

Rediscovering Jesus in the Jewish Gospels

Condemnation of the Scribes and Pharisees

Matthew 23 Lesson 43

On Tuesday before the Wednesday evening Last Passover Supper, Jesus gave His final judgment on the Shepherds of Israel who were responsible for identifying the Messiah's fulfillment of the prophecies and officially presenting Him to Israel.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel had likewise condemned the leaders of His day;

"All ye beasts of the field, come to devour, *yea*, all ye beasts in the forest. His watchmen *are* blind: they are all ignorant, they *are* all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber. *Yea, they are greedy dogs which can never have enough, and they are shepherds that cannot understand:* they all look to their own way, every one for his gain, from his quarter. Come *ye, say they*, I will fetch wine, and we will fill ourselves with strong drink; and tomorrow shall be as this day, *and* much more abundant." (Isaiah 56:9-12)

"My people hath been lost sheep: their shepherds have caused them to go astray, they have turned them away *on* the mountains: they have gone from mountain to hill, they have forgotten their resting place." (Jeremiah 50:6)

"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD unto the shepherds; Woe *be* to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks? Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: *but* ye feed not the flock. The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up *that which was* broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost; but with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them. And they were scattered, because *there is* no shepherd: and they became meat to all the beasts of the field, when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill: *yea*, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek *after them.*" (Ezekiel 34:2-6)

Jesus addressed the elders in the audience with the multitudes and His disciples. (23:1)

He showed respect for their office and authority under Moses. (Exodus 18:20-22; 19:6-8; 24:1,9-14)

He commanded the multitudes and His disciples to respect their authority. (23:2a)

The Mosaic Precedent Authorizing Israel's Elders

"And thou shalt teach them ordinances and laws, and shalt shew them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do. Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place *such* over them, *to be* rulers of thousands, *and* rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens" (Exodus 18:20, 21).

"Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel: and *there was* under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in *his* clearness. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel he laid not his hand: also they saw God, and did eat and drink. And the LORD said unto Moses, Come up to me into the mount, and be there: and I will give thee tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach them. And Moses rose up, and his minister Joshua: and Moses went up into the mount of God. And he said unto the elders, Tarry ye here for us, until we come again unto you: and, behold, Aaron

and Hur *are* with you: if any man have any matters to do, let him come unto them.” (Exodus 24:9-14)

“Moses went out, and told the people the words of the LORD, and gathered the seventy men of the elders of the people, and set them round about the tabernacle. And the LORD came down in a cloud, and spake unto him, and took of the spirit that was upon him, and gave it unto the seventy elders: and it came to pass, that, when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied.” (Numbers 11:24 -26)



Moses' Seat in the 1st Century Synagogue near Ein Geddi

The Problem of Disqualification

These leaders had violated all of these requirements:

“fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness” (Exodus 18:21).

The Predicament of Jesus' Followers (23:3b)

Jesus warned His followers that they had to obey God's authority bestowed upon the elders, despite the terrible example of these shepherds. They were forbidden to be like the hypocrites who “say and do not.”

The Principle Violation of the Elders (23:4-12)

- (23:4) Applying rules to others that they were unwilling to keep themselves.
- (23:5) Doing religious deeds to impress men

“make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments”

The wearing of phylacteries is based on some commands in Deuteronomy. Israel was told to love God and keep His commandments. In fact, they were to “thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes” (Deuteronomy 6:8). Today we Gentiles take the wording of these commands to be figurative meaning : whatever they do (with the hand) and whatever they think (with the head) is to be guided by the authority of God's Word.

“The word *phylactery* comes from a Greek word meaning ‘safeguard, protection, or amulet.’

The phylactery strapped to the arm is called the *shel yad* and has only one compartment; the one on the forehead, containing four compartments, is called the *shel rosh*. The letter shin (ש) is printed on either side of the head phylactery. Various rules govern the length and width of the connecting straps, the tying of the knots to secure the phylacteries, and the color of the boxes (black). Inside each phylactery are four passages from the Old Testament: (Exodus 13:1–10, 11–16; Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 11:13–21.) But, at some point—possibly as early as the fourth century BC—the Jewish rabbis began applying this verse literally, and the practice of tying phylacteries onto their arms and heads commenced.ⁱ

In like manner following the biblical principle came the custom of the “*mezuzah* (Hebrew: מְזוּזָה "doorpost") is a piece of parchment inscribed with specific Hebrew verses from the Torah, which Jews fix to the doorposts of their homes. **Bible Origin** - “And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:8,9).

Tefillin

teh-fil-lin

A mitzvah that binds your heart, your mind and your action together into a single wholeness, wrapped up inextricably with the One who spoke and the world came into being.



The Broad borders on their Garments, from κράσπεδον - kraspedon a fringe or tassel: - border, hem. The original practice is interpreted as a literal command of God. “Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they

make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue: And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the LORD, and do them; and that ye seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring” (Numbers 15:38,39; Deuteronomy 22:12).

Jesus was not condemning obedience to the Rabbinic tradition nor keeping the Biblical commandment literally. In fact, He told His Jewish disciples to do what these elders “bid you observe, that observe and do.” He was condemning the practice and motive of pride to impress men, not God thus trespassing the spiritual requirements set by Moses; “men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness.”

Therefore it is probable that Jesus put on these phylacteries in prayer at the Synagogue service or in morning and evening prayers if it was required by the Rabbis because to disobey those in the seat of Moses was to disobey Moses authority. If the Rabbis taught that wearing a prayer shawl and wrapping tefillin was a literal command then He would have not refused to obey then commanded His disciples to “bid you observe, that observe and do.” To disobey those in Moses seat would have been a violation of the Law therefore sin.

- (23:6-7) Jesus forbade seek recognition and honor for themselves
- (23:8-10) Jesus forbade human religious titles: Rabbi, Master, and Father

Prohibition by Jesus

- (23:8,10) “Be not ye called **Rabbi**” Only one is **Master** = Messiah/Christ
ῥαββί rhabbi - an official title: - Master, **Rabbi** καθηγητής kathēgētēs - a *guide*, a *teacher*: - **master**.

A.T. Robertson notes that καθηγητής kathēgētēs “occurs here only in the New Testament. It is found in the papyri for teacher (Latin, doctor). It is the modern Greek word for professor. While διδάσκαλος didaskalos = teacher [which Nicodemus called Jesus] in (John 3:2) represents *Rab*, καθηγητής kathēgētēs stands for the more honorable *Rabban*”ⁱⁱ ‘Moses’ seat (23:2) refers to Moses’ authority. To this day, Moses is called Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses, our teacher, our greatest teacher. Rabbis believe their authority comes from the 70 elders of Moses. Some Messianic Congregations refer to their Pastor as Rabbi and are in violation of this clear command. Churches who call their Priest or the Pope Father violate this among many other commandments.

- (23:9) “call no man your Father” Only one is Father = God
- (23:10) “Neither be called masters...for one is your master, even Christ”

The Herodians had recognized that Jesus differed greatly from the hypocritical Scribes and Pharisees. (22:16) “Master, we know that thou ...neither? carest thou for any *man*: for thou regardest not the person of men.” Jesus didn’t play political games to gain influence. The elders and Priests were compromised by Roman

influence, overcharging worshipers lining their pockets and paying off Rome. The Temple had become the Roman cash cow and the chief Priests were getting their cut as evidenced by the elaborate ornate homes unearthed in Jerusalem.

New Kingdom Model – Humility “But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.” (23:10-12) A.T. Robertson quotes a 12th century commentary of the exegete-scholar, Euthymius Zigabenus “Do not seek to be called” (Greek tense - ingressive aorist subjunctive), “if others call you this it will not be your fault.” Robertson says, “This is not far from the Master’s meaning.”ⁱⁱⁱ As opposed to the Scribes and Pharisees clawing their way to the top with recognition by superior titles, the best placement at banquets, elaborate robes and long prayers in public places, Jesus said that only self-abasement as opposed to self-exaltation will be rewarded by God. He addresses them as *hypocrites* (ὕποκριτής hupokritēs) *an actor under an assumed character stage player.*

Jesus gave seven woes to Judaism’s 1st-century shepherds who held actual positions “Moses’ seat.”

1. (23:13) “ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in *yourselves*, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.”
2. (23:14) “ye devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.”
3. (23:15) “ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.” A reference to Pharisaic recruitment rather than proselyting to Judaism. How is a convert to Pharisaism two fold more the child of Hell?

“Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching *for* doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, *as* the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.” (Mark 7:7-9) “For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen *it*, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.” (21:32).

4. (23:16-22) “ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor!”
“In the Hebrew way of thinking, an oath was a solemn appeal to the truth of an affirmation or promise. The Law of Moses established guidance concerning oaths in several situations: the loss of one’s personal property (Exodus 22:10-11), the finding of lost possessions (Leviticus 6:3), when a woman was suspected of unfaithfulness to her husband (Numbers 5:11-31), and the misuse of swearing and concealing the truth (Leviticus 5:1). All of these were ‘real’ (non-spiritual). The Old Testament also cautioned against swearing lightly with the solemn warning of Ecclesiastes 5:5, “Better is it that thou shouldst not vow, than that thou shouldst vow and not pay.” Gold therefore having ‘real’ value, it’s ‘loss’ would have an impact - makes the ‘oath’ valid. Where as the temple would have had no such ‘bind’ on the oath.”^{iv}
5. (23:23) “for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier *matters* of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”
6. (23:25,26) “for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and

excess. *Thou* blind Pharisee, cleanse first that *which is* within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.

Jesus referred to these customs “For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash *their* hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders. And *when they come* from the market, except they wash, they eat not. And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, as the washing of cups, and pots, brasen vessels, and of tables. He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with *their* lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.” (Mark 7:3-9).

Paul a former chief Rabbi of the Pharisees addresses these manmade ordinances. “Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? He then addressed that even the scriptural ordinances were temporary and incapable of perfecting and or cleansing the conscience.” (Colossians 2:20-22) “Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience; Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed *on them* until the time of reformation.” (Hebrews 9:9-10)

7. (23:27,28) “for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead *men’s* bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.”

The illustration is obvious, however these two comparisons side by side hint at the huge volume of writings regarding Pharisaic debates over dietary impurity laws concerning death. E.P, Sanders in his work *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah* devotes over a hundred pages to these matters.^v

(23:29-32) “because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.”

The chapter division for Mathew 24 should start after Matthew 23:35. The last 4 verses of Chapter 23 begin a new theme that will continue through Chapters 24 and 25 and will take at least two lessons to expound.

ⁱ <https://www.gotquestions.org/phylacteries.html>

ⁱⁱ A.T. Robertson, Word Pictures of the New Testament, Matthew And Mark, Kregal Publications, Grand Rapids, MI 2004, p 189

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid p 189

^{iv} <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/52242/which-gold-were-they-referring-to-in-matthew-2316>

^v Jewish Law From Jesus To The Mishnah, E. P. Sanders, Trinity Press International, Philadelphia,1937, pp 1166-282