

Dr. David Turner, Matthew

Lecture 10A – Matthew 23: Jesus' Final Words to the Jerusalem Establishment

Well, greetings, friends. This is Lecture 10a of our Matthew course. This is David Turner speaking again to you.

We've now come to one of the most solemn passages in the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew 23, Jesus' final words on the Jerusalem establishment. Ever since our Lord has been in Jerusalem, there's been nothing but difficulties with the various groups of Jewish leaders, and now things come to a head with his rebuke of them speaking much as an Old Testament prophet would. As we introduce Matthew 23 to begin with, we need to deal with some contextual questions.

Matthew 23 is difficult to place in the argument of Matthew. Since it is a discourse, it's tempting to connect it with 24 and 25, as many do, such as Blomberg. But if you connect it with Matthew 24-25, the discourse seems to follow the pattern of Matthew 13, notice especially 13-34-36, which has initial public teaching, which in this case would be chapter 23, followed by private instruction for the disciples in 24-25.

However, the public and private portions of Matthew 13 are united in genre, theme, literary structure, whereas there's obvious differences between 23 and 24-25 in terms of the audience, two different audiences involved there, in terms of the content of the material and in terms of the tone of it. Therefore, it's probably better to view Matthew 23 as the climax of Jesus' confrontations with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, which began in 21:15. At the same time, one must note that there are clear connections between 23 and 24-25, primarily the references to the persecution of Jesus' disciples.

Compare 23:29-36 with 24:9-13, 24:21-22, and 25:34-40. Also, the desolation of the temple, 2 and 23-38, is mentioned in 24:1-3 and 24:15. The return of Jesus in 23-39, of course, is mentioned several times in chapters 24 and 25.

Matthew 23 seems to involve three major sections. First, Jesus warns the crowds and his disciples against the errors of the scribes and Pharisees in the first 12 verses. Then he denounces the scribes and Pharisees with prophetic woe oracles against their sin, and he ties their rebellion to that of the ancestors.

Finally, he poignantly speaks to the rebellious Jerusalem words of lament, which depict his longing for them as well as their deserved judgment in 23:37-39. As I've laid out for you on page 39 of the supplemental materials, when one looks at the

setting of Matthew 23 in the preceding literary context, what's been going on here is a running dispute between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. Various groups of them approach him and try to show him up, make him look bad, get him in trouble, whatever.

I've listed those for you there, five different ones really, the chief priests and scribes, chief priests with the elders of the people, disciples of the Pharisees, and then certain Sadducees, and then a lawyer from the Pharisees. And you find in this passage the form of the arguments take the form of them asking Jesus questions, him responding to their questions with answers which include scriptural quotations, parables, and most of all questions thrown right back at them, which this section concludes at the end of chapter 22 with a question which they're not able to answer. Matthew 23 also serves as an introduction to the eschatological discourse of Matthew 24 and 25.

Jesus' disputes with the Jerusalem religious leaders end in an impasse in 22:46. Jesus then warns his followers against being like those leaders in 23:1-12, and then he pronounces seven woe oracles upon them in 23:13-36. Then he laments Jerusalem's fate, yet he holds out hope for its future in 23:37-39.

As he departs the temple, perhaps reenacting the departure of the Shekhinah glory in the book of Ezekiel, his disciples nervously point out to him the glorious architecture in 24:1. At this point, he speaks bluntly about the coming destruction of the temple, and the disciples respond with the question which gives rise to the discourse, when will these things be and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age in 24:2-3? Thus, the judgment of Jerusalem, primarily its leaders and its temple, is justified in Matthew 23 before it is predicted in Matthew 24 and 25. We do need to spend a moment thinking about Matthew 23 in the context of modern issues, namely, Jewish-Christian relations and antisemitism.

It certainly is a fact that Matthew 23 looms large in discussions of the New Testament and antisemitism. Matthew 23 has been called by the Jewish scholar Samuel Sandmel a unique, unparalleled specimen of invective. Baer's commentary on Matthew utters similar thoughts.

Matthew presents Jesus' disputes with the Jewish leaders in bold relief, and those disputes come to a head with Jesus' prophetic announcements of woe against the Jewish leaders in Matthew 23. These strident denunciations disturb many people today, but heated rhetoric in the service of religious disputes was quite the norm in ancient times. In fact, it can be argued that such rhetoric was used in Jewish circles since the days of the biblical prophets and that it continued to be used in the days of the Second Temple as various Jewish groups critiqued the religious establishment in Jerusalem, particularly the groups which gave rise to the Dead Sea Scrolls.

It has been argued in the introduction to our lectures that Matthew is writing his book to a community that is still identified to a great extent with the Jewish community before the tragic parting of the ways between the church and Judaism. When Matthew wrote, the term Christianity, quote-unquote, which is viewed today as a separate religion from Judaism, was still a sect of diverse Judaisms of the period before the destruction of the Temple in 70. Therefore, Matthew must not be viewed anachronistically as a Christian critic of the Jewish people, but as a Christian Jew who is engaged in a vigorous intramural, that is to say, within the walls dispute, with other Jews over the identity of the Jew Jesus.

In other words, Matthew is, we might say, a Messianic Jew writing to try to convince non-Messianic Jews that Jesus indeed is the Messiah. And if this is the case, Matthew is not attacking Jews or Judaism as a Gentile outsider who claims that his new religion has superseded the outdated religion of the Jews. This mistaken approach may be traced to the polemical writings of some of the early church fathers, but it's anachronistic to find it in Matthew on the lips of Jesus.

To the contrary, Matthew presents the dispute of Jesus with the Jewish leaders as a thoroughly Jewish prophetic critique of the Jerusalem religious establishment, which calls for a return to the values of the Torah. This must not be misconstrued as an attack on the Jewish people of all times or even of Jesus' day. Rather, Jesus' stringent critique is directed against certain scribes and Pharisees who were prominent in the religious establishment of Jerusalem during the days of Jesus.

Now, with that background, we move on to discuss Matthew 23. We have three sections in the rest of your outline, there on page 38, you can see, which correspond to the three main parts of that chapter. First of all, the two models of leadership Jesus has.

Matthew 23:1 through 12, is directed to the crowds and the disciples, not to the Jewish leaders with whom Jesus has been in conflict. But the leaders are still very much in the picture as Jesus commands his disciples not to imitate their hypocrisy in 23:3b. It's very interesting, he has said in 23:2 to 3a, that the Jewish leaders indeed have a legitimate position to guide and lead the people of Israel.

Jesus does not dispute their status as leaders, but he does attack their hypocrisy in verse 4, verse 3b. And he also attacks their oppressive demands in 23:4, which they put upon the people when they don't take them themselves. He also addresses the matter of their love of prestige and power in verses 5 through 7. So their model involves a great deal of show, prestige, and power, much like the type of thing Jesus addressed in Matthew 6:1 through 18 in the Sermon on the Mount.

In contrast, Jesus' disciples are to reverence only the Father and the Messiah, 23:8 through 10. They are not to go around flaunting their titles. This can be very

problematic even today in our Christian circles with folks who flaunt their academic credentials, who flaunt their ordination titles, and all those types of things.

Sometimes the way we use the term senior pastor smacks of arrogance, it appears to me, and a great deal of pride. So Jesus' words in 23:8 through 10 speak directly to us as well as to the Jewish leaders of that day. The disciples' community must imitate the egalitarian model of the family, not the hierarchical model of the Jewish leaders compared to that 20:25.

That Jesus himself, as their teacher or leader, humbly practices what he preaches is not stated here, but it's clear from 20:28. So we have enough reverence due to the Father and his Messiah, our Lord Jesus, that the titles we use to describe them should be full of respect and awe. But the way we describe one another and the way we insist on others describing us should be on the model of just calling each other brother or sister or someone as a co-member of the family, not a matter of some great organizational structure and highfalutin titles.

In contrast to what Jesus is teaching, though, the scribes and Pharisees did not practice what they preached. This inconsistency is the reason why Jesus warns his disciples against them. Jesus does not attack the legitimacy of their authority, but he tells his disciples to follow their exposition of the Torah and the Halakha in 23:3a and 23:23.

Many exposers have great difficulty with this point because they assume that Matthew's community is already broken from Judaism. But 23:3a makes good sense if Matthew's community is still engaged in an intramural dispute with the leaders of formative Judaism. Now, quickly into the prophetic oracles of woe that Jesus utters against the Jewish leaders.

You will notice in 23:13 through 36 that there are seven woe oracles. Actually, if you're looking at a King James Version or an English translation based on the majority text, you'll find eight woe oracles. However, verse 14 is not found in many of the earliest manuscripts and may be interpolated from another passage.

Many modern versions do not include verse 14 as one of the authentic woes of Jesus. If we omit verse 14, then, we have the first oracle in 23:13, the second in 23:15, third in 23:16, fourth in 23:23, fifth in 23:25, sixth in 23:27, and seventh in 23:29. It appears as you look at these oracles that they occur in three pairs, with the first two having to do with the Jewish relationship to the Gentiles and the matter of making proselytes.

The second pair, numbers three and four, has to do with the halakha, that is to say, the interpretations of the law, the legal rulings for everyday life. The fifth and sixth having to do with what true cleanliness is, true purity, and then finally the final oracle

in 23:29 and following, which really gets to the root cause of all of it, the oracle against the Jews for rejecting the prophets and the culmination of this coming in Jesus' life and ministry. So, we need to look at these oracles that our Lord Jesus gave in light of Old Testament background here.

So, we think first of prophetic oracles of the Old Testament. The Old Testament prophets frequently cried woe against Israel's sins. Examples of this, Isaiah 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22, an interesting series of six woes there in Isaiah 5, Amos 5:18, 6:1, 6:4, Habakkuk 2:6 and following, a series of five woes, Zechariah 11:17, and many other places.

Such oracles speak with a blend of anger, grief, and alarm about the excruciating consequences that will come upon Israel due to her sin. After the pronouncement of woe, such oracles contain a description of the persons upon whom the woe will come. This description amounts to the reasons why the woe is merited.

Thus, a woe oracle states the conclusion before the premises on which it is based. Woe oracles may have developed from covenant curses, Deuteronomy 27:15, or even from funeral lamentations such as Jeremiah 22:18. The New Testament includes oracles of woe in other places besides Matthew 23.

For example, look at Luke 6:24 to 26, Revelation 18:10, and a few following verses there. Qumran literature, that is, the Dead Sea Scrolls, also has many woe oracles, as do the pseudepigraphical books of 1 and 2 Enoch. Even the Talmud includes exclamations of woe.

It's important to note that the prophet's attitude in oracles of woe is not simply one of anger. Clearly, the prophet's anger at Israel's sin is tempered at times by his grief and alarm at the horrible price Israel will pay for that sin. The prophet speaks for God against sin, and this explains the anger.

But that anger is directed against his own people, and this explains the grief. The palpable pathos of woe oracles is due to the prophet's dual solidarities. Isaiah, for example, pronounced woe upon himself not only because he himself was a person of unclean lips, but the prophet must speak for God, and in announcing oracles of judgment, the prophets knew that they were announcing the doom of their own people.

Two important conclusions flow from this brief sketch of prophetic woe oracles. First, Jesus' pronouncements of woe upon the Jewish leaders were not innovative. His severe language must have sounded familiar to the Jewish leaders, given their seeming acquaintance with the Old Testament.

To the extent that the Jewish leaders were aware of the Second Temple sectarian literature of their own day, Jesus' woes would have sounded rather contemporary. Second, Jesus' pronouncement of woe oracles was not merely an exercise in spite against his enemies. Rather, as is made clear in 23:37, his words come at least as much from grief as they do from anger.

Now the charge of hypocrisy that's made here. Matthew speaks explicitly of hypocrites fourteen times in his gospel. You can find those with a concordance.

In all but one of the seven pronouncements of woe here in Matthew 23, speak of the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites, the sole exception being 23:16. Now, the word hypocrite does not come so much from the Semitic culture or languages as it does from the Greco-Roman world, where it describes someone who gives an answer, who interprets an oracle, who mimics another person, or who acts out a part in a dramatic production. At times, the idea of pretending in order to deceive is present, but the word in itself doesn't necessarily have a negative connotation.

But in Matthew, hypocrites are more specifically those who live for fleeting human applause rather than for eternal divine approval, as made clear in the first 18 verses of chapter 6. Hypocrites honor God outwardly, but their hearts may be far from him, 15:7, and 8. A hypocrite pretends a sincere religious interest when questioning Jesus with evil intent. Further, such a person says one thing but does another, 23:3. Thus, in Matthew, hypocrisy involves religious fraud, a basic discrepancy or inconsistency between one's outwardly godly behavior and one's inner evil thoughts or motives. Isaiah 29:13 may be the most important prophetic text that condemns religious fraud.

This passage was cited by Jesus in Matthew 15, 7-9, and it concerns the religious leaders of Isaiah's day. The fraud being perpetrated in Isaiah 29 involves seemingly pious words and traditional rulings which in reality disguise hearts which are far from God and plans which are thought to be hidden from God's sight, 29:14. Isaiah's charismatic leaders, the prophets, are mute, 29:10-12, and its judges are corrupt, 29:20, and 21.

But in spite of this, Israel's outward religious observances go on, 29:1. Jesus applies this passage to certain Pharisees and scribes who insisted on the ritual washing of hands before meals but dishonored their parents by the fraudulent claim that what might have been given to the parents had already been promised to God, 15:5. For Jesus, this Korban practice, evidently sanctioned by the tradition of the elders, violated and set aside God's law, 15:6. Additionally, the practice of ritual washing of hands made the fundamental error of viewing defilement as coming from humans from external sources rather than coming from humans due to an internal problem, an evil heart, 15:11-20. Jesus' rebuke of hypocrisy is not only deeply rooted in the Old Testament, and there are many passages we could add to the key one in Isaiah

29, but it's also similar to rebukes found in the Second Temple Jewish literature. Texts from the Psalms of Solomon, the Assumption of Moses, the Community Rule from Qumran, and later rabbinic literature, the Talmud, Barakot 14b, and Sotah 20c, many other passages address the matter of hypocrisy.

So Jesus was not alone in his own day, even amongst Jews who were complaining and critiquing the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders. Now, the central charge, and the more basic one, of Matthew 23 is that Israel has rejected its prophets. The charge that Israel has rejected its own prophets in 23:29-31 is perhaps the most serious accusation found in Matthew 23 since it addresses the root cause of other problems confronted there.

If Israel had only listened to its prophets, the Pharisees would not have prevented people from entering the kingdom. If Israel had only listened to its prophets, casuistry and oaths, and the elevation of trivial duties over basic duties would not have become commonplace. If Israel had only listened to its prophets, matters of the heart would have remained primary, not the external appearance of righteousness.

But Israel had rejected its prophets throughout its history, and that rejection would reach its horrible culmination in the rejection of its Messiah, 23:32, and his messengers, 23:34. This would bring the guilt of innocent blood shed from the first to the last book of the Old Testament, from Cain in Genesis to Zechariah in 2 Chronicles, the last book in the Hebrew arrangement of the Bible. This is not the first time that Matthew points out that Israel has rejected its prophets.

The genealogy of Jesus stresses the exile to Babylon, which is, of course, due to the rejection of the prophets. The ministry of John the Baptist is presented in terms of prophetic rebuke, and, of course, John is rejected as an Elijah-like figure by Israel. When Jesus' disciples themselves are persecuted, they are to be encouraged because the prophets were similarly persecuted in 5:12.

Rejection or reception of the ministry of Jesus' disciples is described as that of a prophet in 10:41, and 42. Notice also 25:35, to 45. All these factors combine to make it clear to the reader of Matthew that Israel has rejected its prophets, and that by rejecting them, Israel has failed to obey the law of Moses.

Jesus' charge that Israel has rejected its prophet clearly echoes many similar charges in the Old Testament itself. Such passages as 2 Chronicles 36:15 and 16, Daniel 9:6, 9, 10, Deuteronomy 28:15, and following. Examples of this, Israel rejecting its prophets, would be Ahab and Jezebel's rejection of Elijah and Micaiah, 1 Kings 18 and 19, 1 Kings 22, Amaziah's rejection of Amos, Amos 7:10 through 17, and other prophets have mention of rejection in the prophetic books.

Jesus' allusion to the murders of Abel and Zechariah effectively sums up the entire history of the murder of God's prophets in the Old Testament, which in the Hebrew text ends in 2 Chronicles. For those passages, compare Genesis 4:8 and following, and 2 Chronicles 24:21. Israel's rejection of the prophets is also frequently stressed in Second Temple literature of the Jews.

The Book of Jubilees, the Parle Pomona of Jeremiah, the first century Jewish work, Lives of the Prophets, the Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah, many of the Qumran materials, and quite a few things here emphasize this as well. So those oracles of woe which we find in Matthew 23:13 through 16 are very difficult and are very direct, and the denunciations perhaps disturb us a little bit if we're used to just nothing but the, you know, nice language. But the fact is that the language that our Lord used there finds its basis in that of the Old Testament prophets and only echoes the type of language that God led them to bring against the people, the leaders of Israel.

Now, to conclude Matthew 23, Jesus' lament over Jerusalem in 23:37 through 39. Jesus' lament over Jerusalem is a remarkably sympathetic conclusion to his antipathetic denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees. In this lament, the compassion of Jesus for his people and his city is palpable.

Compare 9:36 and 11:28. Other touching biblical laments, such as 2 Samuel 1:17 to 27, Romans 9:1 through 5, Revelation 18:10 and following, all these other biblical laments pale in comparison with this lament of Jesus. Jesus is deeply moved for his people and for his city in spite of the shameful manner in which its leaders have treated him and in spite of the horrible sufferings which he knows to be still ahead.

Christians today must ponder the Lord's compassion for the Jewish people and reflect on their own level of concern for the people of the Messiah, as did Paul in Romans 10:1. An arrogant attitude toward those who are lost is always despicable, but it's especially so when it concerns the Jewish people. Look at Romans 11:16 to 24. Matthew 23:37 through 39 illustrates the mysterious relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

The same Greek word is used in 23:37 for Jesus' desire to gather the people of Jerusalem and for their refusal to be gathered. How many times I wish to gather you, but you would not or you wouldn't let me. Other similar passages which lay out divine sovereignty and human responsibility side by side, such as 22:3, Acts 7:51.

Yet in Matthew 11:27, Jesus appears to accomplish his purpose in revealing the Father to whomever he wills. Despite the judgment in 23:38, according to 23:39, the condition continues into the future. The tension continues into the future, that is.

Unless and until the people of Jerusalem utter in faith the words of Psalm 118:26, they will not see Jesus again. But the implication is that if they do bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord, they will ultimately receive the kingdom blessings they have rejected up to this point. Now, some material on Matthew 23 and Jewish-Christian relations again.

No one can doubt that the language of Matthew 23 is severe and that it castigates certain Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day in terms that make us genteel modern folk extremely uncomfortable. And no one should deny that, through the centuries, Christians have used this language as a confirmation of anti-Semitic attitudes and, worse yet, inquisitions, pogroms, and even the Holocaust of Germany. But all this is due to a misunderstanding of Matthew 23 by the early Gentile church, a misunderstanding born out of the arrogance against which Paul warned us in Romans 11:18 to 21.

Ironically, this has become the misunderstanding of modern Jews as well as modern Christians. Perhaps this history of a Gentile-ized misunderstanding of Matthew 23 can be alleviated somewhat by, if you'll permit the expression, a Judaized understanding, one which stresses the Jewishness of the woe oracles and the concerns about hypocrisy and rejection of the prophets. But the intellectual understanding which has been outlined above will fall on deaf ears unless it is conveyed with a sensitive and loving spirit.

Unless Christians today are willing to love the Jewish people and grieve for the sad state of Jewish-Christian relations, as did Jesus in Matthew 23:37 and Paul in Romans 9:3, there's little reason to think that intellectual arguments will make any difference at all. In light of the sad history of Jewish-Christian relations, Christians have much to live down. Matthew 23 itself, especially 23:8 to 12, would be a good place to start a much-needed check of Christian character.

Christians must not read Matthew 23 as only a critique of Jerusalem's ancient leaders. It is also intended to warn Jesus' disciples, both ancient and modern, not to follow the example of the scribes and Pharisees. Compare 1 Peter 2:1. Davies and Allison are correct when they point out that all of the vices here attributed to the scribes and Pharisees have attached themselves to Christians, and that in abundance.

Those who would be salt and light in this world will get nowhere in their testimony if it's ruined by hypocrisy and vanity. But the integrity and humility of Christians, modeled on that of the Jewish Messiah, can alleviate the damage done by the attitudes and atrocities which mar Jewish-Christian relations yet today. And now to summarize Matthew 23 in a few comments as transition into Matthew 24.

At Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, the crowd shouted, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From Psalm 118, verses 25 and 26. As the leaders looked on angrily, these words were uttered, but the children chimed in and agreed.

In 23:39, Jesus pronounces judgment upon those same leaders who rejected Jesus at his entry into the city. And he uses the same words which the crowds had shouted only a few days earlier, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Isn't that ironic? The sinful rebellion of the leaders outlined in Matthew 23 is made all the more monstrous by their official capacity.

They are those who sit in Moses' seat. This is the context into which Jesus speaks his final Olivet or eschatological discourse. This impressive temple precinct, which had been beautified and expanded by Herod, where the bankrupt Jewish religious leadership officiated, will be totally destroyed by a desolating sacrilege before Jesus comes again, and the nation genuinely turns to him with the words, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.