

## THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

### Lesson 76, Chapter 23 Continued

Our study of Matthew 23 continues today, but bear with me before we re-open it's inspired pages. Early in the Book of Genesis we learned of a fundamental governing dynamic of God: He divides, elects, and separates. One of the most obvious examples of this dynamic was when He called Abraham to become the inaugural leader of a new group of people set apart for a divine purpose: to be a kingdom of priests for Him. Being elected, however, was not sufficient; this newly created division meant that Abraham had to separate from his past and his present. He had to leave his father and his siblings, and even his homeland; we should not minimize the severe pain this would have caused all involved. Later when Abraham's wives and concubines bore him children, there was yet another uncomfortable and painful division, election, and separation between his sons Isaac and Ishmael, and some years later it happened again among his grandchildren Jacob and Esau. The Believer's life journey with the Lord necessarily exposes us to this same and ongoing challenge and pain of division, election, and separation.

Yet if there is a common theme within the worldwide Church community it is "unity". Unfortunately the type of unity that is usually contemplated is entirely human in its nature despite the spiritual overtones used to try to achieve it. If ever there was a strong biblical example of the wrong type of unity (the type God does **not** want... the type that is against God's nature and His governing dynamic), it must be in the story of The Tower of Babel. Human unity was so desired and actually accomplished that God devised a simple way to divide and separate Nimrod's subjects: He gave them new and multiple languages such that communication among Babel's citizens became impossible and so people were forced to scatter; they divided themselves into groups based on speaking one of

the several new languages God imposed upon Babel.

I've commented numerous times that culture and language are organically coupled together. Language is human speech that expresses cultural norms and historical customs, and it is language that provides the necessary unity and cohesion for a society of people to best operate and thrive. People of course can learn a second language, but unless they are also immersed into the native culture that is the mother of that language, talking can occur but communicating meaning and nuance likely will not.

The Heavenly kind of unity that God **does** want for us is when we each connect ourselves to Him (through Christ), and then He becomes like the hub of a wheel through which this kind of unity occurs. The irony is that this kind of unity only happens when people are divided, elected, and separated from the community of the world. It is when those who trust in God's Son, Yeshua, become a new and separate order apart from all others... much like for Abraham. Thus this is how those who worship God become Abraham's seed... the Seed of Abraham. This event or process is a co-operative venture of and between God and His elect. God does the dividing and electing, but it falls upon us, His worshippers, to do the separating. Separating is the painful but mandatory part that is at once the hardest to do but also is how the community of Christ on earth is formed.

<sup>CJB</sup> **John 17:11** *Now I am no longer in the world. They are in the world, but I am coming to you. Holy Father, guard them by the power of your name, which you have given to me, so that they may be one, just as we are.*

<sup>CJB</sup> **Revelation 18:4** *Then I heard another voice out of heaven say: "My people, come out of her! so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not be infected by her plagues,*

<sup>CJB</sup> **Luke 14:26** *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father, his mother, his wife, his children, his brothers and his sisters, yes, and his own life besides, he cannot be my talmid.*

I could quote you a couple of dozen more teachings in the New Testament alone about God's type of unity, and about dividing, electing, and separating; but the point is that separating is not an option if we are going to follow Yeshua, and be part of a Godly society on earth; and much of it depends upon us bending our will to the Lord's and thus taking the required steps. This doesn't mean becoming

isolated or cultish. We are to separate ourselves **spiritually** from this world, **behaviorally** from this world, and to fellowship with the like minded. Yet until we die we will always be physically connected to this world and it is our duty to take the Gospel that has saved us and changed us to the people of the world who don't know God and His love for them. This is a tall task and so difficult at times to balance and reconcile. We can stay so attached to this world while still claiming to have trust in Christ that we become what some call Carnal Christians. We can also become so cut-off from this world that we are so Heavenly minded we provide no earthly good. Division, election, and separation is the undertone of all that Jesus has been instructing and demonstrating in His own life, throughout His earthly ministry, and it is especially front and center in Matthew chapter 23. Let's re-read a portion of it.

### **RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 23:8 - end**

We ended our last lesson by briefly going over a short list of titles that Yeshua says ought not to be used within the Hebrew faith: Rabbi, Father, and Leader. The term Rabbi didn't yet mean quite what it means today, but within a few decades after Yeshua's earthly ministry came to a predestined close, it would begin to transform from indicating a greatly admired teacher of God's word, to meaning "great one" in the sense of a person who holds a special office in the hierarchy of the religion of Judaism. The term Father was actually a term already in use within the various Semitic religious sects (and so also within the sphere of authority and reach of the Synagogue) to indicate a highly positioned Elder. Leader is a little harder to decipher except it seems to mean anyone who has exalted themselves above others within the Synagogue religious structure.

Obviously Christ's idea wasn't to abolish these words from the Hebrew language but rather it was dealing with the worldly norm of setting some men upon pedestals such that it led to them glorifying themselves and the people acquiescing to their unquestioned leadership. This leads us back to the purpose for my opening words of today's lesson. Essentially Jesus was using the Pharisees and Scribes of the Synagogue religious system as examples of the wrong way to do things within the Hebrew faith as God originally intended it to operate. Jesus thoroughly denounces them as He continues to set the boundaries, priorities, entrance requirements and even the structure of the new Believers' community that He is establishing. This new community is being formed out of the existing Jewish community, and its members are those who trust in Yeshua of Nazareth as God's Son. Each member is to be neither higher nor

lower in status than another; rather whether a leader or a follower in the Jesus community, everyone is to see themselves as equals... as "brothers".

In verse 11 Jesus sums it up by saying that the greatest among them (the necessary leadership) are not to see themselves as having attained a higher status than the rest, but rather they are to see their purpose and function as servants to the others. This is the way the Kingdom of Heaven is to operate: it's a complete reversal from the way the world operates. It was also a reversal from the way the Jewish religious system had come to operate in Christ's era. And, in too many cases, it is the way that the Christian Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century operates and has since about the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Too often people serve the Pastor or the Rabbi or the Priest, not the other way around as it ought to be. Too often the Pastor, Rabbi and Priest are seen as elevated and above the others... deserving of special privilege and honor. I know of many Church and Synagogue leaders who believe they **are** elevated and thus rightfully should be catered to; and I know of others who are wonderful servants in the mold that God intends, who daily sacrifice their personal needs for their congregants. No doubt this, too, was the case among the Scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus was talking to the ones that needed to be taken down a notch; not to all of them. Even Flavius Josephus speaks about how there were many Pharisees that were fine and humble men, loved by the people for their kindness and mercy.

But there was a far deeper consequence to what Yeshua was speaking and demonstrating. He was demanding that His followers were to become a separate sect... the Messianic sect (lacking for better words)... which would operate both within and outside of the present state of the Hebrew faith that had been morphing into what Bible scholars (Jewish and Christian) loosely call early Judaism. That is, the Hebrew biblical faith had evolved into a human-devised system of behaviors as defined by the Synagogue leaders, and far from the true meaning and sense of the God-given Law of Moses. This helps us to gain more comprehension of a core principle that Jesus taught in His Sermon on the Mount.

**CJB Matthew 5:17-20 <sup>17</sup> "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete. <sup>18</sup> Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened. <sup>19</sup> So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of**

**Heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you that unless your righteousness is far greater than that of the Torah-teachers and P'rushim, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven!**

In this passage that I've quoted to you so many times, Yeshua was speaking about the same type of Synagogue leaders that He is now chastising so severely in Matthew 23. The term "righteousness" that He used in characterizing the Scribes (Torah teachers) and the Pharisees was almost meant sarcastically. Or perhaps better, Jesus was referring to the fake righteousness that the Scribes and Pharisees assigned to themselves that was far off the mark of biblical righteousness, and so it amounted to little to no righteousness whatsoever in the Father's Kingdom. Rather, Jesus describes true biblical righteousness.... as what? As obeying the commandments of the Torah and the Prophets, and teaching these commandments to others. The Scribes and the Pharisees are condemned by Yeshua because they weren't teaching God's commands, but rather they were teaching their own manmade doctrines... a system of behaviors... that brought with them heavy burdens but not much righteousness.

With all this in mind, beginning at verse 13 Yeshua unleashes a torrent of 7 woes upon these Synagogue leaders who are misleading their people. Interestingly, some Bible versions (perhaps the very one you are reading from) add an 8<sup>th</sup> woe. It is this (for those of you who don't have it in your Bible):

<sup>NAS</sup> **Matthew 23:14** *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, even while for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you shall receive greater condemnation."*

In reality this verse is a much later Christian gloss that was added to Matthew's Gospel. It never existed in the earliest Greek manuscripts, so the addition must have occurred in the 5th century or later. Probably (as we've already seen happen in earlier chapters) a Christian Bible editor saw those words in Mark chapter 12 and thought the Gospels would harmonize best if those same words were also included in Matthew. Therefore we'll not deal with that verse and instead only look at the 7 woes that Matthew records.

I wonder if by now, after working our way through 22 chapters in Matthew, some who are listening or watching would still insist that Jesus can only be described as "love". That is, love is the only attribute of Christ or at least the only one worth mentioning. Yet if Jesus really can say "if you've seen Me, you've seen the

Father" and mean it, then the same attributes of the Old Testament God that wholesale destroys entire evil cities and their citizens, and who judges Canaan and turns it over to the refugee Israelites, and who killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in a single day, must live within Yeshua. And indeed, that is more or less what we find in God's Word if we'll only lay down our manmade doctrines that often merely function as a cover-up (although certainly in His 1<sup>st</sup> advent Jesus states that He didn't come to condemn). On the other hand, if He did not come to condemn it is difficult to fit even a **thin** sheet of paper between that and when we find Him using such strong language to set the Synagogue and Temple leadership back on their heels, and here during a non-stop diatribe against them since entering Jerusalem, He now harshly judges the Synagogue leadership that stands before Him by pronouncing 7 woes upon them.

What's a woe? For the sake of illustration, I think it is not too big a reach to equate the woes of Jesus with the plagues of Moses. Since Jesus is the "prophet like me" that Moses promised would come, and since throughout his Gospel Matthew has made an obvious implied comparison between Yeshua and Moshe, then for the sake of trying to best describe what a "woe" meant to Him, we could probably replace woe with plague. That is, in verse 13 where it begins "But woe to you hypocritical Torah teachers and Pharisees" it could just as easily say "A plague upon you hypocritical Torah teachers and Pharisees". I'm not saying that the meanings of the two words are precisely the same; I'm saying that they are close enough in purpose and effect that it might help Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to get the sense that Jesus is talking to these Scribes and Pharisees as though they were foreign enemies, and so how deeply offensive it must have been to them.

Since I am occasionally called out by mainstream Church leaders and Christian laymen for saying uncomfortable things such as I just said (that Jesus is **not** only love), I would like to quote someone of note who at least sees Him more or less similarly. Ben Witherington III in his commentary on Matthew says this:

***"Most people reading this commentary would like to have a user-friendly Jesus, an approachable Jesus. A Jesus who is threatening and who warns of coming judgment and Hell does not produce warm feelings. Those of us who love Jesus need to do our best to avoid the tendency to whittle down or lop off the hard edges of His teaching. If there are parts of His teaching that make us uncomfortable, perhaps we should allow that to tell us something about where we are and what we believe rather than saying***

***Jesus could never have said something like that. The human tendency to minimize what we find disturbing or painful or hard to swallow needs not to be given free reign when it comes to Jesus's teaching. Jesus must be allowed to have His say, whether we are happy with His words or not.***

I don't know whether that makes you feel any better, but it certainly does me.

The 1<sup>st</sup> woe sort of sums up the why and what-for of the 6 following woes upon these religious leaders whom Yeshua finds as despicable and dangerous. He calls them hypocrites; but we shouldn't focus on that word because in His day and for many centuries before and after, one Jew calling another Jew a hypocrite (especially when arguing religious issues) was common banter. It's not too far from English speaking people calling someone a jerk or a phony. The problem is that while we common people can do that to one another with little more risk than perhaps someone being a bit put-off, it is not without its consequences when said to people who consider themselves as having a privileged status and having power over you. We must always factor in the reality that to the minds of these revered Scribes and Pharisees of privileged status and rank, Yeshua was essentially an intruder; an uneducated, trouble making, itinerant Galilean Holy Man that was saying these condemning things to them and making them look bad in front of crowds of people. How dare He!!

Yeshua says that not only will these esteemed Scribes and Pharisees not be welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven, but also their error-filled teaching, arrogant behavior and bad example to others is leading those who believe that their religious leaders' instruction is God ordained, and who long to be able to someday enter into God's Kingdom by following their instruction, instead are being led into the same abyss that these leaders will eventually fall. Following up on those hard-hitting comments by Witherington, I'll once again risk the ire of many fellow Christians by saying that as those who love Our Savior we are much too close within the Church to epitomizing the very people Yeshua is speaking to and speaking about. Every time I say these sorts of things my email inbox overfloweth with notes that say: "Stop Church bashing". Or "Well, MY Church isn't like that." As with Yeshua, just as He wasn't bashing the Jewish faith, but **was** bashing the Jewish leadership for their wrong teaching, so it is my intent not to Church-bash but rather to shake up those among the Church leadership to re-think the many doctrines that they teach, which often as not say something quite different than what the Word of God says.

It is the job of Bible Teachers, Pastors, and Messianic Rabbis to teach the biblical truth; not to teach denominational doctrines. It is our job to lead people into the Kingdom on God's terms and not on ours nor those stated terms of the denominational councils. It is our job to be willing to bear the anger and rejection of others... even of our fellow brethren... because what we teach and do will not always meet their expectations or will it make their lives more comfortable. On the other hand it is **not** our job to be people pleasers, but rather God pleasers. Yeshua was willing to displease the Jewish faith leadership and most of His fellow Jews in order to reform the Jewish faith back into what God had given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. This bold teaching of truth was the catalyst that led Him to the cross.

The next woe Christ hurls at the Scribes and Pharisees is in verse 15 (remember; some Bibles have a verse 14 and some don't). It is about their great efforts to proselytize. There is reasonable disagreement among good Bible scholars over whether Jesus is referring to Jews proselytizing gentiles, or the Pharisees attempting to sway Diaspora Jews to their Pharisaical Traditions and doctrines. Other than this rather ambiguous statement from Yeshua, there is no historical evidence that prior to the destruction of the Temple and the birth of Rabbinic Judaism that Jews ever tried in the least to convert gentiles to the Jewish faith. We do read in Josephus's Jewish Wars of many gentiles being **attracted** to Judaism. He never accused the Rabbis of proselytizing gentiles, although certainly some small level of outreach must have occurred. Even so, he was writing specifically about a time well after 70 A.D. ... some 40 or more years after the death of Christ and a few years after Paul died. Therefore my opinion is that the viewpoint among some Bible scholars that the Jewish missionary activity spoken of here is directed towards pagan gentiles is born out of the Church wanting to connect this passage to the dreaded "judaizing" that we read about in some of Paul's Epistles; a term that Christians generally regard as wholly negative, ungodly, and an arch enemy of the Church. However that view seems so entirely out of place from what we know historically and from what we read in the Bible. Rather it seems to me that considering the Jewish culture, customs and faith of the times, and that when we hear of Peter and other Jewish Believers going to gentiles that they risked being shunned or worse by their Jewish friends and religious leaders, that what must be happening is that the Pharisees went about trying to sway some of the millions of Jews in the Diaspora to adopt their particular doctrines and Traditions that were far more onerous and strict than what they had been practicing in their Synagogues in Europe, Asia, and Northern Africa. In other words, the Pharisees' traveling far and wide was a competition to



acquire adherents to their own Jewish sect, from within the many far-flung colonies of Jewish culture, and it never involved gentiles. Even Christ instructed His disciples to go ONLY to the Jewish people with the Good News. In fact, Yeshua railing against the Scribes and Pharisees for teaching their misguided Traditions to other Jews has been the central focus for a few chapters in Matthew, now. So to interpret this passage as indicating Pharisees proselytizing gentiles just doesn't fit any context that we've come across.

So what is being spoken of here is the passionate determination of the sect of the Pharisees that spares no time or expense or travel dangers to convert marginal Jews to the strict **Halakhah** (doctrines) of the Pharisees. The least we can say is that while the Pharisee leadership might not have practiced what they preached, they seemed to believe most of what they taught. In Christ's mind this great passion made them all the more threatening to the spiritual welfare of the Jews who expected to be part of the Kingdom of Heaven nearly exclusively by means of their birth as Jews. And, says Jesus, whenever these Jewish missionaries convert another Jew to their **Halakhah**, it makes the convert fit only for **Gei-Hinnom**... or in English, Gehenna. No, this was not speaking about the Christian Hell. Clearly this was some kind of ancient Hebrew religious expression that meant those Jews excluded from God's Kingdom... Jews that were so sinful (like prostitutes and tax collectors) that they were not allowed to be part of it. However since the Jewish faith didn't contemplate the idea of gentiles EVER being **part of God's Kingdom anyway, then being cast into Gei-Hinnom** generally speaking was not meant as a possibility for gentiles.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> woe begins in verse 16. I have so far mentioned that the issue with the Synagogue authorities (the Scribes and the Pharisees) is their **Halakah** (their Traditions) that rule the sect and therefore become the lifestyle of the common Jews, almost all of which belong to one Synagogue or another. So after the first 2 woes being rather general in nature, this 3<sup>rd</sup> one specifically addresses certain Traditions that Jesus finds as absurd on their face. I want to be clear: Yeshua is not being hypothetical. He's also not exaggerating. These are actual Jewish Laws of at least some of the Pharisees. It takes up a few verses so let's re-read about the 3<sup>rd</sup> woe.

### RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 23:16 - 22

What connects these various examples that Christ gives is Temple ritual. And, since this scolding by Jesus is taking place at the Temple... and it's during the

Passover festival in Jerusalem... the object lesson about **Halakhah** as concerns Temple ritual makes sense. To be clear, however, this is ritual based upon Pharisee Traditions and not so much rules imposed by the Sadducees (although the 2 religious factions could well have agreed upon them). This begins by dealing with the important matter of oaths. Oaths were important in Jewish society because most business transactions were settled orally and were not written down. But also because people, in regular conversation, had started using oaths to amplify their "yes" or "no". These business transactions among Jews were seen as guaranteed by God if an oath was pronounced by both parties and so an oath was part of nearly every business matter. Thus the religious authorities determined what constituted a valid and binding oath... and what didn't. Naturally since all oaths among Jews necessarily invoked the God of Israel, then indeed it was a religious matter.

The Pharisees then had all sorts of built-in loop holes by which someone could declare an oath, but it was non-binding. Yeshua's position was that all oaths are binding because all oaths invoke the God of Israel. He calls those who make and enforce those rules "blind guides". There is no question to exactly whom He's referring because in chapter 15 He used the same epithet for the Pharisee leaders.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Matthew 15:14** *Let them be. They are blind guides. When a blind man guides another blind man, both will fall in a pit."*

In this point and counterpoint session about the different oaths being used, notice how the Pharisees sought to avoid using God's name. That is, for a couple of different reasons they sought to avoid directly invoking God. First, it was because beginning late in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. a superstition had broken out against saying God's formal name (Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh... Yehoveh). It soon expanded to not saying the word "God" out loud and then soon after to not writing it. This taboo remains intact to this very day in the 21st century within Judaism. The second reason to avoid directly invoking God is because it can make the oath more malleable and so a business partner can find a way out or a way to keep it enforced. No doubt the particular oath formulas Yeshua spoke about were real and commonly used; this was not a joke even though it might sound ludicrous to us when we read of it.

So, if a shrewd Jew swore an oath using the Temple as the guarantor, then he could back out. But, if He swore an oath on the gold used inside the Temple, then

he couldn't. "You blind fools", says Christ (not exactly a nice thing to say, was it?). He asks, which is more important (that is, which has more gravitas)? The Temple or the gold inside of it? Then Yeshua teaches something that the Pharisees would have known if they had been Torah scholars instead of **Halakhah** scholars. He says it is the holy Temple that makes the gold holy. This is the principle that holiness can be spread through contact. That is, a common object (like gold) coming into contact with a holy object (like the Temple) transfers holiness to the common object making it holy as well. The Torah explains that holiness must NOT be accidentally spread or maliciously misappropriated by human device.

We should remember from the Book of Numbers the terrible outcome for the Levite Korach who rebelled against Moses and argued against God's command that only a certain clan of Levites (and it wasn't Korach's clan) would be allowed to come near to God's holiness and serve in the Tabernacle (a great honor). Moses put Korach's assertion to the test. Korach and 250 other men approached the Wilderness Tabernacle with their incense burners. Moses said that God would then reveal who had the authority to be near holiness. As the men approached the Tabernacle, God struck them all down with fire from Heaven, even destroying their fire pans (their incense burners). Why? The men in consequence of their rebellion, and the fire pans because they had contracted holiness from being so close to the holy Tabernacle. God wouldn't allow objects that maliciously and wrongly misappropriated holiness to continue to exist. God and God alone controls who and what can be holy.

Using this same ancient Torah principle Yeshua says that another common dodge used by shrewd Pharisees is to swear by the altar, because that Pharisee believes this can allow him to easily renounce his oath. But, if he swears by the offering (the sacrifice) that is placed on the altar, he cannot back out. Yeshua says that their logic for this Tradition again is hugely faulty because an offering of itself is not holy; it is merely common. It is only the holiness of the Temple altar that gets transferred to the offering that makes the offering holy once it is set upon the holy altar.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Exodus 29:37** *Seven days you will make atonement on the altar and consecrate it; thus the altar will be especially holy, and whatever touches the altar will become holy.*

In verse 22 we find that it had become another Tradition that one could swear by

Heaven, and it too wasn't binding on the oath maker. There's a nuance here that is not visible to us unless we understand it in 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish cultural terms. Using the word "Heaven" in that era was simply a way to refer to God without breaking the taboo against saying the word "God" or saying His Name. This is why we see the Gospel writer Matthew (the righteous Jewish Believer) using the term Kingdom of **Heaven** so often instead of Kingdom of God as the other Gospel accounts do. Heaven and God were essentially synonymous terms, but saying Heaven was a religiously and culturally allowable loophole while saying God was not. This rule was **Halakhah**... Jewish Tradition... and not scripturally correct. However says Christ, since Heaven is God's throne and it represents the One sitting on it, then saying Heaven is just as binding as if God Himself were invoked. So, the terms Heaven and God meant essentially the same thing and one couldn't wiggle out of it just because some Pharisee with religious authority said so. This isn't because the 2 terms technically mean the same (they obviously don't), but because the leaders of Judaism thought they could be clever and refer to God by saying "Heaven" and thus obey Jewish Law.

Please follow along with me on this. I think it is fascinating and very revealing that the only time in the Book of Matthew that we find the phrase Kingdom of God is when Matthew is quoting Yeshua. Only 5 times in Matthew do we find the phrase "Kingdom of God", but we find him using "Kingdom of Heaven" more than 40 times. In Mark we **never** find the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven"; rather only "Kingdom of God" and it is the same in Luke. Why the stark difference? Because Mark and Luke were gentiles and so didn't observe the Jewish taboo of not saying "God". They were also not writing their Gospels for use by the Jewish community but rather by the gentile community, so saying "God" would not have brought a swift negative reaction. Equally fascinating is that Christ is quoted in all the Gospel accounts as sometimes saying "Kingdom of God". This means that Yeshua did NOT adhere to the Traditional Jewish taboo of refraining from using the word God. Jesus saying "God" out loud would have surprised any Jew; and would have deeply upset the Pharisees.

Next up is the 4th woe, which we'll get into next time.