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Woe to Scribes and Pharisees (Part 1)



The Life and Teachings of Christ - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg speaks about Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew chapter 23, highlighting their rejection of the truth and hypocritical behavior. He notes that the scribes and Pharisees may have acknowledged Jesus but were intimidated and put up stumbling blocks to prevent his teachings from being accepted. Gregg also discusses the misuse of vows and oaths by the religious leaders, who used them to deceive and manipulate others. Overall, Gregg emphasizes the importance of upholding biblical values and not putting up roadblocks to prevent the spread of God's truth.

Transcript

Turn to Matthew chapter 23, and we'll take what remains of this chapter from where we left off before. That means we start at verse 13. Matthew 23 and verse 13.

Just by way of reminder, the reason I broke the chapter where I did in the last session was because it is at this point that Jesus turns from talking about the scribes and Pharisees to the multitude and his disciples, to speaking to them, addressing his words to their face. It is also at this point that the material changes in terms of what we have confirmation for in the other Gospels. The material before this has some confirmation in Mark chapter 12, which is the parallel to it, whereas after verse 13, the parallels are in Luke chapter 11.

Actually, some of the material that follows here is found in Mark also, but it's not found in... It's not really found in the form of a woe to the scribes and Pharisees, but rather a statement about them. But that's the main difference between the first 12 verses of the chapter and the remaining verses, is that Jesus in the first 12 is warning his disciples and his listeners not to be deceived by the religious externalism of the scribes and Pharisees, but to look beyond that and not to imitate them, not to think that their religion is the thing that pleases God, and not to honor them with the titles such as they love to hear. They look for honor, but basically you shouldn't give it to them because they're unworthy of it.

But now he begins to speak to them, and for the most part we'll find the parallels to the

remaining portion of Matthew 23 in Luke 11. And we read that in our last session. We'll have occasion to look at it occasionally here to see just the minor differences at times in the way that Luke's version expresses a thought in the way that Matthew's version does.

But at verse 13, it says, For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, or one convert, and when he has won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

Woe to you blind guides who say whoever swears by the temple it's nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he's obliged to perform it. Fools and blind, for which is greater the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And whoever swears by the altar it is nothing, they say, but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it. Fools and blind, for which is greater the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore he who swears by the altar swears by it and by all things on it, and he who swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it, and he who swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits on it.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith, or faithfulness, another rendering of the same Greek word. These you ought to have done without leaving the others undone. Blind guides who strain at a gnat and swallow a camel, woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence.

Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like whitewashed tombs, which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. Even so, you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous and say, If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves, that you are the sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up then the measure of your father's guilt.

Serpents, brood of vipers, excuse me, serpents, brood of vipers, how can you escape the condemnation of hell? Therefore indeed I send you prophets, wise men and scribes. Some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Barakai, of whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her, how often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. See, your house is left to you desolate, for I say to you, you shall see me no more till you say, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Now there's really two parts of this section.

There's the part which is the principal part where he's pronouncing his woes upon the scribes and Pharisees. But then there's the latter part where he makes a prediction. Actually verses 34 through 39, he predicts that that generation will suffer the consequences of a long history of rejecting God's messengers and shedding the blood of innocent martyrs and that that generation is going to see the accumulative punishment of the whole racial history of the Jews who had killed all the prophets before and they were not going to see him anymore until they could embrace him as the one who comes in the name of the Lord, that is until they could become Christians.

He says in verse 3, their house has become desolate, meaning the temple. So he's announcing the desolation of the temple. In the next chapter in the Olivet Discourse, he speaks of the destruction of the Jerusalem and of the temple as the abomination that makes desolate.

And in Luke's parallel in Luke 21, he says, when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, know that the desolation of it is near. So the desolation of Jerusalem, the desolation, the abandonment by God of Jerusalem and its temple is here announced. And then Jesus apparently goes out and never again after this point went into the temple.

Now, I say he never went into the temple again after this point, because that would agree with both Mark and Matthew's version. Luke does mention sometime after the Olivet Discourse that Jesus is doing some teaching in the temple. But the probability is that it's that Luke is mentioning it out of chronological order and that Jesus did go out of the temple for the last time here and never went back in.

Earlier in his ministry, he had said to them, my father's house. It's supposed to be a house of prayer, speaking of the temple. But his ministry now near its end, even a week earlier, he had called it his father's house.

But now he says, your house. He doesn't even own the temple anymore. God's no longer there.

Their sins and their rejection of the truth has caused God to disown the temple. It's no longer Jesus' father's house. It's now their house.

Your house is left to you desolate, he says in verse 38. You can have it. He says, God's not going to inhabit this house any longer.

It's not his, it's yours. And it's not going to last long anyway. Now, let's talk about, first of

all, what is recorded first in this sequence, that is, his woes upon the scribes and Pharisees.

And woe is just the opposite pronouncement of a beatitude. A beatitude is a statement that starts with, blessed are you, or blessed are those who do such and such a thing. And the opposite of a beatitude is a woe to those, or woe to you, who do such and such a thing.

Now, we know that Jesus spoke in beatitudes frequently. Not only in the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount did he have a series of beatitudes, but also at other times he'd say, if you, he'd say things like, if you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. That's a beatitude.

Or when a woman said, blessed is the womb that bore you and the breast that nursed you. He said, ah, more blessed are those who hear the word of God and do it. That's a beatitude also, blessed are those who hear the word of God and do it.

There are a number of beatitudes that Jesus uses. It's his way of expressing what persons are to be envied. What persons really have God's favor and blessing, so that in the final analysis, whether they are envied in this life or not, they certainly are the ones who have occasion to be envied, because they have the best blessing of all.

That is the approval of God. Now the opposite of a blessed remark, of a beatitude, is a woe remark. We know that because in Luke chapter 6, which gives us Luke's version of the beatitude at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, beginning around verse 20, we find Jesus comes down from a mountain where he's been praying all evening, all night I should say, and he begins to speak to his disciples and he gives four beatitudes.

Blessed are you poor. Blessed are you who are hungry. Blessed are you who weep.

Blessed are you when men persecute you. But then he follows that with the flip side. He says, woe to you rich.

Woe to you who are full. Woe to you who are laughing now. Woe to you when all men speak well of you.

It's obvious that each of these woes is just the reverse of each of the beatitudes he gives. Blessed are the poor. Woe to the rich.

Blessed are you who are hungry. Woe to you who are full. Blessed are you who are weeping.

Woe to you who are laughing. And blessed are you who are persecuted. Woe to you when all men speak well of you.

The structure of that passage makes it clear that Jesus intends a statement of woe to be

just the opposite of a statement of blessing. So if the persons upon whom beatitudes are spoken are the special recipients of God's blessing, then those upon whom or over whom woes are pronounced are the special recipients of God's cursing. And woe means something like I wouldn't want to be you.

Woe to you means you have a great deal of woe to look forward to. Just like a blessed are you means you have a great deal of blessing to look forward to. Woe is of course misery.

So as he has a series of beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, he has now a series of woes for those who are rejecting his message. The first of them in verse 13, woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men.

For you neither go in yourselves nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. Now, the scribes and Pharisees exercise their free choice with reference to Jesus' teaching. They chose not to follow.

They chose not to accept it. Men have that choice. They have to live ultimately with the consequences of that choice and they don't have any choice about those consequences.

If they choose to reject Christ, the inevitable consequences they will not be able to avoid. They will of course be damned. But they do have the right to make a choice and they did so.

But what Jesus is complaining about is not only have they made the criminal choice of rejecting the kingdom of God for themselves, but they are also preventing other people from doing so. How so? Well, you might recall in the Gospel of John about twice, it tells us that the Jewish leaders had said that anybody who acknowledged Jesus would be put out of the synagogue. And while there were many who acknowledged Jesus anyway, there were some who were just sufficiently intimidated by that not to take an open stance in his favor.

The parents of the man born blind in John chapter 9, they wouldn't speak up for Jesus although they knew he had healed their son. They wouldn't say anything about it because they didn't want to be put out of the synagogue. Later on in John chapter 12, it tells us that many of the priests actually became secret believers in Christ, but they kept it a secret because they didn't want to be put out of the synagogue.

And it says they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God. Unfortunately, not everybody is courageous about truth. Some people might be inclined toward the truth, but it doesn't take much to turn them away.

Jesus talked about seed that was sown on shallow ground. And it was like people who received the word cheerfully at first, but when persecution or tribulation arose because

of the word, they quickly fell away. There are some who simply will not continue if they are opposed.

And the Pharisees and the scribes were opposing Jesus and trying to place sanctions upon those who would follow him. And there were some who followed him anyway, but there were just a certain class who would not allow themselves to follow him, would not allow themselves to espouse his cause or to come into the kingdom of God, not because they saw it to be wrong or didn't believe him, but simply because they couldn't allow themselves to because they were too cowardly. That cowardice, of course, is their fault.

But those who put the stumbling block before them also have fault in this. Remember what Jesus said in the opening of Luke 17. In Luke 17, 1, Jesus said it's inevitable that stumbling blocks or offenses will come, but woe to him by whom they come.

It's better for him to put a millstone around his neck and be thrown into the sea and killed that way than to stumble or offend one of these little ones who believe. So Jesus indicated that people like the Pharisees who prevented others from coming to the kingdom have a very strict condemnation. And so that's the first woe he pronounces on them here.

It's also found in Luke 11.52. This woe that's pronounced in verse 13 has its parallel in Luke 11.52. And there it's pronounced just on the lawyers. But it's obviously the lawyers, many of them were Pharisaic in their religious orientation. They were Pharisees whose occupation was that of lawyers and scribes.

This reminds us a bit of one of Aesop's fables. Sometimes actually biblical truths are found in pagan stories and legends and so forth. But one of Aesop's fables told about a dog.

It's called the dog in the manger. And the dog would position himself between the cows and the feeding trough, the manger. And every time the cows would come near to eat the hay, the dog would snap at them and bark at them and chase them off.

And one of the cows commented to the other, he said, this dog is... I don't remember the exact words of course. Not every day that you can remember quotes that cows say. But the cow said something like, you know, this dog is so unreasonable.

He doesn't want to eat the hay himself. And yet he forbids us who want to from eating it. And it's the same idea that Jesus said about the scribes and Pharisees.

They didn't want to eat the meal in the kingdom of God that Jesus was dishing out. But there were some who would have liked to, but they were like the dog in the manger, driving those away who were interested. Of course they were not successful in driving everyone away, but apparently Jesus indicated that some were driven away, apparently successfully, by these.

Now, given the Calvinistic doctrine of irresistible grace, this raises some interesting questions. If we were to assume Calvinism to be true, then we would have to say that anyone that was driven away by the intimidation of the scribes and Pharisees was not elect anyway. And even if there had been no scribes and Pharisees, these people would have rejected Christ.

Because anybody who is truly elect, and according to Calvinism only those who are elect can be saved or will be saved. So anybody who is truly elect would inevitably be saved regardless of resistance. There is this thing called irresistible grace of God that draws them irresistibly even over all the hurdles and obstacles.

And Calvinism would have to say, I guess, that only those disciples that ignored the intimidation and came to Christ were the ones who were elect. And I would have to agree, only those who came to Him really proved themselves to be elect. But where I would disagree is, they would have to say that those that were driven off by the scribes and Pharisees wouldn't have come anyway.

But if that were true, I don't really see how Jesus' remark really would have any teeth to it. He's complaining that there are some who want to come in. You don't allow those who are into it to go in.

There are some people who are actually coming in. But the scribes and Pharisees prevent them, which suggests that though God's grace does draw them in, it does not necessarily irresistibly draw them in. There are some who, though they are being drawn, can be hindered by certain factors.

Lack of courage, for one, is the case here. The next woe, in verse 14, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.

This is also spoken against the scribes in Mark 12, in verse 40. It has this parallel, Mark 12, 40. This devouring of widows' houses probably means that they, in one way or another, by their policies, their religious policies, have managed to bilk helpless old women, and maybe gullible old women.

Con artists forever have targeted old women, widows, and so forth. In fact, even the injustice done against society by the persons in Old Testament times. The prophets complained mostly about people who were taking advantage of widows and orphans.

Because it's generally understood that a widow and an orphan don't have a man in the house to look out for their interests. They don't have a man to defend them against the exploitation and deception of other men. And therefore they are more vulnerable.

It's not exactly clear how they were devouring widows' houses here, but it's very possible that by perhaps going around to widows and asking for special donations for

special projects and making it sound as if there is some obligation before God for them to do this, that they were getting more of the widows' money than they would have gotten without this deception. It's possible that in some way or another they were trying to lay claim to the inheritance that widows had left to them by their husbands. We don't know exactly how it was done then, but we can see how it's done now.

Television evangelists, not all of whom are guilty of what I'm about to say, but it is well known that the support for most Christian television comes from widows' pensions. Have you ever watched television evangelists and wondered who in the world would support these guys? I don't know if you've got the same problems culturally with them that I do. I think, who in the world would support these obvious charlatans in many cases? I mean, with their plastic hair and plastic faces and plastic smiles and, you know, there's not a thing about them that looks genuine.

But they're appealing to a certain cultural group. They dress for and wear their hair for and talk in such a way as to appeal to women of an older generation than ours. I mean, I can't imagine anyone in my generation finding these people appealing or even mistaking them for being genuine.

But old ladies, you know, the Lawrence Welk generation, they're the ones who like that kind of stuff. They're the ones who fall for that kind of stuff, who like those styles. And many of these television evangelists and stuff have just doctored their presentation to appeal to old ladies.

And the reason for that is, studies have shown, the vast majority of support sent into media ministries comes from old ladies. Widows in particular, giving from their limited fixed income usually. They're living on some pension that their husband left them.

And they don't have a husband there to tell them, you know, not to be taken in. Now, I don't mean to insult you ladies, as if to say women are more gullible than men. But women are more gullible than men.

I don't mean that as an insult. I really don't. That might be to their credit.

Maybe women are more innocent than men. That might not be the case in the next generation of old ladies, because so many of the old ladies of next year were the young ladies this year who went out and got in the business world and found out what charlatans are. And, you know, I mean, women who are out there in the business world now, which is not where I think they should be, by the way, but I mean, the ones who are there, no doubt will find out first-hand what men have found out for generations.

And that is, there's a lot of crooks out there. In former generations, women stayed home with their children and so forth, and they just didn't see an awful lot of con artists. And, therefore, they would tend to be more gullible when one approached them by a

television or something like that.

Whereas men, I think, because of their dealings out in the world and their having seen craftiness and cunning and deception in the business place, you know, almost all their adult lives, they tend perhaps to be a little less gullible to those kinds of fraudulent things. And that's why these guys on TV get a lot more money from old women who don't have husbands than from anyone else. One of the most terrible things, I think, is that a lot of these televangelists deceive these old ladies.

They act as if, you know, they got to get so much money by this time tomorrow or else they're going to go off the air, which, by the way, might not be such a great tragedy. But that's another deception they give, that if they go off the air, the kingdom of God is going to collapse because, I mean, this evangelist is the only one who's really got the word of God for today and really is effective. A lot of organizations give false information about how many orphans they're feeding or how many people are being converted to their crusades.

I remember an evangelist, a fairly well-known evangelist, not like Billy Graham or anything like that, but a reasonably well-known young evangelist came to San Jose one year and his crusades went on and on because there was something like a revival happening at this church that he was preaching at. It went on for, I forget, 21 days or 40 days or something. It went on a long time.

And they even began to broadcast his sermons live on a Christian radio station because there was said to be a great revival there. And some of my friends went over to San Jose because we lived in Santa Cruz at the time to go to his meetings. And every night on the radio you'd hear him saying, the place is packed, there's standing room only.

And, you know, last night we packed this place out so much that they had to turn away thousands at the door and stuff. And yet friends of mine who were there said, no, there are a lot of seats empty. But they weren't turning anyone away at the door.

But, you know, there's a lot of liars out there who are trying to make their ministry seem more significant than it is to make it sound like, you know, if anything happened to me, just think of all the work of God that would just go undone. And something's going to happen to my ministry if you don't give it to me right now, you know. And then there's these guys who get up and say, God has told me that there's four people in this room who could afford to give \$1,000.

And God doesn't want you to leave until you've given it because he's putting his finger on you right now, you know. And God has told me he's singled you out. There's three of you out there.

Well, of course, in a large crowd of people, there's probably hundreds of people who

could, if they really wanted to tighten their belts, contribute \$1,000, and every one of them, I mean, if they're gullible, and apparently enough people are to keep these guys on the road, every one of those could be saying, well, I must be one of those three, you know. I know I can afford it. I guess if I really, if I give up, you know, that vacation I was going to have, or if I, you know, if I don't buy my kid new Levis this year, you know, I guess maybe I'm one of the ones, you know.

And people do this kind of deceptive stuff. It's an abomination. And who they mainly built is widows.

In a sense, they are devouring widows' estates, widows' houses, and many of them aren't spending the money on anything like what they're advertising that they're spending it on. I have inside information about that from some organizations, and I know it's too common. I'm not going to say all organizations do that.

Of course, I don't believe that's the case. But there's a lot of that that goes on. And I'm not saying any of this to make you distrust everybody who's in the media, but I'm saying that such people stand condemned by these words of Jesus because these people invariably make long prayers for a show.

And yet Jesus said their hypocrisy is that they're dishonest in their private dealings. They're even dishonest in their ministry. And they built the widows of their estates, and then they act so spiritual when they're on TV, or when they're praying in front of a group, they make long prayers.

And Jesus says, therefore, you will receive greater condemnation. What makes their condemnation greater? Their condemnation would be great enough if they just robbed widows' houses, if they were just common burglars. They'd have condemnation enough, but their condemnation is the greater because they mask their burglary by a religious facade of making long prayers and pretending to be religious.

And there's probably no crook worse than a religious crook because, of course, these people quote themselves in the appearance of religion in order to remove suspicion from their target, from their mark. And that makes their condemnation all the worse because they now are exploiting God's people's sensitivities. They are acting as if they're acting in the name of God.

They're bringing God into this deal and bringing reproach on His name. And that makes their condemnation the worse. You might remember that in James chapter 3, James said that teachers have the stricter or greater condemnation, greater judgment, stricter judgment.

And that's sort of similar to what Jesus says here about the scribes and Pharisees. Teachers, because they teach in the name of Christ, if they deceive or if they get it

wrong, if they don't teach truly, their judgment will be worse than people who just had wrong beliefs and never taught them. And so he says to the Pharisees the same kind of thing, that because of their religious facade and the air of authority that they carry themselves with, their robbery and their dishonesty and their injustice in their dealings is going to weigh more heavily against them than it otherwise would because they are using God as sort of their front for their thievery.

Verse 15. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, which is, of course, a convert from a Gentile faith into Jewish faith. And when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourself.

Now, what does this say about missions? What does this say about a theology of missions? Well, one thing it says is that not all missionary effort is desirable. If you are a son of hell yourself, don't go and multiply him. Don't go overseas and make more sons of hell.

Now, I can't say that I know a lot of missionaries that I describe as sons of hell. But I do know some missionaries that are pretty bad examples of what a Christian is supposed to be and some of them may well be sons of hell if the truth were known. I can't judge.

God knows. But I know of missionaries who had to leave the field because of child molesting and other dishonesty because of scandals, sexual scandals they get involved with. In the countries they go to, money mismanagement due to dishonesty, not just incompetence.

I know of cases of all these things, of missionaries who are going overseas and making converts but they themselves do not give evidence of being exactly the kind of thing you want to reproduce. And the Pharisees, we don't know to what degree or through what means they went out and made proselytes. I don't know of any specific cases of the Pharisees actually going to other countries to win Gentiles.

Actually there's a sense in which the Jews were supposed to be doing that. In a way they weren't. They were supposed to be bringing Gentiles to the knowledge of God.

But what few Jews had shown any interest in the Gentiles at all did so not promoting the knowledge of God but their own corrupt religious character and their own corrupt religion is what they multiplied and it's better not to multiply it. A.W. Tozer in a book called Paths to Power, one of his chapters was called No Revival Without Reformation. And he was saying, everywhere I go I hear people talking about the need for revival.

We just need an old-fashioned revival. We need for God to bring more revival into the churches. And by that, usually they mean revival means more numbers of people being converted and coming into the church.

And Tozer said, you know, we don't need a revival of what we got now. We don't need

more of this. What we see in the churches right now is pretty compromised.

It's pretty worldly. And revival invariably reproduces more of the kind of, you know, the person who's doing the preaching. And he said, what the church needs before it needs revival is reformation.

It needs to get its act together. It needs to get holy. It needs to get serious.

It needs to get back to the Bible. Then we can ask for revival because God can bless that. God can honor that.

But he said, there's some parts of the world where revival is happening. Revival of Islam and revival of lots of other things. But that's not a good thing.

Because a false religion, the worst disaster could happen for the kingdom of God is for a false religion to experience revival. And much of what goes under the name of Christianity in our day is a false religion. I don't mean to say that people in the churches are, you know, to a man, not real Christians.

I believe there are true Christians in virtually every denomination and virtually every church. But the problem is many Christians are poorly discipled, poorly trained and poor examples of what Christianity is supposed to be. And if these people are sent out to bring more in, then the ones they bring in are going to, of course, look at them as the norm.

And it's going to reproduce more children of hell or more, at least, poor examples of what Christianity is supposed to be. When I first visited the Christian community that Phil Mason came from in Australia, it was called the True Vine Christian Community. I was impressed by the fact that they had 300, approximately 300 adults, recent converts out of the New Age and hippie movement, mostly.

But these people seem to be full on, completely dedicated Christians. They're sold out disciples. I mean, they were intolerant of sin in their lives and so forth.

And they just seem to be such a potent movement, like a real revival of true Christianity going on. It appeared to me. And I remember talking to the pastor and saying, well, I come from a church in California that's got 300 people.

You've got 300 people. Our church has 300 people. I said, I would say that the sold out disciples of Jesus in our church, I was an elder in the church, so I had some knowledge of what the demographics of our church was.

I'd say at the most we might have 50 in our congregation of 300. We might have 50 who are really sold out for God, uncompromising Christians. And by the way, that's a pretty high density, but we had a reasonably good church in that respect.

And I said, why do we have 50 out of 300 and you seem to have 300 out of 300 that are sold out Christians? He said, well, he said, for one thing, most of the people in our group have never been in a church before they came here. So they have no other model of Christianity but that which they're exposed to when they come, when they get saved here. They got saved there and their first impressions of Christianity are what they see there.

And they say, we don't tolerate any standard other than the biblical standard. Therefore, the only standard they ever see is that of discipleship. And they either embrace it or they don't embrace Christianity at all.

They don't embrace some subnormal Christianity. He said that if you have a church where some people are espousing a high standard, others are espousing a low, the tendency is going to be for people who are converted to embrace the lowest standard that's considered acceptable. And therefore, you're going to have, you know, not quite the same result.

Now, I don't know whether he had the right answer to my question, but it sounded right to me. It still seems right to me. The sad thing is there's certain species of Christianity today that aren't very good Christianity.

They don't resemble much of what the Bible calls Christianity. And revival in these churches, if revival means lots of people being converted and brought in to be trained in their Christian life under these churches that aren't doing very good with what they've got already, that wouldn't be all that good. Because it is possible for a missionary to make more children of hell like himself.

That's what the scribes and Pharisees did. Now, their evangelistic zeal perhaps was impressive to some. Look at these guys going into all the world to tell people about our God.

But Jesus was not impressed. There were guys going out in the mission field who shouldn't be there because they were not representing God correctly. And I think that even among true Christians who are on the mission field, people who we could not say are their children of hell, many of them are not very good examples of what Christianity is.

Many of them are very petty and immature and territorial and have a number of relationship problems. And I don't find anywhere in the Bible that God, through his church, sent out in the book of Acts any missionaries who were not pretty mature, pretty consistent Christians. Paul and Barnabas were like the best the church of Antioch had to give and the other ones who got sent out to reproduce more.

And they produced good churches for the most part because they were good seeds

themselves. And so I think we need to consider things like this, what Jesus said, when we consider missionary theology, missionary philosophy, because Jesus wasn't impressed with evangelistic zeal when it only produced more of the same kind of person as the one doing evangelizing and that person was substandard, subnormal. And we need to improve the standard of the persons that are doing evangelizing.

Okay, let's go on to verse 16. Woe to you, blind guides, who say, Whoever swears by the temple, it's nothing. But whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he's obliged to perform it.

They also said in verse 18, Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing. But whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he's obliged to perform it. Now this tells us something that we might not otherwise know about what the Jews had done with the whole system of taking oath.

You remember in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew chapter 5, Jesus said, don't swear at all. He told his disciples, don't even take oaths. Now, why did he say that? Many people have just taken that as a law for Christians, don't ever make any oaths, although if that was taken consistently, and some do take it fairly consistently, by the way, you could never swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God, in court, because that's taking an oath.

In fact, there'd be questions about whether you could even take a wedding vow. Because that's an oath. And when Jesus said, don't swear at all, we need to ask ourselves, what lay behind that command? Is there something intrinsically immoral in the swearing of oaths? The answer's got to be no, there's nothing intrinsically immoral about oaths.

And the reason there isn't is because God allowed and commanded oaths to be taken. In the Old Testament, he said, you shall swear by the name of Jehovah, your God. And don't swear by any false gods in the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, oaths are things committed to God by a vow were to be performed. And if vows and oaths were themselves something evil, then there'd be no reason why God would have made so much provision for them in the Old Testament, even commanded them to be made in his name. And if they're not immoral, then why would Jesus forbid them? That's the question.

Well, I think this passage is that which sheds light on that question. We see from this passage what the Pharisees and scribes, the rabbis, had done with this whole practice of oath-taking. You see, an oath stood in the place of a contract in our modern society.

If you have to trust somebody in some exchange of trust, for instance, if you bind something from someone you can't pay cash and you intend to pay them in five payments or a hundred payments or whatever it's going to be, of course they're going to

want that in writing. They're going to want a contract. They're going to want you to be legally bound by something they can prove that you've committed to it, because who knows, that you might not come back with the second payment or any of the rest of the payments.

They don't want to surrender the merchandise to you unless they're guaranteed that they're going to get the payment from you. And since they may not know you from Adam, they're not just going to trust you because you have a nice face. They're going to want it in writing.

Now, in biblical times, instead of written contracts, people were bound in the same way by making oaths. If I said to you, give me your car and I'll pay you ten payments over the next year and pay it off. And you say, well, I don't know if I trust you.

How do I know you'll make the payments? Well, I promise. Well, how do I know that you're telling the truth? Well, I swear by God. Oh, okay, you wouldn't do that if you were telling the truth.

That was the assumption. The fear of God was prevalent, it was assumed, throughout Israel enough to guarantee that if someone swore by Jehovah, that he wouldn't break his oath, because by swearing by Jehovah, you were incurring... First of all, you were pleading the virtue of Jehovah on your behalf. You're saying, he's standing behind what I'm saying.

He knows it's true. God is my witness. When Paul in some places says, God is my witness, that's an oath in the name of God.

He's saying, God knows I'm telling the truth and I wouldn't bring his name into this situation if I weren't telling the truth. And so swearing by something greater than yourself, as the book of Hebrews tells us, and that's in Hebrews chapter 6, I believe, was a practice that ended all disputes about things. It was just sort of like signing a contract.

Now, there's nothing wrong with signing a contract and there wasn't really anything wrong with oaths, per se. Still aren't. Except that what the Jews had done, the legal experts, the scribes and the Pharisees, had worked out a whole series of different kinds of oaths that people might take, some of which were binding and some were not binding.

The trouble is, it took a legal expert to know which ones were and which were not. It's just like modern law where there's all kinds of things that a tricky lawyer can provide loopholes for somebody who appears to be doing something honest but the way the law is actually written, he's not caught, he got away with something because the law doesn't quite say it that way. And legal loopholes are, lawyers have always been good at this.

And the scribes and Pharisees had come up with loopholes which would enable them to make vows, thus incurring the trust of the person who they made the vow to, but not to

keep them because the vow they used, unbeknownst to their victim, was not a binding vow. They said, I swear by the temple. But then they could break their vow because swearing by the temple in their system was not binding.

I didn't swear by the gold of the temple. Look it up, you'll find out. The rabbis have said that if you swear by the gold of the temple, it's binding, but if you just swear by the temple, it's not binding, so I got you there.

I only swear by the temple and therefore I don't have to keep my word. It's basically what they're saying. Likewise with the altar.

A Pharisee might say, I swear by the altar. And then when he doesn't keep his word, someone says, hey, I thought you swore that you'd do this. Oh, I didn't swear by the gift on the altar.

Look that up, it's in the books. It's not the altar, it's the gift you have to swear by to be binding. It's not binding if you only swear by the altar.

That's exactly what they were doing. Jesus says so. That's what they said.

In other words, a system of oath-taking, which originally served as a means of guaranteeing somebody's honesty and integrity, had become just another way of deceiving people and ripping people off. And so Jesus says, hey, just give it up. Don't even take an oath, just tell the truth.

That doesn't mean that it's wrong to take an oath if you are being honest, but you don't need one. If you're an honest person, you can just say, I affirm that this is true and I'm an honest person and I don't need to swear to prove it to you. Because I consider myself bound by my word whether I have an oath before God or not.

Because everything I say, I say in the presence of the Lord. I'll have to give account for every word I speak. I don't need an oath to keep me honest.

That's the way it should be, at least, for Christians. Now, Jesus said, these people are fools and blind. He says, you don't think it's binding to swear by the temple, but it is binding to swear by the gold in the temple, as if the gold is more important than the temple.

Which is greater, the temple, or, excuse me, the gold, or the temple that sanctifies the gold? Gold is just ordinary gold until it was put into the temple. And then it became sacred gold. The temple itself and the association of the gold with the temple is that which made that gold different than any other gold.

It sanctified it. It made it holy. It made it set apart.

The gold earrings that the average citizen was wearing was not sacred gold. It was just

an earring, just for private use. But once the gold was plated onto the stones of the temple, or used for making the chair of them, or something like that, it became sacred.

It was the temple itself that sanctified the gold and made it different than any other gold. Likewise, the gift in the altar. They said, swear by the altar.

That's not binding, but swear by the gift is. He says, what's greater? The gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Sanctified means makes it holy. A lamb was just an ordinary lamb until it was offered to God.

When it was put on the altar, it was no longer a common lamb. It was sanctified. It was holy unto the Lord.

It couldn't be used for anything else. There was a law or a statement in Exodus 29.37. Exodus 29.37 said, whatever touches the altar is holy. Exodus 29.37. Whatever touches the altar is holy.

That means any animal that was placed on the altar in the tabernacle ceased to be an ordinary animal. It was now separated. It was now sanctified.

It was now set apart from the Lord and could never be used for anything else ever again. It was now set apart from all other lambs by being separated unto the Lord. So Jesus said, what's more important? The gift, that is the animal itself, or the altar that makes the gift holy? Contact with the altar is that which makes the gift special.

What he's saying is, you guys even have your values wrong. You've got the gold and the gift more important than the temple and the altar. But that's not the only place you're going wrong.

He says in verse 20, Therefore he who swears by the altar swears by it and all things on it. He who swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. That is by God.

So if you thought you could swear by the altar and not by the gift of the altar and you wouldn't be bound, forget it. You swear by the altar, you're swearing by it and the gift on it. If you swear by the temple, you think you're not bound, but if you swear by the temple, you're swearing by God who dwells in it and you are certainly bound by your oath.

And he who swears by heaven, by the way, the Jews often would swear by heaven because, as you know, because they didn't want to use the name of God in vain, they'd sometimes replace the word God with heaven. Heaven bless you, you know, I've sinned against heaven and in your sight the prodigal son, the kingdom of heaven for the kingdom of God. So often, instead of saying I swear by God, they say I swear by heaven.

And they would think that swearing by heaven absolved them. You see, the whole

reason for replacing the word God with the word heaven in their usage was they didn't want to use the name of God in vain. But you know what it means to take the name of the Lord in vain? The primary meaning of that commandment in the Ten Commandments, the third commandment, you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, you know what it means.

It means you shall not use his name in an oath and then break the oath. That's literally what it means. You don't take his name in an oath and then not keep it.

Then you've taken his name in vain. And that's the principal meaning of that command. It has other extended ways it can be violated too.

But the idea is you don't swear by God and then violate your oath. So to avoid violating their oath to God, they'd swear by heaven and then violate their oath. And he says you swear by heaven.

You're swearing by God anyway. You're just as much a violator. You're still taking the name of the Lord in vain.

Why? Because he says heaven is the throne of God, verse 22. And you're swearing by the throne of God and him who sits on it. Now what he's saying here is very much like what he said in the Sermon on the Mount.

He said don't swear by heaven for it's God's throne. Don't swear by earth, it's God's footstool. And don't swear by Jerusalem for it's the city of the great king.

In fact, don't even swear by your own head because you don't have the power to turn one hair white or black. His point is no matter what oath you take, in every case God is involved in your statement. The integrity of God is at stake if you swear by heaven, earth, Jerusalem or even your own head because all those things in some way are associated with God.

God alone is the one who determines when you're going to go white in the hair, not you. God obviously is sovereign over your head. He's sovereign.