

Masterwork of the Messiah

Expositional Study Of Matthew's Gospel

Fakes, Phonies, & The Faithful: Part 2

Matthew 23:16-26

Written By

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The fortress, in John Bunyan's classic work called *The Holy War*, is besieged by ruthless, powerful forces; however, the enemies are unable to capture the fortress unless the massive gates are opened from the inside. How did the enemies strategize to get these gates open? Speaking to his buddies, Diabolus states with a raspy voice, "We'll cajole them, delude them, pretending things that will never be and promising things they shall never get. Lies, lies, lies --- the only way to get Mansoul to let us in."¹

In Christ's day, Diabolus, also known as the Devil, was working overtime through the teaching of the religious leaders of Israel. The lies these power-hungry, self-absorbed, arrogant, self-righteous men perpetuated promised the kingdom of God based upon endless adherence to religious laws they tacked onto the Law of Moses. Their false teaching, couched in such nice, lofty terms, followed by blinding, mindless obedience, led them and their adherents not to freedom and bliss but to slavery and destruction, nationally and spiritually. Further, those who were exposed to their deceptive teaching became so superstitiously and zealously attached to it they were blinded to the message of the Messiah, the true spiritual teacher and true King of

¹ Ethel Barrett, *Chronicles of Mansoul* (Glendale: Regal, 1980:5).

Kings, when He arrived. The religious leaders bore full responsibility for permitting Diabolus in the gate, resulting in the deception and ruination of the nation.

No wonder Jesus, the proven and prophesied Messiah, castigated them with seven ominous woes in His final message to them on the Temple mount the last Tuesday of His life. He didn't scream and yell at them, nor did anger consume Him. Quite the contrary. He yearned for them to be men of God, to love God, and to embrace Him as the Son of God, as foretold by the prophets (Isaiah 7:14, 42; 53; Micah 5:2). Their rejection of the best evidences He could produce for His messiahship left Him with no choice but to publically expose their pseudo-orthodoxy, to pull the thin veneer back of their false righteousness so they, and everyone else, could see their wickedness and the dangerous nature of their lies.

Our times, in many respects, are very similar. The gates of our once great, predominately God-fearing, law-respecting land, have been opened by devious religious, political, intellectual leaders whose mouths are full of lies, lies meant to deceive the masses, lies designed to control the masses, and lies constructed in order to silence and sideline the faith in the Messiah, Jesus. Our responsibility in this dark day is akin to that of Christ. We, too, must stand our ground and go on the verbal offensive, with hearts full of love for the lost, where spiritual truth and error are concerned. Are you prepared? Again, our calling from Christ's model couldn't be clearer:

Oppose False Teaching & False Spirituality (Matthew 23:13-39)

When false teachers opened the gates in Jerusalem in the tenuous times before the fall of Judah in 586 B.C. by promising peace to the people, despite the fact the Babylonians were positioning themselves to overrun the Israelites, Jeremiah, the one lone voice of truth, courageously spoke up, addressing the dangerous teaching the false religious and political leaders espoused with confident smiles on their faces.

⁸ How can you say, 'We are wise, and the law of the LORD is with us'? But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie. ⁹ The wise men are put to shame, They are dismayed and caught; Behold, they have rejected the word of the LORD, And what kind of wisdom do they have? ¹⁰ Therefore I will give their wives to others, their fields to new owners; because from the least even to the greatest everyone is greedy for gain; from the prophet even to the priest everyone practices deceit. ¹¹ "And they heal the brokenness of the daughter of My people superficially, Saying, 'Peace, peace,' But there is no peace. ¹² Were they ashamed because of the abomination they had done? They certainly were not ashamed, and they did not know how to blush; Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time of their punishment they shall be brought down," Declares the LORD. ¹³ "I will surely snatch them away," declares the LORD; "There will be no grapes on the vine, and no figs on the fig tree, and the leaf shall wither; and what I have given them shall pass away." ¹⁴ Why are we sitting still? Assemble yourselves, and let us go into the fortified cities, and let us perish there, because the LORD our God has doomed us and given us poisoned water to drink, for we have sinned against the LORD (Jeremiah 8).

No wonder the culture didn't like Jeremiah. He spoke truth in a truthless time. He dared to tell the powerful political and religious leaders of his day their nice-sounding, comfortable message to the people was nothing more than an outright, despicable lie, a lie which would cost them the kingdom if no contriteness and repentance followed his true message from the Word of God.

Might we be like Jeremiah who bravely spoke up and out against false teaching in his day. Might we be like Jesus, the ultimate prophet, who exposed the devilish teachings of His day. When you get the courage to say what needs saying, you must, by definition, speak openly and honestly about ...

The Reality of Condemnation (Matthew 23:13-33)

Yes, condemnation will come against those who teach and follow false teaching. Here in these teaching session with Christ, we see not just seven woes, or words of condemnation, but where exactly the religious leaders were theologically wrong in what they taught themselves and the masses. We also learn, from a positive perspective, how God wants His kingdom people, His disciples to act like while they are His representatives on earth.

Delving into the Christ's next three divine woes we gain deeper insight into the method and message of false teachers and leaders.

False Religionists Cling To Lies (Matthew 23:16-22). For those who seek to hold onto power, who desire to mislead the masses so they can control them, who hate the light and love the darkness, they are masters of evasion, of lying while they are telling you they are people of truth. Jesus, in line with Jeremiah, took these devious, dangerous people to task by exposing their deceptive ways which they had wrapped up in religious language:

¹⁶ Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obligated.' ¹⁷ You fools and blind men; which is more important, the gold, or the temple that sanctified the gold? ¹⁸ And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering upon it, he is obligated.' Matthew 23).

How interesting. How clever.

Diabolus, the father of lies (John 8:44), worked overtime in the lives of the Pharisees, the *Chasidim*, or the pious ones, who were also known as the *Perushim*, the separated ones.² In order to get out of some commitments they had agreed to in oaths, these religious leaders, and I use that term loosely, devised a slick system for breaking your word. If you swore by the temple, you didn't have to keep your word; however, if you swore by the gold built into the temple, then you had to keep your word. "I swear by the holy temple I will loan you my camel next Tuesday while your camel is at the vet. Yes, my friend, you can count on me, a fellow Jew, a brother through our forefather Abraham." Right. You could break that oath all day long.

Further, if you swore by the holy altar, then you could break your word if you needed to, and God wouldn't be upset with you; however, if you said, "I swear by the offering Jews place on the holy altar of God I will fix your wagon for three hundred shekels," then you had to perform or risk sinning against God. The Pharisees were nothing more than clever sinners, and they

² Alfred Edersheim, *Life And Times Of Jesus The Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1981): Book I: 323.

crafted an entire tractate in the Mishnah to cover binding versus non-binding oaths (Shebu'ot). Read it and you'll see just how many ways they devised to evade commitments and to just downright lie to others.

How did Jesus respond to their gamesmanship in playing fast and loose with being truth-speakers? He couldn't have been more forthright:

¹⁹ You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering? ²⁰ "Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. ²¹ And he who swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. ²² And he who swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it (Matthew 23).

In our day, Christ's argument is called an *a fortiori* argument, one which moves from the lesser to the greater. In His day, the rabbis called this *kal va-chomer*, and every Pharisee listening to Him knew exactly what He meant because He spoke their lingo. Did they actually think God would care about their fine distinctions? He didn't. Did they think the gold of the temple was more important than the temple? It was not. The entire Temple compound was holy because it was God's Temple, the place where He said He would dwell. To pick it apart, making some parts more important than others so you could craft oaths you could easily break, missed the Temple concept completely.

What did God demand? Truth. As Jesus pointed out in His Sermon on the Mount, His followers were/are to be known for being people of their word, so much so, they wouldn't even need to take an oath (Matthew 5:34-37). God is not a liar (Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:29), and, based on His holy character, it is impossible for Him to ever lie (Hebrews 6:18). It logically follows, then, that God hates (yes, that is a strong term, but it is biblical) liars and lying (Proverbs 6:17; 12:2). Speaking a few years later, Paul, the converted rabbi who had been trained in the art of acceptable deception, gave kingdom members these marching orders:

"Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices" (Colossians 3:9).

Grammatically this command, which is composed of a negative wedded to a present imperative, forbids an action in progress.³ It's as if Paul said, "Stop lying to each other!" Why? Because this is what your old, sinful man used to do so well. On the contrary, speak truth!" Obviously, some members of the church in Colossae had an issue with lying.

What about you? Are you a clever sinner, a crafty liar as a kingdom member? Do you purposefully mislead others around you for a variety of selfish reasons? Do you shave the truth to make yourself look better to others? Are you lying to your wife about some hidden sin, some forbidden relationship? Are you lying to your parents about who you were with last Friday night and what you were doing? Is your resume truthful in every respect? Really, do you live your life above board, speaking truth, even if it is the harder thing to do? Jesus exposed the lying ways of

³ H.E. Dana & Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1957): 301. On the contrary, "the purpose of a prohibition, when expressed by the aorist subjunctive, is to forbid a thing before it has begun; i.e., it commands to never do a thing. But a prohibition in the present imperative means to forbid the continuance of an act, it commands to quit doing a thing."

the Pharisees to condemn them and to warn His disciples of what He expected from them as His new religious leaders.

Just like ancient Israel, both in the Old and New Testament times, our nation is awash with lies and deception, the very thing which is the precursor to the fall of a nation. To read through the prophets is to recount how this sin destroyed the nation from within (Isaiah 59:13; Jeremiah 6:9-19; 9:3-6; Ezekiel 13:19; 21:29; 22:28; Micah 6:12). Israel's leaders, both religious and political, hadn't learned anything from their past in Christ's day. No, they carried out the same deadly, destructive sin of their forefathers and it ultimately cost them heaven, because they bought into false notions about how to get there, and it cost them their nation because they rejected the long-awaited Messiah. Think of the lies we hear repeated so often they start sounding like truth:

- It's all right if they live together before they get married. That way they can see if they are compatible. *Right.*
- There won't be eternal punishment for those who reject Christ. *Right.*
- All religions are equal and it is wrong to say that one might be more important than another. *Right.*
- It's not sexual perversion, but rather how they are made biologically speaking. *Right.*
- It's not a dangerous religion, even though some of their proponents evidence violence around the world. *Right.*
- It's not a planned invasion on our border but a humanitarian situation. *Right.*
- The Bible is just one religious book of many viable religious books. *Right.*
- We have no idea how all those files from all those witnesses just happened to all get deleted from those hard drives around the same time. *Right.*
- We can continue to spend money we don't have and do it without a budget because nothing will ever happen. *Right.*
- Christians are equal to fanatical religious terrorists. *Right.*
- There are no logical proofs for the existence of a personal God, so let's just embrace science as our life-guide. *Right.*
- Their divorce should be acceptable to God because it is based on incompatibility. *Right.*
- All you have to do to get into heaven is believe in God and just be a really good person. *Right. (I heard that this week from a lady.)*
- You have a birthday and a deathday and after that it's over. *Right.*
- I wasn't gossiping about so and so. No, I was just sharing some real spiritual concerns with others so they could pray for her. *Right.*
- It's just medicinal marijuana. *Right.*
- I broke my confidence with so and so because I was so concerned about them. *Right.*

Lies. We are awash in them. Let us, as Christians, not have any Pharisaism about us where truth is concerned. On the contrary, might we be people who speak truth at all times, and who

also hold others accountable for doing likewise. Such activity will not only bring the blessing of God, it just might turn our nation back to God.

A fourth thing Christ condemns the religious elites of His day for must have shocked them. Ostensibly, it is a sin still alive and well on planet earth.

False Religionist Confuse Priorities (Matthew 23:23-24). Translated into our vernacular: they major on the minors, and minor on the majors. Here's how Jesus pointedly put it ...

²³ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, ...

Hold it right there.

Note: Jesus didn't criticize the Pharisees here for their devotion to tithing, as prescribed in the Mosaic Law, but for their devotion to lesser spiritual values at the expense of greater ones. Not that any of us can relate, right?

Basically, as Edersheim notes, there were two classifications of Pharisees. The *Chabher*, or the associate. He was committed "to observe in the strictest manner, and according to traditional law, all the ordinances concerning Levitical purity; and to be extremely punctilious in all connected with religious dues (tithes and all other dues)."⁴ Should you only desire to observe just the tithes part of this equation, you would be called a *Neeman*, or an accredited one; however, greater prestige and power came with the former title. The whole system was designed to elevate the pride residing in every man's heart. Tithe like a Pharisee and you, above all people, were obedient and accepted by God. Or so they thought.

Take a look, for a moment, at what the Mosaic Law actually said about tithing.

According to Leviticus 27:30ff, Israelites had to give a tenth of their crops to the Lord each year, coupled with a second tenth annually for the support of worship ceremonies and festivals (Deuteronomy 12:11, 17). Every three years, an additional tithe, amounting to 3.3% annual, was tithed to support the Levites, aliens, orphans and needy widows (Deuteronomy 14:28-29). All told, God commanded Israel to give 23% of their monies to the support of His work.

We are no longer under the Law. Aren't you glad? Now, God wants us to have a planned giving program based on our freewill and wedded to our appreciation of how He has blessed us (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15). Before we get into what the Pharisees did with God's command for them to tithe, let me ask you an important personal question: "As a follower of Jesus, do you have a planned program for giving to support His work through the local church?" Here's another, "Are you giving in light of His blessing on your life?" And one more, "Are you giving sacrificially, meaning is it a real commitment for you to give money freely unto Him?" We should all, as kingdom members, be known as magnanimous givers to support God's work in and through the local church ... just like the New Testament believers did. This September we will be challenging you to give over and above to our new building program designed to accommodate our near triple numerical growth. On September 28th we will all be challenged to turn in pledge cards denoting what we plan to do above our normal giving. Might the Lord's face shine upon each of us because He sees hearts focused on giving to help train more saints in

⁴ Edersheim, *Life And Times*: Book I: 331.

the ways of holiness and on seeking to reach more non-believers with the life-changing power of the gospel.

Anyway, back the Pharisees who completely missed what God wanted them to do.

According to Jesus, these pious, zealous men tithed on dill, mint, and cumin. What does that mean? It means they took the law of tithing to an extreme. God never commanded them to tithe from non-marketable small plants like this. But the legalistic-loving, highly superstitious Pharisees made sure that they gave God His supposed due even from the most insignificant potted plants around their houses. If a mint plant had twenty leaves, they'd count them and then give God two leaves. If a dill plant produced fifty seeds, they'd meticulously count them out and give God five. Anyone watching them would have quickly said, "Boy, if anyone is holy, they are."

Note, again, Christ didn't castigate them for tithing, but for taking tithing to a whole new (extreme) level of minutiae God didn't care about while neglecting more important aspects of the Mosaic Law. As he said,

... and [you] have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.

They were so busy meticulously making sure the plants their wife brought home from the local Wegman's were properly counted and tithed from, they had completely forgotten about the more valuable aspects of God's Law like justice, mercy, and faithfulness.⁵

In the Old Testament, God laid out what concepts were more near and dear to His heart. Listen and learn because the Pharisees didn't:

³ To do righteousness and justice is desired by the LORD rather than sacrifice (Proverbs 21).

You could bring sacrifices every day to the Temple; however, if your life didn't pursue righteousness and justice, God didn't place a great value on the sacrifice, even though He commanded it (Leviticus 1-7).

Here's another:

⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6).

And who can forget what the prophet Samuel said to King Saul after his disobedience to God's command followed by the desire to offer multiple animal sacrifices from his war booty:

⁵ The article "the" is added to each of the words, viz., justice, mercy, faithfulness, and is thereby classified grammatically as the anaphoric use of the article, or previous reference. Ostensibly, this serves to point the reader back to where these words have been used before in the narrative of the book: justice (Matthew 12:20); mercy (Matthew 9:13); faithfulness (Matthew 9:2, 29). By doing this, Jesus demonstrated He did, in fact, focus on these key Old Testament concepts, just as the Father had in ancient times.

“And Samuel said, “Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22).

Don't neglect Zechariah 7:9-10, either.

The Pharisees evidenced obedience in areas of tithing God never addressed, and couldn't care less about; however, they demonstrated disobedience toward the greater values like justice, mercy, and faithfulness in their private, personal lives. On that fateful Friday, these passionate, legalistically meticulous men would show their disobedience by unjustly accusing Christ of blasphemy and sedition, they would embrace ruthlessness as they sought to convict an innocent man of a capital crime, and they would show they were not faithful to God because they were going to attack God for interrupting and challenging their well-ordered religious machinery. How utterly tragic.

How utterly ironic. They, who attempted to keep from being defiled by little things, were defiled by bigger things. Realizing this moved Jesus to condemn them in the most humorous fashion:

²⁴ You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

Pharisees were known for placing pieces of gauze over cups so as not to inadvertently drink an unclean little bug like a gnat. God forbid they be spiritually defiled in this way! To watch them drink must have been sort of funny as they sought to keep all the little bugs out of their mouths. If gauze wasn't available, they would clench their teeth to keep bugs out so they'd keep defilement at bay. Talk about devotion to the smallest ceremonial detail.

Yet, while they drank like this, Christ said they really drank an unclean camel with no problem. They were so worried about being defiled by a gnat their penchant for being unjust, unmerciful, and unfaithful caused them to drink the equivalent of unclean camels all the time.⁶ You pick up Christ's humor with the word choices here.

ὁδηγοὶ τυφλοὶ οἱ διυλίζοντες τὸν κώνωπα τὴν δὲ κάμηλον καταπίνοντες

Straining, διυλίζοντες (a present tense participle denoting they did this as a lifestyle) sounds very similar to the swallowing, καταπίνοντες (a present tense participle also denoting a perpetual action). It a play on words which I'm sure brought a smile to the faces of the masses and a frown to the Pharisees. Another play on words occurs here in the Aramaic. In that language, which Christ would have spoken, gnat is *galma*, and camel is *gamla*.⁷ Now you have a better idea of what Christ was so interesting to listen to. He mixed humor with the most powerful, penetrating message in order to drive home His timeless truths to a spiritually

⁶ But their tithing served only as a smoke screen, distracting people from noticing that they had neglected **the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness** (cf. Deut. 10:12–13; Mic. 6:8). They made it appear that they were paying “full rent,” when in reality they were only keeping up the “newspaper subscription.” The implication is that they were guilty p 378 of committing injustice and acting unmercifully at the expense of others and for their own profit. Stuart Weber, *Matthew: Holman New Testament Commentary*, Vol. New Testament Commentary, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Boardman & Holman, 2000): 377.

⁷ Craig Bloomberg, *The New American Commentary: Matthew*. Vol. 22 (Broadman & Holman New Testament Commentary, Vol. , 1992): 346.

darkened people. I'm sure they got the point. They focused on the religious/spiritual minors while neglecting the religious/spiritual majors.

Don't think, for a minute that is not still applicable today. This word readily applied to the disciples, and it still speaks to us to day. Once legalism seeps into your life, it poisons you into thinking that spiritual majors are minors and vice versa. Next thing you know, you are all uptight and focused on all the wrong things, while neglecting the more important teachings of the Word of God.

A man walked into my last church with his family in tow. After I greeted him, he looked at the stage and said, "Pastor, are those drums on the stage?" "Why, yes, they are. We use them for worship" I replied.

He didn't say a word. He motioned and his family, turned around in almost military fashion, and walked out, never to return. It's probably good he didn't stay, because his Pharisaical type usually tries to get the drums relegated to a backroom somewhere in church.

Is he you? Are you wound around the axel of secondary religious/ spiritual matters so tightly you are not giving proper time and attention to the more lofty teachings and commands of God? More precisely, "Are you in a situation right now calling for justice, but you are withholding it?" "Is there someone you know you should show mercy to but you haven't?" "Are you being faithful to the things God is concerned about, or are you all caught up with being devoted to religious/spiritual items you are concerned about?"⁸

Show me a weak church and I'll show you a group of people quibbling over things which won't really matter in time and eternity. Show me a strong church and I'll show you a group of people committed to the things which God says are super important to Him. Oh, Lord, make us the latter church, fashion us into the latter people.

Diabolus is inside the city gate, and he's wreaking havoc on our society and he's trashing churches all over the place. It's time God's people banded together and drove him and his minions outside the gate so God's kingdom can advance with blazing speed. You, as a Christ-follower, can help do your part in pushing him out of the gate by doing two things: Be a truth-teller, and be known as a Christian who gives your time to those biblical/spiritual concepts with count for time and eternity.

There is much work to do. Let's get to it.

⁸ *Faith* is a comprehensive term which is used to define the proper relation that should exist between God and his people, and among God's people. It is best represented by "faithfulness" (NIV) or "good faith" (Phps, NJB, NEB, NAB). It can also be "to be faithful to God" or "to be faithful in doing all that is required of you." A verb construction is possible for the three terms: "to treat others with fairness and mercy and to be faithful to God." Barclay Newman and Philip Stine. *A Handbook On The Gospel Of Matthew* (New York: United Bible Societies: 1992): 216.