

The Warning Against False Religion-Legalism



Matthew 23:1-12 TEXT, EXPOSITION AND PRACTICAL HELPS

West Los Angeles Living Word Christian Center
Centro Cristiano Palabra Viva
Dr. Eddie Idefonso, Senior Pastor
6520 Arizona Ave. Los Angeles, CA 90045
Email: Pastoreddie@Wlalwcc.org
WWW.WLALWCC.ORG

THE MESSIAH'S LAST WEEK: HIS CLAIM CHALLENGED AND REJECTED, [Matthew 21:1-23:39](#)

The Warning Against False Religion, [Matthew 23:1-12](#)

[\(Matthew 23:1-12\)](#) **Introduction:** in order to understand what is happening in this passage, it is helpful to recall the events which led up to it. It was still Tuesday of Jesus' last week on earth. On Sunday, just two days before, He had been escorted into the city by teeming thousands proclaiming Him to be the Messiah. On Monday He had cast out the money changers and those who were doing business within the temple walls.

Following these two dramatic events, He had taken upon Himself the right and authority to teach and heal within the temple. Naturally the governing leaders, both religious and civil, were upset and angered by what was happening. More to the point, the leaders felt threatened by Christ, fearing the people might rally around Him as the Messiah and rise up against the Romans. Such action, of course, would cause the Romans to march against Jerusalem and blame the Jewish leadership for not maintaining order. Then after putting the insurrection down, Rome would remove the present Jewish leadership from office. In the minds of the leaders Christ was a threat to their position, power, wealth, and security. They were forced to discredit Jesus before the people.

They sent group after group to challenge Christ, attempting to trip Him up. Each time He answered brilliantly, teaching a much needed lesson not only to those standing around, but to men of all generations. Finally, the leaders were baffled and silenced. But Christ did not give up trying to reach them. He reached out once more, trying to lead them to the truth: the Messiah is not only Man, He is also Lord, the Son of God Himself ([Matthew 22:41-46](#)). The result? Again, the leaders refused to open their minds and hearts. They remained closed to the truth, obstinately so. They rejected Christ and turned and walked away. They began the final plot—not to challenge Christ in argument again, but to kill Him.

As the present passage is studied, it is helpful to keep in mind the major reason these leaders opposed Jesus so violently: they feared the loss of all they held dear and possessed in this world: position, power, livelihood, wealth, and security. In their minds, as long as Christ was alive He was a threat to them and to their nation.

The great tragedy was that they were supposed to be the godly teachers and leaders, God's very own representatives and messengers to the people. Yet, they were so far removed from God that they were unable to recognize God's very own Son. Despite appeal after appeal and proof after proof by Christ Himself, they still refused to believe and follow Him. They deliberately chose to be obstinate in their unbelief and chose to follow the way of the world by plotting to kill Him.

This background lies behind the present chapter—the most severe attack Christ ever spoke against a people. The true nature of these religionists, the Scribes and Pharisees, is clearly seen as Christ opened up the hypocrisy of their lives and religion point by point. In this particular passage Christ warned against their religion—a religion which stands as a symbol of the false religions of the world.

1. **Jesus spoke to the multitudes and the disciples (v.1).**
2. **False religion is a religion that claims to "sit" in the truth, in Moses' seat (v.2).**
3. **False religion is a religion of hypocrisy (v.3).**
4. **False religion is a religion of heavy burdens (v.4).**
5. **False religion is a religion of show, of ostentation (v.5-7).**
6. **False religion is a religion to be guarded against (8-12).**

1. (Matthew 23:1) Religion, False— Scripture: in this particular passage Jesus spoke to the multitude and to the disciples, not to the religionists, not to the Pharisees and Scribes.

There are at least four reasons why Christ warned the multitude and disciples at this point. These same reasons make this passage extremely applicable to every generation.

1. Everyone needs to know what is true and what is false in religion. Man-made religion (legalism) always includes some truth and some error. And unfortunately even the true religion, God's revealed religion, is sometimes added to or taken away from by men. This is what had happened to the Pharisees and Scribes, the religionists of Jesus' day. They were staunch followers of God's Word, the Old Testament Scriptures, but they added to the Scripture. Therefore, Christ needed to teach what was true and what was false in the present religion (Matthew 23:2-3).

2. Everyone needs to have the hypocrisy and sin of religion (legalism) exposed. When men add to or take away from God's revealed truth, it creates and causes hypocrisy and sin within religion. When men *add* rules and regulations to Scripture, self-discipline is demanded and super-spirituality results. When men deny or *take away* certain portions of Scripture, it creates and causes the exaltation of man and his rationality, making *gods* out of man and his ability. Again, pride and vain glory result.

3. Everyone needs to be warned against following the error of religion. Just being religious is not enough (Matthew 5:20). A person must follow the truth. If a person follows false religion, he is doomed (Matthew 23:8-12).

4. Everyone needs to have his false ideas about Christ corrected. The false teaching and attacks of the religionists had influenced the people. Unbelief and false ideas about the Messiah were running rampant. Christ needed to declare the truth (Matthew 23:7-10).

Thought 1. The warning concerning false religion was directed primarily to the public and the disciples because there is always more hope for them. It is always difficult for a leader who teaches error to repent and change.

- 1) He fears embarrassment in admitting that he has held to error and taught error.
- 2) He fears the ridicule and rejection of his peers.
- 3) He fears the loss of position, power, and security.

2. (Matthew 23:2) Religion, False— Minister— Teaching: false religion is a religion that claims to "sit" in the truth, that is, in Moses' seat.

Moses was the great teacher and interpreter of God's law and Word. Christ said that the Scribes and Pharisees "**sit in Moses' seat.**" They were responsible for teaching and interpreting God's Word just as Moses had been. **The application is clear:** all religions, false and true, "**sit in Moses' seat**"—all religion is responsible for teaching the truth of God's Word. As shall be seen, all teachers shall be held accountable for how they "**sit in Moses' seat,**" how they *sit* in their position as teachers and interpreters of God's Word.

"And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" ([Luke 6:46](#)).

"Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things" ([Romans 2:1](#)).

"Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you, as it is written" ([Romans 2:23-24](#)).

Thought 1. The place of religion in the world has been *set* and *ordained* by God. Just because bad men may sit in places of leadership does not mean that all religion is bad nor that all religion is to be invalidated or ignored. Hypocrites within the church, even within positions of leadership, do not mean that the church is evil and can be neglected and avoided. We are to *test the spirits*, distinguish between the true and the false, and we are to go on worshipping God and edifying those who follow the truth.

Thought 2. It is a terrible thing for a false teacher to "**sit in Moses' seat.**" The most severe judgment awaits those who teach error ([Matthew 23:12](#); [Matthew 23:13-36](#), esp. [Matthew 23:14, 15, 33](#)).

"Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" ([Matthew 23:33](#)).

3. (Matthew 23:3) Religion, False: false religion is a religion of hypocrisy (Matthew 23:3).

However, there is a fact that must be noted: not all religion is false, even when it is taught by a false teacher. Christ says, "**Observe, obey the truth of what they say, in so far as it is God's Word (Matthew 23:2); but do not follow after their works.**"

Note several things.

1. Jesus is condemning false religion and teachers, but not the truth. False teachers can and do teach some truth. The truth is to be obeyed, no matter who teaches it. The truth and our duty to obey it are not invalidated just because a hypocrite teaches it.

2. Jesus is saying that teaching the truth does not mean that a person is acceptable to God. Being acceptable to God depends upon one thing and one thing alone: living the truth. A man may teach the truth yet be unacceptable to God. He is unacceptable because he is a hypocrite and does not obey the Lord. He simply does not live the truth. A man is not acceptable just because he proclaims and professes the truth—even if he is a teacher. He is acceptable because he walks in the truth day by day.

"Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal? Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege? Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God?" (Romans 2:21-23).

3. We must separate the office from the officer, the ministry from the minister, the church from the people, the truth from the teaching, the doctrine from the practice. The spirits must be tried.

"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

4. Jesus is saying that the claims of religion and of men must not be allowed to lead us. The doctrine, morality, and discipline of religion and men may be commendable; on the other hand, both religion and men may be false.

"They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate" (Titus 1:16).

"My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18).

Thought 1. Preaching and practice must always be separated. There is always some difference. Every man is human, and every man comes short, but God's Word is perfect.

4. ([Matthew 23:4](#)) Religion, False: false religion is a religion of heavy burdens.

Jesus said that false religion and teachers impose heavy burdens upon men.

There are four ways heavy burdens are laid upon the shoulders of men.

1. God's Word and law can be imposed upon men in such a strict and severe way that mercy is lacking.
2. Religion and men can add to God's Word through rules, regulations, rituals, observances, and traditions. Such tends to become more important than the truth.
3. Religion and men can deny and take away from God's Word, leaving men to stumble around searching for the truth within themselves and other imperfect and frail men.
4. Religion and men can exercise undue authority, lording it over people, insisting that tradition and ritual and other man-made burdens be kept.

In discussing rules and regulations, many are willing to impose the rules upon others, but not upon themselves.

There are two particular failures with such hypocrisy.

1. Some teachers and laymen fail to lift a finger to practice the burden themselves. They are strict in laying the burden upon others, but lax in bearing the weight themselves. They will not be bound by such rules themselves, at least not strictly, but they will preach and teach the rules to others and bind them to keep the rules. The shoulders of others are weighed down ever so heavily, yet they will not lift their own fingers to carry the weight of the rule or restriction.
2. Some teachers and laymen fail to lift a finger to ease the burden for the weak and heavy laden. This is another possible interpretation of what Christ is saying. Some just will not show mercy; they will not help those who need help in practicing the burden. Some teachers are so strict and assuming that they know little of the love and mercy of God. They know little about Christian liberty ([Acts 15:28](#)).

"But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?" ([Galatians 4:9](#)).

"Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" ([Galatians 5:1](#)).

"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?" ([Col. 2:20](#)).

Thought 1. There is the possibility of terrible pride in imposing burdens upon men. The right to impose burdens sets a person up as *lord* over others. Of course, there is a place for authority in proclaiming and exercising God's Word, but not for imposing man-made rules (legalistic conservatism) and human rationalizations (liberalism). Both weigh man down ever so heavily. Both force man to secure the approval of God by keeping rules through a person's own strength. Both know little if any of the mercy and discipline of God's Spirit. God's Word is fully adequate for both faith and practice. God's Word is all man needs to direct and govern his life. We do not have to add to or take away from God's Word.

5. ([Matthew 23:5-7](#)) Religion, False—Pride: false religion is a religion of show and ostentation.

Christ points out three things these teachers did to be seen by men.

1. They changed their appearance, dress, and clothing to draw attention to themselves.
 - a. They wore phylacteries. These were little leather type boxes which contained a piece of parchment with four passages of Scripture written on it. The Scriptures were [Exodus 13:1-10](#); [Exodus 13:11-16](#); [Deut. 6:4-9](#); and [Deut. 11:13-21](#).

The use of the phylacteries seems to have arisen from a literal translation of [Exodus 13:9](#) and [Proverbs 7:3](#). The true meaning of these two passages seems to be that we are to have the word of God in our minds just as clearly as if we had them before our eyes.

The great fault of the religionists was that they interpreted these passages literally and they enlarged the little leather boxes to draw attention to themselves as being religious.

- b. They also enlarged the borders of their garments; that is, they wore tassels on their clothing. God had instructed the Jews to make fringes or tassels on the borders of their outer robe. When a person noticed them, he was to be reminded to keep God's commandments. Again, the error was that the religionist changed his appearance from others; he enlarged his tassels, drawing attention to the fact that he was more religious than others.

Thought 1. A person can wear clothes that expose the body, that actually attract attention to certain parts of the body. A person can wear clothes that are too tight, too low cut, too high cut, too thin. A person can wear too little clothing, and clothing that fails to cover enough of the body.

Jesus said to beware of dressing to attract attention. The religionists did it to appear righteous. Others do it to appear worldly (appealing).

"Neither yield ye your members [bodily parts] as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God" ([Romans 6:13](#)).

"In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; but (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works" ([1 Tim. 2:9-10](#)).

"[Women] whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; but let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price" ([1 Peter 3:3-5](#)).

2. They loved the positions of honor, special seats, and places of recognition. There are those who love the restricted neighborhoods and clubs and the preferred lists. They love the preeminence ([3 John 9](#)). Note what is condemned: not being in these positions and places, but the *love* of them. Someone has to hold the upper positions and fill the major places of responsibility. It is the *love* of such, the love and the feeling of pride because of the place and position that is wrong.

"How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?" ([John 5:44](#)).

"Nevertheless man being in honour abideth not: he is like the beasts that perish" ([Psalm 49:12](#)).

3. They loved the titles that honored and exalted them. The title was simply "**Rabbi**" which meant teacher or master. It carried with it the modern idea of *Doctor* or *My lord*. It was a title that took a man who was supposed to be God's messenger and said, "**Here he is; this is he.**" It honored the man and not the Lord.

"And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted" ([Matthew 23:12](#)).

"For when he dieth he shall carry nothing away: his glory shall not descend after him" ([Psalm 49:17](#)).

Thought 1. Too often men change their clothing and seek the upper places, positions, and titles to draw attention to themselves and their abilities. They are honored and not the Lord ([Matthew 6:1-7, 16-18](#)).

Thought 2. There is nothing wrong with living holy and godly lives, with being religious. But it is wrong to draw attention to oneself instead of to the Lord. We should not *overdo* or *remake* our outward being (appearance, position, titles) to draw attention to ourselves. We should always walk humbly among men, walk as one of them, walk pointing them to Christ by our lives.

Thought 3. God has no favorites among men. Why should we seek to appear as a favorite? Why should we seek *appearance, position, and honor* that would point toward us as being special?

Thought 4. If there is anyone who should walk humbly before men and point them toward God, it is the man who professes to serve God. He, of all men, should not love the appearance and positions and titles and honor that point toward him instead of his Lord.

6. (Matthew 23:8-12) Religion, False: false religion is a religion to be guarded against.

There are **three strong reasons** why we are to guard against false religion.

1. All positions and relationships are already set in the Kingdom of God. There is no position and no relationship left to be determined. All have already been determined.

- a. God is the Father of our faith, of the true religion. No earthly founder or teacher is *Father*. Therefore no man is to be acknowledged as such. God alone is to be proclaimed *Father*.

"One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" ([Ephes. 4:6](#)).

"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" ([James 1:17](#)).

- b. Christ is our Master. One alone is Master, even Christ. We are not to be called masters ("**kathegetes**", **leaders, guides**, [Matthew 23:10](#). Cp. [Romans 2:19-20](#).) We are servants of the Master. Note that Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah.

- c. Believers are brothers. One is not above or more exalted than another. Each stands as an equal before God and one another. Each is to serve and help the other.

2. Greatness is measured by service, not by earthly honor. (See [Matthew 20:20-28](#). **This is a good discussion on "The Price of Greatness."**) When religion is conceived by man or influenced by man, that religion focuses upon ritual, ceremony, rules, and regulations, and upon honor, recognition, position, and influence.

"But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" ([Matthew 20:26-27](#)).

"But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve" ([Luke 22:26](#)).

"For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith" ([Romans 12:3](#)).

"Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble" ([1 Peter 5:5](#)).

3. Judgment is coming. It is what a person does himself that determines his fate: he exalts himself or humbles himself. Again, someone has to fill positions of leadership; but if a person pushes himself forward for the honor of the position and not for the purpose of serving, he is to be judged by God. The rule is: we are called to serve, not to rule.

"Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" ([Matthew 5:19](#)).

"He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree" ([Luke 1:52](#)).

"Look on every one that is proud, and bring him low; and tread down the wicked in their place" ([Job 40:12](#)).

"They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches; none of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him" ([Psalm 49:6-7](#)).

"A man's pride shall bring him low: but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit" ([Proverbs 29:23](#)).

"For the day of the Lord of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low" ([Isaiah 2:12](#)).

"For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch" ([Malachi 4:1](#)).

Thought 1. One thing that can be said of the Christian faith is this: Christian faith is a faith of *oneness* ([Ephes. 4:1-6](#), esp. [Ephes. 4:4-6](#); [1 Cor. 12:4-13](#)). There is no room for pride or divisiveness, neither for the love of position, honor, or title.