

Matthew 23:1-39 ¹ Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, ³ so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. ⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, ⁶ and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷ and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. ⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. ¹⁰ Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. ¹¹ The greatest among you shall be your servant.

¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

¹³ “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. ¹⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

¹⁶ “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ ¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸ And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ ¹⁹ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰ So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹ And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. ²² And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

²³ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

²⁵ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

²⁷ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

²⁹ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰ saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ ³¹ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. ³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? ³⁴ Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, ³⁵ so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. ³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

³⁷ “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁸ See, your house is left to you desolate. ³⁹ For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Let's Warm Up: Questions to break the ice.

1. What are some examples of "do as I say, not as I do"?

Drivers, I bet you've seen police cars driving way past the speed limit without any emergency lights on. You may have been tempted to follow them. If you have younger siblings, you've probably reprimanded them for disobeying your parents while also trying to go around your parents' authority. As parents, we've told our kids to limit screen time or always speak politely, but ... uh ... we don't.

While working at a Winn Dixie grocery store, my managers expected me to work hard. Some set a good example for me to follow, while some were lazy. For example, one expected us to handle tons of customers for hours straight. Whenever we'd go to the office, she'd be on the landline phone, chatting away.

In this week's passage, Jesus calls out religious leaders for teaching people to do as they say, not as they do.

2. Have you ever been distracted by something obviously fake in a movie, TV show, or video?

Maybe you've seen a movie baby that's so fake that you forget what the characters were talking about (https://youtu.be/TKrG_6JFlhA). There was a spate of fake sign language interpreters at high-profile events such as Nelson Mandela's memorial (<https://youtu.be/X-DxGoIVUWo>). I'm sure anyone with a hearing impairment couldn't help but focus on that.

I came across a clip of dueling violinists from a movie (<https://youtu.be/LM0Ar5IB9sw>). Just looking at the bow of the guy in black: his pinky finger is straight instead of curved, his wrist isn't bending so his bow can't stay parallel, the bow is sliding too smoothly like there's no rosin, and he didn't even properly tighten the hair! It's so obviously fake! Don't get me started on the "sword fighting"! No violinist would ever do that!

Although lots of people thought the religious leaders were great examples of following God, Jesus points out many ways they are fake and what to watch out for.

3. Is there something you easily notice, but others don't?

Perhaps you are a physical therapist or athletic coach, so you can't help but notice if people have pronation or supination. Or you're an English teacher and every grammatical error and typo headache severe give you grief. (Did that previous sentence give you grief?)

Some people know cars. Once, I was in the car with Pastor Vinh, and it just so happened to coincide with the Worship Arts Ministry team going out for lunch. He was able to point out, from the back, which car belonged to which WAM member. I hope none of the WAM team is creeped out by that.

While visiting family out of state, my brother (Brian) and I attended a church service. Brian smiled and said to the worship leader, "Happy Chinese New Year." I had no idea what he was talking about since it wasn't Chinese New Year. Brian told me that the guy was wearing a pair of Adidas Ultra Boost Chinese New Year (<https://sneakernews.com/2016/12/28/adidas-ultra-boost-3-0-chinese-new-year-where-to-buy/>). My brother wasn't a sneakerhead, but he knew about trendy shoes and noticed them.

In this week's passage, Jesus notices the hypocrisy and spiritual blindness of spiritual leaders, even though most people didn't.

4. Has someone ever called you out on something that led to a positive change?

Being confronted is never pleasant, but it's sometimes necessary.

I was having a hard time getting people to participate at one church. I was frustrated and angry. A pastor from another church, Andrew, noted that I sounded bitter and that my congregation would sense it. I said I could hide that resentment. He said I couldn't. Sometime later, I talked to my brother, Brian, about my frustrations and how I missed my previous church. He was surprised and told me that I usually complained about that previous church.

God showed me that I tended to focus on what goes wrong while forgetting the good God was doing. Instead of bringing the failures and frustrations to God, I stewed in my anger and vented to people.

About a year after Andrew gave me that warning, I thanked him for what he told me and said he was right. His response? "I said that? I don't remember." Thanks anyway, Andrew.

In this week's passage, Jesus calls out the many ways the religious leaders failed to follow God.

Let's Get Started: Questions to start thinking about the main themes.

5. When are people tempted to behave hypocritically, and why?

Here are some of my thoughts.

Benefits or Consequences. When other people *think* you're a certain way, you get something good or avoid something bad. If you're a salesperson, coming off as friendly, trustworthy, and knowledgeable can help you land that sale. If you're on a first date, making the impression of being likeable and charming gets you a second date. If you hate your boss, letting them know you hate them gets you fired. If the RCMP see you driving like the maniac you are, you'll get a ticket or arrested.

But why don't we align our realities with our perceptions?

Alignment with Desired Perception Is Not the Goal. Being who you pretend to be sometimes doesn't matter. It's just a way to get what you want.

Scammers pretending to be friendly and helpful Telus/Rogers/Bell/etc. customer service representatives offer killer deals. They don't care about helping because they just want to steal money.

We copy our friend's homework so we'll pass the class, but don't care about if we understand advanced chemistry or basic thuganomics. We just want to get a good grade to pass or avoid being punished by our parents.

Social media is so full of fakes! We pick the best photos with the best lighting and the best circumstances to make people think we're living life to the fullest to get the praise and the likes. It doesn't matter if it represents reality. One of my favorite examples was an Instagram account of what looked like a beautiful, young Japanese girl who

loved motorcycles but was actually a 59-year-old man using face filters (<https://www.vice.com/en/article/viral-japanese-biker-transformation-woman-faceapp/>)!

Too Hard or Not Worth the Effort. Sometimes, we fake it because we can't make it. How many of us put on a happy face during tough times? We *do* want to be happy on the inside, but all we can offer is happiness on the outside.

Or we join Sunday worship or Life Group meetings and see others worshipping with joy, praying wholeheartedly, and sharing about how God keeps showing up. We want that, but we don't know how to get it, so we fake it just to fit in.

6. What are the dangers of blindly following leaders such as pastors?

We're not perfect. As Pastor Brody mentioned, someone told him that pastors can't make any mistakes. And he had a family friend who (jokingly) called himself the Most Holy Mega Reverend Pastor Doctor Sir.

Years ago, I knew a pastor who got ordained and, in his tradition, earned the title of reverend. He would joke, "Hey, I'm not reverend. Just ask my wife." I think every pastor's parent, sibling, spouse, and child would quickly dispel any misconceptions of pastors being perfect.

Jesus and the Bible are the only infallible authorities. Pastors, along with anyone else, can still make mistakes and get things wrong.

The Jewish people blindly followed their leaders, leading them to stray further and further from God, even to the point of calling for their savior to be crucified.

We can't do your spiritual life. Pastor Brody said that people can be tempted to bequeath their spiritual responsibilities to the pastor while leaving their brains at home. There are so many amazing preachers and teachers here at Willingdon and even more online. It's tempting to sit back and let them do all the Bible study, meditation, and interpretation. But they can't replace you doing your part. Everyone needs a relationship with Jesus, and once they do, they need to cultivate it.

Spiritual leaders are there to teach people to follow Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20) and equip them to serve Him (Ephesians 4:11-12).

Let's Dig In: Questions to discuss the passage and how we can respond.

7. What gets Jesus angry?

Depictions of Jesus are usually of this peaceful, smiling guy. He's smiling while holding lambs and children. He's loving, kind, and caring. But in this passage, Jesus is harsher than a battle rapper with His words.

He pronounces woe upon the religious leaders seven times. The Greek word is οὐαί (pronounced oo-ah-ee) and means "interjection denoting pain or displeasure, woe, alas" (BDAG). οὐαί even sounds like what someone yells out in grief. It's the opposite of blessed (μακάριος), meaning happy. These leaders think they're blessed and happy, but Jesus tells them they're headed to grief, pain, sadness, and suffering. (As an amusing sidenote: I found a haircare company called OUAL.)

The Greek word for hypocrite is ὑποκριτής and refers to an “actor, in the sense of pretender, dissembler” (BDAG). If you don’t know what a dissembler is, don’t worry. I had to look it up, too. It’s someone who hides their true intention or feelings to trick other people. When you’re an actor playing a role, it’s good. When you’re supposed to be trusted and honorable, it’s bad.

The religious leaders fooled people into thinking they were good role models for following God. That led many others to disobey God, too. Leaders leading people astray is a theme in much of the Old Testament (e.g., Exodus 32:1-6; 1 Kings 16:26).

Since Jesus loved God and people, this was the worst of both worlds. The leaders didn’t love God or love people, so they led people to do the same.

8. What words or phrases does Jesus repeat in this passage? Do you see any themes?

Take a few minutes and mark up the page if it’s printed. You can also take a screenshot on your phone and mark it up. What are the themes in His words? What do you think He is trying to get at?

9. Why is it bad to only look spiritual and good on the outside?

Hearts. When we love someone, we want their hearts. If you’re like me, you’ve been around people who *seem* nice, but you can smell something’s off. The niceness feels performative, like they’re only acting this way and it’s not how they really feel. Do you *really* think ordering that entrée was such a good choice? Are you *really* that happy I’m here? If anything, that fakeness is a huge turnoff. “Hey, if you want to be my friend, that’s great. If you don’t, that’s fine. But pretending to be my friend is weird.”

I don’t want my son to *act* like he likes me. I’m hoping he *really* loves his daddy/father deep down.

Reality. If we look good on the outside but not inside, it’s no good. Imagine going to a restaurant that gives you a bowl that’s spotless on the outside but full of crusty, day-old food on the inside. What if you asked the server to give you a new bowl and they told you, “What’s the problem? It looks good on the outside. Isn’t that enough?” I’d definitely be questioning their FOODSAFE qualifications (<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/keeping-bc-healthy-safe/food-safety/food-safety-courses>). Who cares if we look righteous on Sunday mornings but are crooked and evil the rest of the week?

Years ago, a grocery trip almost led to me getting locked in a cemetery at night. I’m sure many of you are nodding because you can relate. That cemetery had a beautiful mausoleum with big columns. Yes, it looked good, but there were skeletons inside.

God has X-ray vision and can see our hearts (1 Samuel 16:6-7). Our biggest problem isn’t that the world is unclean and sinful. Our hearts are the problem (Mark 7:18-23).

Our insides are what counts. And if we’re clean and alive on the inside, our outside will look alive, too.

10. What does humble leadership look like?

The religious leaders failed to recognize their pride. They liked to sit on Moses' seat (i.e., take Moses' authority). They give people lots of burdens and don't help them. They can feel superior because they (appear to) follow the laws while everyone else fails. Every good work was a show of how good they were, like blowing trumpets whenever they gave a big donation (Matthew 6:1-2).

Even their outfits made them look super spiritual. Phylacteries were little boxes with certain Bible passages inside to keep God's Word on them at all times (Exodus 13:9). Fringes/tassels were supposed to remind them of God's commandments so their hearts would follow Him (Numbers 15:37-41). We know Jesus wore fringes because many sick people touched them to get healed (Matthew 9:20; 14:34-36). The problem was that they made the boxes and fringes huge so people would say, "Wow! So spiritual." Imagine Pastor Brody walking around with a gigantic Bible expecting people to say, "Wow! That Bible's huge! You must be so spiritual! Your parents must be so proud!" And then, off to the side, his mother and father earn the Guinness World Record for "Biggest Simultaneous Eye Roll".

Check out these videos about phylacteries (<https://youtu.be/3Dx0P1ZFvY>) and fringes (<https://youtu.be/oGP5rPsm3hE>).

Ultimately, it wasn't about doing things for God or others but for themselves.

Jesus taught that greatness came from being humble. The greatest people serve the most, so Jesus served the most by dying on the cross.

Who in your life embodies humble leadership? Pastor Brody fondly remembers Pastor Bob, who publicly demonstrated that he needed Jesus just like everyone else.

11. How can we prevent spiritual blindness?

Jesus calls the Pharisees blind **five** times. They think they see the path to God to lead people to Him, but they're blind. And when the blind lead the blind, they both run into disaster (Matthew 15:14). Because they're blind, they can't even see that they're on the wrong path.

Here are some suggestions based on the fact that the blind can't see what they can't see.

Pray for Open Eyes. Ask God for spiritual insight and vision. He can see everything. He can reveal things to you that you may not have realized, including chronic sinful patterns.

God's Word. God's Word is full of knowledge and power. It teaches us all the different ways people are blind to their sin. It's also God's power because God mightily works through His Word to change our lives.

Other Eyes to See. Having others helps. Sometimes, we don't realize areas of sin because they feel so normal to us, but to other people, it's obvious. Also, the people around usually have different blind spots, so thankfully, we're aware of different sins from each other. Together, we can see more.

Mentors Who See Further. Christians who have lived a longer life than us have been further down the road of life and know what's ahead. It's the difference between driving down an unfamiliar road and your daily commute. Mentors know common blind spots, such as in marriage/singleness, having children, pursuing a career, going through suffering, and more.

12. Pastor Brody said, "The Pharisees were good at finding loopholes and exceptions to the law for themselves."

What loopholes are we tempted to use?

"The Bible says this, but ..." Sometimes, we believe we are experiencing the exception. "I should love my neighbors, but this lady ... she's no neighbor!" Sometimes, we justify our actions. "Yes, I lied about that, but it was for the greater good." Or we minimize things. "Yeah, I shouldn't illegally download those movies, but it's not a big deal." Or we think we deserve something. "I deserve this position at work, so it's OK for me to go behind my boss' back to get that recognition."

Where do we find loopholes, and what can we do to stop using them?

13. How can we respond to Jesus' compassion?

Despite all the evils they had performed, Jesus still longed for them. Yes, they have been killing God's prophets for years, but God kept inviting them back under His care and love. That's wild!

No matter what we've done, we can still respond to Jesus' love and compassion. What can you do today?