

The Book of Matthew Study Guide

Matthew 23-24

23:1-12

This chapter might be considered a form of a sermon. It begins by identifying the audience as being the multitude and Yeshua's disciples. It does not state if the scribes (teachers of the Law) and Pharisees are present, although they are the subject of His criticism.

- v. 2 – We see the phrase “seat of Moses.” In the culture of the Ancient Near East, rulers sat down while administering their authority and power. It refers to the Pharisees having claimed the same authority as the one who recorded the Torah in the first place. According to Mat 15:1, they upheld the tradition of the elders, which later became known as the Oral Law, which was considered to be of equal authority to the written Law and was later recorded in the Mishnah, as part of the Talmud. That issue speaks to the relevance of the Oral Law for Messianic believers. Because the Pharisees had no authority in God's eyes and just claimed it for themselves, their teachings are therefore not binding for believers.
- vv. 3-7 – Yeshua identifies three ways that religious leaders (represented by the scribes and Pharisees) can act in ungodly ways:
 - Telling people to do one thing but personally practicing another (vv. 3,5).
 - Putting religious burdens on people (v. 4).
 - Drawing attention to themselves (vv. 5-7).
- vv. 8-10 – Yeshua then identifies three terms or titles that indicate an underlying inflation of self-significance.
 - Rabbi – lit. “my great one” (v. 8). The word does not fundamentally mean “teacher” (the primary Gr. term for teacher is *didaskalos*, and the Heb. equivalent is *moreh*).
 - Father – Gr. *pater* (v. 9).
 - Master (KJV) / Leader (NASB) – Gr. *kathegetes* (v. 10). This is the exact same word used in v. 8b where it is translated as “teacher” in the NASB). *Kathegetes* is a word with two parts. The first part shares the same root (*kata*, meaning “down”) as *kathedra*, meaning “seat.” The second part, derived from the verb *hegeomai*, meaning “to count.” So *kathegetes* literally means “one who counts from a seat” or what we might term today, “a chairman.” Notice how this word links with the criticism Yeshua had for the leaders who have “seated themselves in the chair of Moses in v. 2.

Altogether, these were titles of respect that the Pharisees accepted for themselves. This biblical truth is supported by the way they were preferred in the Talmud in *Makkot 24a* and *Ketubot 103b*:

“Whenever King Yehoshafat, King of Yehudah, saw a wise student, he would rise from his throne, embrace him and kiss him, and call him, ‘*Avi, Avi* (my father, my father),’ ‘*Rabbi, rabbi* (my great one, my great one),’ and ‘*Mari, mari* (my master, my master).’

What does it mean then, when Yeshua says, “do not be called Rabbi, Father, and Master?” It is not a universal prohibition against the use of specific terms as some claim (in such cases,

inconsistency is often manifested, for when “rabbi” and “father” are censured, rarely do you hear a condemnation of the third term, “chairman”). Instead it is a warning against self-adulation and assuming a place of authority that does not belong to you.

- vv. 11-12 – Yeshua contrasts these terms of greatness with that of servanthood. This informs leaders of congregations today that it is not your title that matters, and that your attitude about your importance can be a detriment. What truly matters is your humility.

23:13-36

Yeshua gives a series of woes (exclamations of grief) regarding hypocritical leaders:

- v. 13 – like someone with the key to a door but not using it, they had not entered the kingdom of heaven and thus they were unable to lead people there as well.
- v. 14 – taking advantage of widows.
- v. 15 – making deceived followers.
- vv. 16-22 – swearing oaths in order to give influence to your words.
- vv. 23-24 – keeping the minutiae of the Law while neglecting the most important aspects like justice, mercy and faithfulness.
- vv. 25-26 – this woe is a reflection on the way that they were meticulous about maintaining ritual purity, but were spiritually unclean, which is hypocrisy.
- vv. 27-28 – It was customary to paint tombs white just before people would make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover in order to avoid people inadvertently touching them and thus becoming ritually unclean. So this woe uses that imagery to convey the problem of appearing to be righteous but actually being unrighteous.
- vv. 29-33 – receiving honor but practicing harmful behavior.

We can no doubt find parallels today. We can also relate to the types of Pharisees described in the Talmud (remember, the text is not authoritative, but it does provide some insights, and in this case some rather candid ones):

- The shoulder Pharisee who carries his good deeds on his shoulders (equivalent to getting your name recognized in some manner) so he can be noticed by others.
- The wait-a-moment” Pharisee who wants you to wait so you can see him do a good deed.
- The bruised Pharisee who looks at the ground in order to avoid looking at a woman and ends up walking into a wall (being so legalistic that you end up hurting yourself).
- The reckoning Pharisee who commits a sin and then does a good deed to balance it out.
- Like a pestle in a mortar that has to do the hard work of grinding something up, the pestle Pharisee intentionally tries to appear humble, but wants others to know about it.
- The super saint Pharisee who asks, “What is my duty, so that I may do it? because he believes he has already done every other religious obligation.
- The obsessed Pharisee who is fearful that he has not met all of the obligations of the Law.

vv. 34-36 – Because of the error of those leaders, Yeshua declared that specific things would follow (note that He is the one that does the sending, which conveys the meaning of divine authority). He would send prophets, wise men and scribes (teachers of Torah), who would be rejected and persecuted to the point of death. The guilt of their blood falling upon the leaders is based on the Torah principle of equitable punishment. Thus such harmful leading would make them guilty of death. That says about the role of leadership that there are severe consequences for leaders who lead people astray.

23:37-39

This concluding statement depicts two great contrasts that are time-dependent. One the one hand, in Yeshua's day, Israel as a nation was spiritually desolate. On the other hand, v. 39 makes it clear that a day is coming when the nation will recognize Him as Messiah, and it will be concurrent with His return to earth (cf, Rom 11:26 – “all Israel shall be saved”).

24:1-2

The disciples point out something about the Temple structures and Yeshua uses that as an opportunity to foretell what would happen to all of those buildings (in 70 A.D.)

24:3-28

The disciples want to know when Yeshua will return, so gives them a series of signs that point to that day in what is called the Olivet Discourse because it was held on the Mt of Olives.

v. 5 – False Messiahs.

vv. 6-7 – Wars and rumors (lit. “hearing”) of wars. So people will both experience wars and just hear about them, which is consistent with the way that we do not normally see warfare with our own eyes today.

v. 7 – Famines and earthquakes (KJV “and pestilences” – not in the Greek text).

v. 8 – But those are only the beginning signs.

The final signs are described in the verses that follow.

v. 9 – Followers of Yeshua will face tribulation (KJV afflicted), death and hatred because of Yeshua.

v. 10 – Many will “fall away” (KJV “be offended”). This is the Gr. *skandalizo*, which literally means “stumble.” Those who have identified themselves as believers will betray and hate one another.

v. 11 – False prophets will deceive many people.

v. 12 – Because of lawlessness (KJV “iniquity”) – Gr. *anomia*, lit. “without law,” love will grow cold for many people. One might reasonably ask if abolishing the Torah is a factor in people becoming “lawless” and “unloving” (“Your shall love Adonai your God” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”).

vv 13-14 – Both verses employ the term, “the end.” The question, then, is “the end of what?” Verse 13 gives the sense that some people will endure the difficult events in the previous verses “to the end.” And they were previously identified in verse 8 as the final birth pangs. And concurrent with the end of the birth pangs, the mission of

taking the Gospel to the end of the earth will have been reached.

- v. 15 – The event that marks the time of the end is described as the “abomination of desolation.” The only other place that phrase is used is in the book of Daniel. In Daniel 11 he describes in detail the events that led to the story of Hanukkah, and in v. 31 he describes how Antiochus Epiphanes IV would exalt himself in the Temple and desecrate it (with idols and the sacrifice of a pig), calling it the “abomination of desolation.” Then in Daniel 12 the scene changes to the End Times and, according to verse 11, once again an “abomination of desolation” takes place. This implies that there will be a functioning temple at the very end, and a similar act of desecration to that of the Hanukkah story will take place. In other words, there will be an individual who despises Adonai and the Jewish people who carries out this abominable act. That is the event Yeshua is referring to in Mat 24:15.
- vv 16-20 – He then gives a strong suggestion to the Jewish people who are living in the land at that time – flee.
- vv 21-22 – The Great tribulation (*thilipsis*) will then occur, unlike anything in history. It will be so horrible that the days will be shortened as an act of mercy for the elect (believers who will go through the Great Tribulation).
- vv 23-26 – While the Great Tribulation is taking place, false Christs and false prophets will arise.
- vv 27-31 – The return of Yeshua is described with these characteristics:
- It will be sudden like lightning (27).
 - It will be in the midst of a great battle that will draw vultures to carcasses (28).
 - It will immediately be preceded by the heavenly signs that were foretold by the prophet Joel (3:15) – the sun and the moon and the stars will not be seen from the perspective of people on earth.
 - As prophesied by Daniel (7:13), He will appear in the clouds (30).
 - It will be accompanied by the blowing of a heavenly shofar by angels (31; see also 1 Cor 15:52; 1 Thes 4:15-17).
 - It will gather the elect from around the world (31).
 - It will be the time of Israel’s salvation (30). Notice that “all the tribes of the earth will mourn.” That will include the “tribe” (Gr. *phule*) of the Jewish people. It will be the fulfillment of Zech 12:10 –

“I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn.”

24:32-41

Yeshua then deals with the disciples’ question “when shall these things be?” in other ways:

- vv 32-35 – In light of the immediate context of Matthew 24, it seems reasonable to conclude that in the parable of the fig tree, Yeshua was simply saying that when you see the

signs He has described, the end is near. But the parable can also be a reference to the rebirth of the nation of Israel, since Israel is compared to a fig tree in Scripture (Isa 28:4; Jer 8:13). This latter interpretation is consistent with what is conveyed in v. 34 where “this generation” can refer to the Jewish people as a nation (*genea* is derived from the root, *genos*, meaning “kind, offspring, nation”). Thus it would be a reference to Jer 31:34-36 that promises God’s preservation of the nation of Israel as long as the sun, moon and stars are shining.

v. 36 – In spite of the signs, only the Father knows the exact day and hour.

vv 37-41 – And in spite of the signs, people will still be unprepared for His coming, just “like the days of Noah.”

24:42-51

Yeshua concludes by giving a purpose for knowing these things. He makes it plain that we need to be doing the Lord’s work, feeding the people He entrusts to us spiritually and caring for them, right up to the moment He comes.