruitful in Your Kingdom. Make us joyful and glad to be your servants, and bless us as we put our every effort into doing what You would have us do, for the glory of Your name: AMEN

Prayer

Dear Jesus, the things we do each day fill our minds completely, or so it seems. We find it hard to give You the space to do in us those works of grace we need, and you are waiting to do. Lift our hearts, and in a moment let the spirit lift our worldly weary souls to heavenly places of joy and wonder, love and praise. Take us there, dear Jesus, at any time of Your choosing and at every instant of our need; and may our lives give testimony to the transforming power of a moment spent with You. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Faithfulness

Pray for those who try to remain faithful in the home, in work, or in relationships. Satan seeks to destroy what is good; so pray for those who faithfully stand firm for what is right.

On-going prayers

- *Give thanks to God for the joys of Christian fellowship*
- *Pray for the people of Afghanistan and the war still raging there.*
- *Pray for UN peacekeeping forces in countries around the world*

Meditation

The breath of God has breathed in me, and by the grace of God, I am:

But sin has grasped my heart, my soul, the tempter's voice has whispered;

Truth and justice have found me out, the hand of God has touched me;

Righteousness has challenged me, the scales do not show balance;

Yet grace has melted my aching heart; the Saviour has already saved me!

Now repentance fills my broken soul, the Spirit breathes forgiveness;

Confession stirs within my heart, I accept the Father's love;

Mercy flows throughout my veins, the life-blood of my being;

And love is made God's fruit in me, the consequence of faith.

The breath of God has breathed in me, and by the grace of God, I am.

Bible Study - Matthew 23:1-12

¹ Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, ² 'The scribes and the Pharisees occupy Moses' seat; ³ You must therefore observe and do whatever they tell you; but do not follow their example, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴ They tie up heavy, cumbersome burdens, and put them on other people's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to help them. ⁵ All they do is done to be seen by others; they enlarge their phylacteries and the tassels on their clothes. ⁶ They love having the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues; ⁷ being greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and being addressed as rabbi.

⁸ 'You, however, are not to be called "rabbi", for you have one Teacher, and you are all students. ⁹ Call no one on earth "father"; for you have one Father, the one in heaven. ¹⁰ Neither are you to be called "leader", for you have one leader, who is the Messiah. ¹¹ The greatest among you must be your servant. ¹² All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be lifted up.'

Review

Our passage of scripture today is a carefully composed and passionate speech revealing Jesus' attitude towards the Pharisees. It continues throughout chapter 23 and sets the scene for his final teaching, as found in the speeches and parables of chapters 24 and 25. All of this was spoken 'to the crowds and to His disciples' (23:1). The Pharisees had finished challenging Jesus (22:46), but we cannot discount the possibility that some remained to hear Jesus begin to denounce them. The crowds and the disciples had witnessed Jesus' disputes with the Pharisees since the beginning of His ministry in Galilee (9:34) and would have understood why He spoke so strongly.

As a brief but important note, Christians in some periods of history have used this passage as an excuse for anti-Semitism. However, if we read it carefully, there is no excuse for either this or anti-Pharisaism. Jesus' criticisms serve to warn us against all evils of religiosity, however and whenever they arise.

The Law, Scribes and Pharisees Jesus' opening words are the only positive words He spoke about the scribes and Pharisees; they 'occupy Moses' seat', and must be obeyed (23:2,3). It was important that Jesus should begin in this way, even though it was very different from what He said earlier about the 'yeast' of the Pharisees' doctrines (16:6ff), or the narrow religiosity of the scribes and the Pharisees which obscured the will of God (see the Sermon on the Mount; chs 5-7). What Jesus indicated, however, was that the Pharisees should be respected as the guardians of God's revelation through the laws of Moses. However, Jesus was against their interpretation of these laws in everyday life; they were corrupt and their practices were to be rejected. It was the Pharisees who were at fault for the irreligious Judaism of Jesus' day, not the Law itself or the people of Israel as a whole; and we should also remember that whilst Jesus denounced Pharisaism, He was always willing to help an individual Pharisee (such as Nicodemus in John 3).

The Pharisees were the dominant force in Judaism and shaped the religious life of the people of Israel throughout the first century AD, and they used their positions of power to their worldly and spiritual advantage. This is what Jesus was intent upon exposing. For Jesus, the battle ground was not the Law; He had already taught about how to interpret this in the Sermon on the Mount. He was fighting against the power structures within Judaism which were about to convict Him of blasphemy and put Him to death.

The sins of the Pharisees Jesus clearly identified the burdensome religious requirements of the Pharisees. No-one who had listened to Him throughout His ministry needed any reminder of the details; family laws, Sabbath and purity regulations for example. Jesus caricatured the Pharisees for running a system that did nothing to help people keep to its demands (23:4), but then paraded their own apparent devotion. They publicly displayed expensive phylacteries, leather boxes containing fragments of scripture (see Ex 13:9 and Deut 6:8, 11:18), and the tassels they wore on clothing as a reminder of the Law (see Numbers 15:37-39). It was a show of religion.

Jesus continued by chastising the Pharisees for the offensive way in which those with religious authority sought places of honour at banquets and at worship. They were demonstrably more interested in their status than their duties (23:6,7)! We do not need to

know the social details of how people ate in those days to get the point straight away. Those who exercise power and status selfishly and without helping the people they claim to lead are not worth following, whoever they are.

Names and titles The last part of the passage is about the use of names, though what Jesus said appears at first to create problems because He forbade the use of three titles 'rabbi', 'father' and 'leader'. The first of these was used in Jesus' day as an expression of esteem, the second was a title of respect within extended families, and the third was a general word for anything from a teacher to a synagogue elder. Now, if we should not call anyone 'father' because we have one 'Father, the one in heaven', for example, how should any of us address our parents? Further, if Jesus was indeed forbidding the general use of titles amongst His people, why then does the New Testament talk of evangelists (Eph 4:11) and bishops (Phil 1:1, 1 Tim 3:1,2 etc) for example, or why does Jesus Himself describe the disciples as 'scribes trained for the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 13:52)?

The key to this teaching lies in Jesus' theme, which is His rejection of the display of power and status shown by the Pharisees. Jesus did not merely ban the use of titles for the sake of it, either these ones or generally, rather, He objected to their use to display status, power or authority. For God's people, all power and authority belong to God alone, and what we have of them comes from Him. There is therefore nothing wrong with people using titles properly, but it is wrong to use them to claim power and authority, especially in the church. This is what Jesus deplored about the Pharisees.

This is all confirmed by the final verses of our passage, which reiterate one of the most common themes of Jesus' teaching; service and humility. These are the key features of discipleship for everyone who is part of God's people, the Church. In this light, any position of leadership is one of duty and honour which is afforded so that God's people may be led not by Pharisaic religious despots, but by God Himself through godly people.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In your opinion, what are the chief sins of the Pharisees in this text? Are they shown in the church today? How?
2. What hypocrisies afflict the life of God's people today and make it a laughing stock to others in the world?
3. Is 'service' the principle upon which your own church is built? How can God's people serve each other more faithfully?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Clearly, this text has much to say about leadership and service. There is a question lying within it for everyone who is a Christian; do we perform our tasks in the church for ourselves and our own motives, but claim to serve others and God? Of course, serving others and God overlap, but by attempting to meet our own hidden needs in the guise of faith we can hide personal sins which need to be exposed and dealt with. We must ask ourselves this question with as much vigour as we put into accusing others of falling at this same hurdle, and unless we do so, preferably on our knees, we will find ourselves under God's judgement.

Ideas for discipleship programme