

Dr. Craig Keener, Matthew, Session 16,

Matthew 23-24

6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Let's picture this. A crowded courtyard in ancient Jerusalem. A popular teacher, Jesus, stands up and just publicly unloads on the most respected religious leaders of his day.

Now, this wasn't some polite disagreement. We're talking about an absolutely explosive public takedown. So what on earth was behind this historic confrontation? Well, at the very heart of it all was this single devastating accusation.

Hypocrisy. A charge that, let's be honest, still rings pretty true today. Jesus wasn't just debating theology with them.

He was calling their entire way of life a total sham. And yeah, that brings us to the big question, right? Why would he do that? Why risk it all to attack the religious establishment so directly, so publicly? I mean, this wasn't just picking a fight. This was a move that would set the stage for his own execution.

Okay, so first things first, we've got to get this straight. This was not Jesus attacking Judaism. He was Jewish.

His followers were Jewish. This was a fierce internal family debate. It was the kind of sharp in-house critique between different Jewish groups that was actually pretty common back then.

Think of it like the ancient prophets calling out the leaders of their own people. So who exactly were these leaders he was calling out? Well, you basically had two main power players. The Sadducees.

They were the rich, priestly elite. They held the power and ran the whole temple operation. And then you had the Pharisees.

These guys were super respected by the everyday person because they were known for their intense, meticulous devotion to God's law. You could say they were the religious influencers of their time. But what's really wild is just how small this group was.

According to the historian Josephus, there were only about 6,000 Pharisees in the whole country out of a population of well over half a million. So a tiny group, but their influence was absolutely massive. And that's exactly why Jesus aimed his critique right at them.

So what was his main beef? It all boiled down to this. Jesus claimed their religious devotion had become a performance. That it was all for show.

Something designed not to honor God, but to win public praise and lock in their own high status. And he wasn't vague about it. He pointed to specific things everyone could see.

Like they'd wear these little scripture boxes called phylacteries on their foreheads and arms, but they'd make them extra big so everyone would notice. They'd make the tassels on their cloaks super long for the same reason. They'd fight for the best seats at dinners and in the synagogues, and they demanded people call them by these fancy titles that put them on a pedestal.

And this just created such a stark contrast. While they were busy collecting all these honorifics like rabbi or father, Jesus was teaching this idea of radical equality. He told his followers, look, in God's kingdom, there's no spiritual pyramid.

You have one father. You are all just brothers and sisters. True leaders in his book were servants, not some kind of masters.

Now, Jesus didn't just show up and rant. No, this was a structured, formal takedown. Almost like a prosecutor laying out a case in court.

His arguments are known as the seven woes, and each one was a specific charge aimed at a specific failure. He went right down the list. He accused them of making converts who ended up in a worse spiritual state than they were.

He called them out for creating these complicated self-serving loopholes about making promises, which basically made it okay to be dishonest. He hit them hard for obsessing over tiny little rules while completely ignoring what he called the weightier matters of the law. And maybe the most damning charge of all was that they were spotless on the outside, but completely rotten on the inside.

And to make sure his points would be impossible to forget, Jesus used these incredibly powerful, witty, and sometimes downright shocking metaphors. He wanted every single person listening to get just how badly these leaders were missing the entire point of their faith. So check this out.

The law required giving a tenth of your agricultural produce to God, but the Pharisees took this to an insane extreme. They were literally debating whether you had to count out a tenth of the tiniest spices from your little herb garden. I mean, they were unbelievably careful about the small stuff.

But, and this is the huge but, here's the punchline. While they were so busy carefully counting out their dill seeds, they were completely blowing off the very heart of what the law was about. Justice for the poor, mercy for the hurting, and faithfulness to God and each other.

And this obsession with tiny details led to one of the most famous, and frankly savage, insults in all of history. He calls them blind guides and then paints this unforgettable and totally ridiculous picture. Now the genius here is that this is probably a pun in Aramaic, the language Jesus was speaking, where the words for gnat and camel sound a lot alike.

But the image is just absurd, right? You picture a religious leader painstakingly filtering his wine to get a tiny unclean gnat out, and then proceeding to gulp down a massive, unclean camel without even noticing. It's the perfect image for majoring in the minors. Okay, so if that first metaphor was kind of funny, this next one was anything but.

This image of a whitewashed tomb was designed to be deeply, deeply unsettling for everyone who heard it. See, here's the context you need. Tombs were painted bright white for two reasons.

One, to look nice and tidy, but two, as a warning sign. Because if you touched a corpse, even by accident, you became ritually impure for a whole week. So what Jesus is saying is, you guys look so pure and righteous on the outside, but you are so corrupt on the inside that anyone who gets close to you is spiritually contaminated by the death that's in you.

Oof. So after these intensely personal condemnations, Jesus then zooms out and pivots to this final, sweeping judgment. He delivers a devastating sentence, not just on the leaders themselves, but on the entire religious system they represented.

Now to really feel the shock of what he says next, you have to understand the temple. This was not just a building. For the Jewish people, it was the center of the universe.

It was a massive source of national pride, one of the architectural wonders of the ancient world. And for most people, it was seen as invincible, protected by God himself. And then, standing right there, probably in the shadow of this glorious structure, Jesus delivers this absolutely stunning prophecy.

To his audience, this would have sounded like him predicting the end of the world as they knew it. It was an unthinkable, terrifying declaration of total destruction. And here's the thing.

It happened. About 40 years later, what was considered one generation in those days, his words came true in the most horrific way imaginable. In the year 70 AD, the Roman legions crushed a Jewish revolt, sacked the city of Jerusalem, and burned and dismantled that magnificent temple stone by stone.

So why does this ancient feud still matter to us now? Well, the sources strongly suggest this whole account was saved and passed down not just as a history lesson, but as a timeless warning. And here's the key takeaway. The story isn't actually just about some first-century Pharisees.

It's a permanent challenge aimed at any person in any religious tradition in any time period who abuses their spiritual authority for personal gain, anyone who prioritizes the outward performance of religion over the inward reality of things like justice, mercy, and faithfulness. And really, that just leaves all of us with a pretty challenging question to think about. In our own lives, in the leaders we might follow, in the institutions we're a part of, how do we actually tell the difference between a genuine, life-giving faith and a hollow performance that's just looking the part?