

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 16, Matthew 23-24

Podcast Audio Overview

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Welcome to your Deep Dive. Today, we're going to be looking at the Pharisees and their relationship with Jesus. Okay.

And we're going to be drawing from a lecture from Dr. Craig Keener on the Gospel of Matthew. Sounds good. Now, just a heads up, this is going to be a little different than what you might expect.

Yeah, a lot of people kind of have this idea of the Pharisees as like the bad guys in the Gospels. Right, right. But it's really a lot more complicated than that.

Yeah. So how about you help us unpack this a little? Dr. Keener points out that the Pharisees weren't like this massive evil empire. Right.

They were actually a relatively small and diverse group within Judaism. Yeah. So what made them stand out then? What made them different? Well, one of the things they were known for was their really strict interpretation of the Torah.

Okay. They were really devoted to following it to the letter. Interesting.

And some of them were even considered like super righteous by other Jewish groups. Really? Yeah. But here's where it gets kind of interesting.

Okay. They were also really focused on outward piety. Outward piety.

Yeah. Like they might wear special clothing or have these bigger phylacteries. Phylacteries? I don't even know what those are.

They're these little boxes with scripture verses inside that they wore on their foreheads and arms. Oh, okay. It was almost like they wanted to make sure everyone knew how devout they were.

It sounds a little like showing off, doesn't it? Well, you could see it that way. Yeah. But I think it's important to consider the context too.

Okay. The context. Yeah.

They were often at odds with the Sadducees. Sadducees. Those were the... Yeah.

They were the priestly aristocracy. Oh, okay. They held a lot of the power at the time.

Right. So you can imagine there was some competition there. Some tension there.

Yeah. Vying for influence and legitimacy. Yeah.

That makes sense. So those outward displays of piety, it might've been their way of asserting their authority. Oh.

Kind of like a way of saying, hey, we're the real deal when it comes to religious matters. Okay. So it was less about genuine piety and more about power dynamics.

Not necessarily. Yeah. I mean, their devotion to the Torah was likely genuine.

Right. But it's easy to see how that outward focus might've caused some issues, especially with Jesus. Yeah.

That's a good point. This really sets the stage for some of Jesus's harshest criticisms, right? Jesus, who was also Jewish, criticized them for focusing on those external displays of holiness. Right.

And neglecting the deeper aspects of the law. Exactly. Like justice and mercy and faithfulness.

Yeah. He wasn't saying those outward expressions were bad. Right.

He was just saying that they shouldn't come at the expense of the heart of the law. Yeah. He even called them out for their hypocrisy, right? Oh, absolutely.

The whole strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel thing. Yeah. That's a classic example.

Such a great line. It really is. He was basically saying that they were so obsessed with these tiny details of ritual purity that they were missing the bigger picture.

Like imagine filtering your drink for these tiny little insects. Okay. But then turning around and eating a whole camel, which is considered unclean.

Yeah. That definitely puts it into perspective. Yeah.

It's a pretty vivid image. It is. And he wasn't just talking about ritual purity either.

Oh, really? No. Jesus also accused them of exploiting people for their own gain. Wow.

Which is a pretty serious accusation back then. It really highlights the danger of religious leaders who abuse their power. It does.

And it also shows that his critique wasn't just about their outward actions. Okay. But about their hearts too, about their internal state of being.

Right. He was getting at the core of what it meant to be truly righteous. Which apparently wasn't something they were always getting right.

Well, to be fair, the priestly elite weren't exactly known for their upstanding behavior either. Oh, so it wasn't just the Pharisees. No.

The priesthood at that time was notorious for corruption. They would even exploit lower-ranking priests for financial gain. Wow.

Okay. So Jesus was targeting anyone who was twisting religion for their own benefit. Exactly.

It was a systemic issue. Wow. And Jesus was trying to hold those in positions of religious authority accountable.

It makes you wonder what he would say about some of the religious leaders today. Yeah. That's a whole other deep dive.

It is. But for now... Yeah. Let's stick with the Pharisees and their role in this really tumultuous period of history.

Agreed. And all this talk about religious hypocrisy and distorted priorities takes on even greater weight when we consider what Jesus predicts next. What's that? The destruction of the temple.

Yeah. That's a big one. It is.

And that's where we'll pick up in the next part of our deep dive. I'm ready when you are. Yeah.

It sounds good. But before we move on, I want to ask you, our listener, what stands out to you so far about the Pharisees? What are your initial thoughts? Yeah. What questions are bubbling up for you? Keep those questions in mind as we continue our deep dive.

It's wild to think about how this whole temple destruction thing wasn't just out of nowhere. Right. Like out of all the things to predict.

I know, right? But Dr. Keener actually brings up how Jesus wasn't the only one saying it. Really? Other people were predicting this too. That's crazy.

It was a pretty bold claim. Yeah. Especially back then with how central the temple was to Jewish life.

For sure. But there were others. Like there was this guy, Joshua Ben-Haya.

Okay. He was another prophet who also said the temple was going to get destroyed. And what happened to him? Oh, he actually got beaten up pretty badly for it.

Really? Yeah. Speaking out against the temple authorities was not a good idea. So basically any criticism of the temple was like a huge no-no.

Pretty much. Even from people in power. Makes you wonder if they knew deep down that something was wrong.

Maybe. I mean, even some of their own writings hinted at the temple's vulnerability. Oh, really? Like what? Well, there's the Testament of Levi and the Testament of Moses.

Never heard of those. They basically talk about how the priesthood wasn't exactly pure, and that could lead to some bad consequences. Like destruction.

Exactly. So it sounds like even before Jesus came along, there was already this growing sense of unease. Yeah.

Like a premonition of judgment or something. It's kind of spooky when you think about it. Yeah.

And on top of all that, there was this whole other thing going on. What's that? People were actually expecting a new temple. A new temple? Why? Well, they thought the current one was going to get destroyed, and a better one would replace it.

So they were already thinking about a new temple before the old one was even gone. Yeah. There were texts like First Enoch, and this thing called the Qumran Temple Scroll.

Okay. They talk about this new glorious temple that's going to come. So I guess in that context, Jesus's prediction wasn't totally out of left field.

Exactly. It was shocking for sure, but not completely unheard of. It makes you wonder what was going on back then that made so many people think the temple was going to be destroyed.

Yeah. It's definitely more complex than just Jesus coming in and making this random prediction. Right.

It was like something was already in the air. For sure. And even after the temple was actually destroyed, Jewish thinkers still attributed it to divine judgment.

Like the rabbis, for example. So they believed that God had allowed the temple to be destroyed because of Israel's sins. Exactly.

The idea wasn't new. So the destruction of the temple wasn't just like a historical event. Right.

It had this whole theological meaning behind it. Yeah. It became a symbol of what happens when you stray from God's covenant.

Makes you think. It does. Now, Dr. Keener mentions that Jesus's prediction wasn't completely accurate.

Oh, yeah. What's that? He said that not one stone will be left on another. Right.

But we know from archaeology that some stones did survive. Yeah. Especially from the retaining wall.

Okay. So how does that work? How can an inaccurate detail make the prediction seem more authentic? Well, think about it. If someone was making up this prophecy after the fact, they would have made it perfect, right? Yeah.

Probably. They would have known that some stones were still standing. True.

But because it's a little off, it actually makes it seem more like a genuine prediction made beforehand. Wow. That's pretty clever.

It's like a historical quirk that actually strengthens the case. Yeah. It's like finding a little imperfection in a painting that makes it clear it wasn't made by a machine.

Exactly. It's the little details that often reveal the truth. So then, in talking about the temple's destruction, Jesus tells his followers to flee when they see the abomination that causes desolation.

Oh, yeah. That's a tricky one. What exactly did he mean by that? Well, that phrase comes from the book of Daniel, and it's been debated for centuries.

But Dr. Keener thinks it might be connected to something really specific. What's that? This crazy event in 66 AD where these Jewish patriots slaughtered priests right inside the temple. Whoa.

Hold on. They killed priests in the temple? Yeah. It was a really violent time.

That's intense. So maybe that's what Jesus was referring to. So the abomination wasn't like a specific object or person, but more like an act.

Exactly. Like a transgression so bad that it defiled the entire temple. So it was the violation of something sacred that triggered it.

Yeah. And for Jesus, this act was a sign that things were about to get really bad. Hence the need to flee.

Exactly. He was basically saying, get out while you can. Makes the whole thing a lot more serious.

It does. It shows just how seriously Jesus viewed this whole situation. And it makes you wonder how we should respond to injustice and violence today.

That's a great question. Do we just accept it or do we speak out against it? Even if it means facing consequences. Exactly.

It's like what those Jewish patriots did; even though it was a horrific act, they were fighting for what they believed in. It's a tough question with no easy answers. It is.

But it's something we all need to think about. Absolutely. Now it's easy to get caught up in all this doom and gloom.

Yeah. But Dr. Keener reminds us that Jesus wasn't just throwing out these warnings to scare people. Right.

His pronouncements were actually driven by deep love for his people. Yeah. He wasn't some angry judge just waiting to punish them.

Exactly. He was heartbroken over their choices. You can really see that in the way he talks about Jerusalem.

Oh yeah. What was that image he used? He compared himself to a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings. Oh, that's kind of sweet.

I know, right? It shows that even in the midst of judgment, God's heart is still filled with compassion. It's like those pronouncements of judgment aren't about punishment, but about longing for repentance. Exactly.

It's a call to come back to the right path. To embrace the true heart of faith. And that message speaks to all of us, no matter who we are or what we believe.

It does. It reminds us that even when we mess up, God still loves us and wants us to come home. It's a beautiful thought.

It really is. So we've got the destruction of the temple and God's love for his people, but now let's talk about how this all connects to the second coming. Okay.

How did that fit in? Well, Dr. Keener points out that the disciples actually asked Jesus two questions. Okay. When will the temple be destroyed? Right.

And what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age? So they were kind of blending those two events together. Yeah. It's like they saw them as interconnected.

Which makes sense, given their understanding of history. Right. They believed that everything was leading up to this big climax.

A time of judgment and restoration. Exactly. And Jesus addresses both questions in his response.

But he's careful to make a distinction. Between what? The signs of the temple's destruction. Okay.

Which would happen within a generation. Right. And the signs of his second coming.

Which are? A little more vague. Oh. He talks about wars and famines and earthquakes and all sorts of stuff.

Sounds pretty apocalyptic. It does. But he's clear that those are just the beginning pains.

Okay. The real sign, the unmistakable one, will be the Son of Man coming in the clouds with power and glory. So he's giving them a framework for understanding both the near future and the distant future.

Yeah. He's acknowledging their concerns about the temple. Right.

While also emphasizing the need to be prepared for his eventual return. Sounds like a lot to take in. It is.

But the key takeaway is that it's not about knowing exactly when these things will happen. Okay. It's about being watchful and ready.

Living in a state of constant readiness. Exactly. It's about embodying the values of the kingdom and sharing the good news.

So it's not just passively waiting around for the end of the world. No. It's about actively living out your faith, making a difference in the world.

Being the change you want to see. Exactly. And by doing that, we become part of that bigger story of redemption.

We participate in God's work of bringing healing and restoration. That's a beautiful way to put it. It is.

So we've covered a lot of ground in this deep dive. We have. We've talked about the temple destruction, the second coming, God's love for his people.

It's been a whirlwind. It has. But before we move on, I want to give you, our listener, a moment to reflect.

Yeah. What are your thoughts on all this? What stands out to you? What questions are swirling around in your mind? Think about the parallels between the Pharisees and us today. Are we guilty of the same mistakes? Do we prioritize appearances over substance? Do we get caught up in the rules and miss the heart of our faith? These are all important questions to consider.

They are. Because the story of the Pharisees is more than just history. It's a mirror.

It's a reminder to check our hearts and make sure our actions match our beliefs. And to make sure that our faith is genuine. And that our lives reflect the heart of God.

You know, it's easy to kind of look back at the Pharisees and think, oh, they were so messed up. Yeah, it's easy to judge. But maybe their story is more of a mirror than we realize.

That's a good point. Like, it makes you wonder if we're falling into the same traps today. Definitely.

It's a good question to ask ourselves. Are there areas where we're more concerned with appearing righteous than actually living out our faith? Right. Are we more focused on checking boxes than on actually changing our hearts? Exactly.

It's easy to get caught up in the outward stuff and forget about the inner transformation. Before we wrap up this whole Pharisees thing, there is this one last point from Dr. Keener that really stuck with me. Oh, yeah? What was that? He talked about how even with all their flaws, the Pharisees were still genuinely seeking God in their own way.

That's an interesting perspective. Like, they were super devoted to the Torah. They really believed they were upholding it.

But something got lost along the way. They went from the heart of the law to obsessing over these external expressions. It's like they missed the forest for the trees.

Exactly. They got so focused on the details that they lost sight of the bigger picture. Which is something we can all do.

It is. It's so easy to get caught up in the rules and rituals that we forget about the true spirit of our faith. Right.

Like, what's the point of all those things if they don't actually change us on the inside? And it's a constant battle, right? Like, how do we make sure that our pursuit of God stays centered on the heart of faith? I think it starts with being honest with ourselves about our motivations. Like asking, why am I doing this? Yeah. Am I doing this to please God or am I doing it to impress people? That's a good question to ask.

It is. And I think it also involves being open to correction. Like being willing to admit when we're wrong.

Exactly. And be willing to learn and grow. Now, I know we've talked a lot about Jesus's criticisms of the Pharisees.

Yeah. Some of them were pretty harsh. They were.

But Dr. Kiener reminds us that even those criticisms came from a place of love. Like tough love. Yeah.

Like Jesus wasn't trying to condemn them. You wanted them to change. Exactly.

He wanted them to turn back to the true heart of faith. It's kind of like when you have to have a hard conversation with a friend. Right.

Like, you don't do it because you hate them. You do it because you care. Exactly.

Yeah. And you want what's best for them. It's the same with Jesus and the Pharisees.

He saw their potential. He knew they could be better. And he wasn't afraid to call them out on their stuff.

So I guess the takeaway here is that even when we mess up, even when we stray, God still loves us and wants us to come back. That's a beautiful thought. It is.

It's a reminder that we're all on a journey and we're all capable of course correction. It's never too late to change. Exactly.

So as we wrap up this whole deep dive into the world of the Pharisees, I want to leave you with this. I'm listening. Their story isn't just some ancient history lesson.

It's relevant to us today. It is. It's a reminder to examine our own hearts and motivations.

And to make sure that our faith is real. And that it's grounded in those weightier matters. Justice, mercy, faithfulness.

Exactly. It's a call to move beyond the superficial and embrace a faith that's rooted in love and compassion and a genuine desire to make a difference in the world. To be the change we want to see.

Well said. Thank you for joining us on this deep dive. It's been a pleasure.

Until next time, keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep seeking the heart of truth.