

# Masterwork of the Messiah

## Expositional Study Of Matthew's Gospel

*Are You A Walker Or A Talker?*

Matthew 23:1-12

Written By

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**W**hile in Israel in April of 2013, I caught a glimpse of Pharisaism, or what we might call legalism, in action.

On the Jewish Sabbath (which is from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday), a group of Orthodox children played with a soccer ball in the hallway outside of the rooms of some of our group. Hearing the loud commotion, one of our men opened his door and checked out the source of the loud yelling and banging. Seeing the children having fun, he grabbed his trusty camera to snap a shot of real Jewish life in action, but he never got to take the shot. Right as he got everything in focus and prepared to push the button, a Jewish mother came out of the room yelling at him in Hebrew.

Looking up he said, "Do you mind if I take a picture of your children playing?"

"No," she replied and then in broken English she emphatically stated, "You cannot push that button on the camera in Sabbath."

"Why?" he asked like anyone of us westerners would have.

"Because that would be work, and to work is to break the Sabbath" she commented, and with that she gathered up her children and abruptly shut the door to her room.

Interesting, isn't it? It wasn't work to open the door, or to throw the latch to lock the door when she shut it, or for the children to be exerting physical activity by kicking a ball up

and down a once quiet hallway; however, pushing that little button on the camera would have been a major infraction on spiritual law. Right.

And you thought Pharisaism was dead and gone. Think again. It's alive and well in Israel and you don't have to look far to find it in our own land either. Why, with a little soul-searching you might be able to find it in your own life, you know, it is that desire to live by rules and regulations God never gave us in order to help us earn favor with Him. Yes, the legalist loves their laws which supposedly guide adherents to spirituality if they are faithfully and perpetually observed, and ostensibly there is little or no room for grace and love. No, the law is worshipped above all else to the point that a relationship with the living God is completely obscured from view.

Late on the final Tuesday of His life, Jesus wrapped up His final public message to the Jewish public at large. The legalistic religious leaders, viz., the Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, saw Jesus' message of grace and love as a threat to their message of salvation by means of a perpetual adherence to all of their blinding rules and regulations. Yes, their devotion and passion to the Mosaic Law burned so intensely they, i.e., the Scribes, had devised over fifty volumes to house the plethora of additional regulations to keep a person from disobeying the commands of the prophet and lawgiver. If you wanted to know specifically how many steps you could take on the Sabbath to remain holy, they told you. If you were a cripple and wanted to know if you could go out in public with your wooden stump or not, they told you in binding, mind-numbing rules.<sup>1</sup> Yes, follow their endless, ridiculous religious rules and perhaps you would see the God who was so honored by their stellar and faithful observance of the written and oral Law of God.

After several failed attempts to silence Jesus on the Temple mount that Tuesday afternoon, they became silent and melted back into the large crowd (Matthew 22:46). Their best attacks against Him with some of their best men failed miserably as He, the master teacher and debater, put them in their proverbial place in chapter twenty-three by going on the apologetic offensive. And with so much at stake, with eternity hanging in the balance for so many who had bought into their false theology, and with His disciples struggling with some of the same spiritual issues as the carnal, self-absorbed religious leaders, Jesus turned and leveled their godless, arrogant, showy religion with some of the harshest words He ever spoke. He used pejorative terms like hypocrites (v. 13), blind men (v. 16), whitewashed tombs (v. 27), and serpents (v. 33) to cast judgment on them. So much for being nice, warm, tolerant, and accepting. No, when it came down to a fight between spiritual truth and spiritual error, Jesus minced no words.

Let me caution you, however. Don't get caught up in Christ's final denunciation of the false religious system of the Jewish religious leaders, thinking it was about time He put them down. On the contrary, do pay attention to what these words say to you. Why do I say this? Because of whom Matthew and Luke tell us Jesus spoke to:

“Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples” (Matthew 23:1).

“And while all the people were listening, He said to the disciples” (Luke 20:45).

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<sup>1</sup> *Mishnah*, Sabbath: 5:8.

The religious leaders were, no doubt, sitting among the people, probably in small groups. However, Christ's words here, while an open and biting condemnation on the entire Pharisaical intricately devised religious system, were, first and foremost, a word of warning to His followers. Put differently, Jesus wanted to caution His people about eventually turning the gracious gospel and kingdom message into the debacle of the Pharisaic system. Further, He desired to warn His followers of moving from love to legalism, of becoming lovers of the law instead of being lovers of the Lord. We can get into His timely message in chapter 23 by posing the question which naturally arises from the opening twelve verses:

## Are You A Faithful Follower? (Matthew 23:1-12)

The faith of the religious leaders, the faith they sought to teach all the people was wrapped up in all the things God hates: pride, power, and prestige. From what we know of the disciples and their constant argument about who would be the greatest, they, too, had Pharisaism all about them. Maybe it's all about you. Maybe it's time for you to do a little soul-searching as a saint and ask the Lord, "Lord, am I living as you would have me live as your ambassador, or is my faith encumbered by all the wrong things?" A series of questions which naturally arise from these verses just might help you ascertain how you are doing in really living like a kingdom member.

## Are You Guilty Of Talking And Not Walking? (Matthew 23:1-3)

A talker is one who sounds spiritual, who drops spiritual words into the conversation, who is the first one to lay down the spiritual law, who will quote a verse to get others to be obedient or to turn from sin, but who, in the final analysis, is the last one to actually apply the Word or law to their own life in private. Such were the religious leaders Christ faced.



<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; <sup>3</sup> therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them.

The seat of Moses was typically an ornately carved seat located at the front of a Jewish synagogue, and it is where the rabbis theoretically sat as they pontificated and taught about the laws of God; coupled with the laws they had devised to help God-fearing Jews obey all of God's laws. Here is a picture of replica of the prestigious chair from synagogue of Chorazin, located on the beautiful, grass-sloped hills of north-eastern Galilee. This particular basalt seat contains an inscription when mentions Yudan, son of Yishmael, who donated his wealth to the building of the synagogue. Guess making sure everyone knows of

your financial largesse to God is nothing new. Anyway, to teach from this chair meant you, supposedly, had authority derived ... or passed down ... from Moses himself.

True, on many occasions, Jesus warned about the dangerous and mis-guided nature of the teaching of the Scribes and the Pharisees (Matthew 5:21-48; 15:3-14; 16:12); however, here He actually says to “do and observe all they tell you.” Obviously, Jesus did not contradict His former warnings, but merely underscored that when these religious leaders taught truth derived from the teachings of Moses, obedience *should* follow for the teaching came from the actual revelation of God.

What Jesus opposed was those who traffic in un-lived, untested spiritual truth. The religious leaders were highly skilled at teaching from the Pentateuch and applying Moses’ words to various situations in life; however, where failed miserably, spiritually speaking, because they knew the Word but did not personally obey the Word. Couched differently: they were talkers, not walkers. They could quickly cite chapter and verse you needed to start applying to your life, but they had no intention of making it a part of their lives. Interesting. You can know a lot about the Bible but not have a vibrant, exciting relationship with the living God of the Bible.

Jesus opened with this warning because He didn’t want His disciples to ever be guilty of trafficking in un-lived, untested spiritual truth. What they taught and what they did were supposed to match for that is true spirituality. Anything less is carnality and sin. James speaks about this concern in the New Testament:

<sup>22</sup> But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. <sup>23</sup> For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; <sup>24</sup> for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.

Men, by nature, do not spend a lot of time studying their faces in a mirror. They shave, trim their beards and goatees, and move on, forgetting all the details of their appearance. Such is what a person is like the man who hears the Word of God and does not obey it. He listens to it in a sermon or in a Bible study, walks out the door of the service and forgets what God wanted him to do. He’s onto bigger and better things. Such describes the religious leaders of Christ’s day. Big on hearing. Not big on doing.

What God is looking for is found in the rest of the words of James:

<sup>25</sup> But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

Looking intently in Greek means to stoop or bend over something intently. Applied to the Word of God it means to spend quality personal time bending over it in reading and study, with the sole goal of saying, “Lord, what do you want me to do in order to conform my life to yours? Lord, what do I need to change to become holier?” Reading and hearing the Word of God is supposed to be followed by life change. The ensuing verses tell us this much:

<sup>26</sup> If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> Pure and undefiled

religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1).

If you are truly religious, then you will be a person who hears and does the Word. Are you? Are you in the Word? Is the Word in you? Do you know a lot about the Word with minimal obedience, or does the knowledge you have of the Word change you? Jesus is looking for people to be salt and light in this godless day and age and it all starts with being a walker and not just a talker. Quit talking a good spiritual game, then, and start walking like Jesus in every facet of your life.

Additionally, in your quest to evaluate the nature of your faith, ask yourself:

### Do You Live For Law And Not Love? (Matthew 23:4)

Show me a good, skilled legalist and I'll show you someone who knows how to build and bind others with spiritual laws, rules, and regulations God, in His grace, never laid on us. Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees were the poster children for religious legalists in their day:

<sup>4</sup> They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger.

To read the Mishnah, the written version of the Oral Law which supposedly God gave to Moses on Sinai, is to be overcome with endless and mindless religious laws, covering everything from how to fast on a fast day to how to build a well so that a man did not do anything in sinful fashion.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, there was no way a normal person could ever abide perpetually by all these

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<sup>2</sup> [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org): MISHNAH (Heb. מִשְׁנָה). The term "mishnah" is used in a number of different ways (see below), but when used as a proper noun ("the Mishnah") it designates the collection of rabbinic traditions redacted by Rabbi \*Judah ha-Nasi (usually called simply "Rabbi") at the beginning of the third century CE. The Mishnah supplements, complements, clarifies and systematizes the commandments of the Torah. The Torah, for example, commands: "Remember the Sabbath day" (Ex. 20:8). The Mishnah provides this abstract commandment with a concrete form – the kiddush and havdalah rituals which mark the beginning and the ending of the Sabbath day. The Torah commands "Observe the Sabbath day" (Deut. 6:12). The Mishnah specifies 39 categories of forbidden labor which are prohibited by this commandment, subsuming dozens of other kinds of labor under these 39 headings. The Torah commands: "When you eat and are satisfied, give thanks to your God for the good land which He has given you" (Deut. 8:10). The Mishnah spells out specific blessings to be recited before and after each kind of food, and what to do if the wrong blessing is recited by mistake. It also extends the recitation of blessings to areas other than food, detailing blessings to be recited before and after the performance of commandments, blessings of praise and thanksgiving, even establishing a regular order of daily prayers. When the commandments seem chaotic or inconsistent, as in Lev. 13–14 ("leprosy"), the Mishnah organizes these rules into a consistent system. When they are already relatively detailed and systematic, as in Lev. 1–7 (sacrifices), the Mishnah deals with additional aspects of the halakhah, either ignored or mentioned only in passing in the Torah, such as the proper intentions which should accompany the sacrifices, and the consequences of improper intention.

The contents of the Mishnah are the product of an ongoing process of elaborating and explaining the foundations, the details and the significance of the Torah's commandments. This process began long before the redaction of the Mishnah, and continued throughout the talmudic period (1st to 6th centuries CE) and beyond. Nevertheless, the Mishnah has a unique place within the rabbinic tradition. It was the central literary document of the entire talmudic period, providing the framework for the redaction of its companion volume, the \*Tosefta, and serving as the foundation for both the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud. Through these works the Mishnah has shaped most of the actual practice of the Jewish religion down to the present day. In the post-talmudic period commentaries were composed to the Mishnah, and together with them the Mishnah came to serve as the

minute laws. True, since the religious leaders had more time to devote to keeping these laws, they probably looked quite religious to the commoners of the day; however, they had no intention of ever helping the commoners become more obedient to the “laws of God,” and I use that phrase loosely. Like good legalists, all they cared about was looking good and heaping more and more laws upon those around them so they could lord their power over them. Yes, just when you thought you had done a pretty good job in obeying the oral law, they would move the benchmark in front of you, leaving you feeling helpless, hopeless and dependent on them.

Don't think for a moment believers can't drift down this dangerous river. Let's get down to brass tacks.

- Legalists love to load rules and regulations on others to get them in spiritual shape, rules and regulations God never gave us. Is that you?
- Legalists crush the joy of people around them with their rules and regulations. Is that you?
- Legalists are always getting offended by people who are breaking their contrived and ever expanding rules and regulations. Is that you?
- Legalists don't speak words of love, they speak words of law. Is that you?
- Legalists don't smile much, they frown. Is that you?
- Legalists are grim, exacting, and unbending. Is that you?
- Legalists don't build up faith in people. On the contrary, they build fear. Is that you?

As kingdom members, Jesus wants us to live differently. One key area where we need to begin to do this is in relation to how we live out the faith. Will we live with a heart devoted to dancing and enjoying life because grace is in full abundance, or will it be with a heart in bondage to legalism and getting others into bondage ... all for the sake of looking good others or earning the favor of God? Growing, maturing faith chooses grace, shackle-freeing grace, living every time.

Another key question you have to ask yourself is tucked away in verse 5.

### Do You Flaunt Your Piety? (Matthew 23:5)

The religious leaders of Christ's day lived for showcasing their holiness before others.

<sup>5</sup> But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments.

You name the good work and they performed it. Their motivation? They always desired for others to see their passionate, over-the-top devotion to God. Even their clothing was turned into an advertisement of their self-righteousness. Don't you find it interesting how we can take the teachings and commands of God and turn them into a point of self-glorification?

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authoritative epitome of the talmudic tradition as a whole. In these two roles – as the foundation underlying the talmudic tradition and as the authoritative epitome of that tradition – the Mishnah has played a decisive role in the religious life of the Jewish people.

Four times in the Law God commanded His people to place the Law upon their forehead and their hand as a reminder of His Word and ways (Exodus 13:9, 16; Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18). To fulfill this Law, the religious leaders made phylacteries, or small little boxes containing the law and placed them on their heads and hands by means of leather straps. The box on the wrist contained four Scriptures: Exodus 13:1-10; 13:11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21. The box on the forehead had four compartments, each holding a small scroll of one of the passages just mentioned. In order to show their devotion to God the religious leaders, especially the Pharisees, constructed unusually large boxes nobody could miss when they put them on every day except for Sunday and special holy days.

Additionally, the Law of Moses also called for the Jews to place tassels on the fringes of their garments. Their purpose? To cause the worshipper to remember God and His Law every time they looked down and saw the tassels. Unfortunately, the self-absorbed, narcissistic religious leaders drew much attention to their allegiance to God by making sure their tassels were bigger and bolder than everyone else's. Sad, isn't it? They took the symbol meant to turn their hearts toward God and used it as a means of arrogantly showcasing their self-righteousness before lesser spiritual people. Sickening.

How can we miss the message as Christ's disciples? Flaunting one's piety and holiness is not something restricted to the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Are you guilty? In order to help you answer the question, which is a question I've had to pour over in my own life, let me ask you some questions:

- Do you typically let people know just how much you read your Bible? How often and how long you pray? While there can be viable reasons for communicating what you do for spiritual disciplines, much should be, in my estimation, kept private.
- Do you typically do the majority of the talking in a home Bible study? Sharing is great, but if you are always hogging all the sharing time, I think it is time to check your motivation.
- Do you weave religious jargon into just about every discussion you have in a given day?
- Do you kneel in public to pray but you don't kneel in private?
- Do you waste no time telling people all you've done for God in your lifetime?
- Do you vie for placement in the body where your gifting will be seen publically?

Self-elevation for pietistic purposes is a carnal venture, but it comes so naturally to our sinful bodies.

From a positive perspective, Jesus is looking for saints who do not mind if others do not know what they do for Him. He's looking for believers who quiet and private about what they do to further the cause of the gospel. Will you be this person?

Finally, as we are all doing a little soul-searching to make sure we are walking in a way which brings Christ glory, we need to pay strict attention to His closing counsel in this section from Matthew:

## Are You All About Position And Prominence? (Matthew 23:6-12)

Some people are. Some people have to be seated nearest the bride and groom. Some people get off on who they are with and will waste no time telling you whose company they enjoyed, while others bask and gloat over the titles which either precede or follow their names. We'd call these people snooty, and the word certainly applies to the Scribes, Pharisees, and the Sadducees. As Jesus warned:

<sup>6</sup> They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues,

Underline the word "love." These self-loving, self-righteous men got off on being seated next to prominent people at lavish, no-holds-barred banquets with the best chefs and the most tasty foods. They got off sitting on the raised platform at the front of the synagogue during a service so everyone could see them. Remember back in the day when churches had massive white, ornate chairs situated on the platform for staff to sit in while the pastor spoke? Been there. Done that. How easy it would be for a man to sit there and take in his spiritual importance and worth to the church and to God. For us, I'm glad the staff sits in the audience. But what about you? Are you one who just can't wait to be seen with key Christian people at certain functions?

When you get the e-mail or cell phone number of a notable Christian person, do you waste no time dropping this little tidbit of info into a common conversation? When we looked for an Executive Pastor last year, I spoke with an old classmate of mine from Dallas Theological Seminary. His name? Chip Ingram. Sure he is famous. I am not. But do you see how easy it would be to kind of gloat on the fact I have an e-mail train from Chip?

Let's move on because that is too convicting.

The religious leaders of Christ's day, like people in our times, loved their titles:

<sup>7</sup> and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. <sup>8</sup>

But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. <sup>9</sup> Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven.

<sup>10</sup> Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ.

These arrogant, we-are-full-of-ourselves men relished the moment each time someone in public recognized them and said, "Shalom, Rabbi." To the Jews this was a great honor for it denoted one who was a teacher of the ways of God, and in order to become a rabbi you first had to pay your dues as a disciple or student. When you called a Pharisee a Rabbi, you could just watch sheer enjoyment spread over his humble face as he took in the full meaning of the title.

Jesus commands us, on the contrary, to realize that only He is our Teacher, our final Rabbi. No, this doesn't mean we can't call a pastor a teacher. Paul does in Ephesians 4:11ff. What Jesus is condemning is the ostentatious love of titles among His people. If you have a Ph.D., do saints have to call you doctor? If you run into me in a given Safeway, which is where I usually meet new worshippers, do you have to call me Pastor Marty? You can if you want out of a sense of respect (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13), but I will not get offended if you don't because my life is not about my title. I'm not taking that title to heaven with me, and you aren't taking your title with you either. You're not taking your rank with you to heaven either. You're going to leave that here. What matters is that you walk humbly before God, the One who has all rank and title in the cosmos.

Jesus goes on to forbid us from calling anyone on earth father because we only have one Heavenly Father. Does this mean you cannot and shouldn't call your earthly dad, father? No. In the Jewish culture, please understand, the word father applied specifically to the rabbis, to the greatest, most gifted spiritual teachers of the day.<sup>3</sup> Again, Jesus warned against placing undue importance on titles, even down to calling someone a leader. Yes, it is all right to call a leader at church by that title. The author of Hebrews did (Hebrews 13:24). Once more, Jesus is cautioning against placing undue stress on who a person is within the Church body. He's also cautioning against His leaders thinking their title is all that.

How are we supposed to think about ourselves, even if we happen to be in places of authority in the local church? Jesus tells us in clear, concise, convicting terms:

<sup>11</sup> But the greatest among you shall be your servant. <sup>12</sup> Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.

We are to be known for our humility, not our haughtiness. We are to be known for being servants to others, not in being served. Did you get that? Let it sink deep into the soil of your soul. Life is not about exaltation but about effacement. Life is not about elevation but obscurity. Life is about others, not about ourselves.

Stop and take stock of your spiritual walk right now. Are you really a servant in every sense of the word? What does a humble servant do?

- He gives to support the work of God without compulsion.
- He steps in and serves where there is a need without being prompted, begged, or asked.
- He looks for ways to practically help others with needs.
- He doesn't get his feelings hurt when his gifts are temporarily not used in an up-front fashion. He can joyously live with obscurity while not becoming retaliatory toward those who might send him there.
- He is happy when someone else gets to do something which is seen by others.
- He doesn't get all bent out of shape if his name isn't mentioned when thanks are giving out for a certain church project.
- He doesn't become an irate parent when another person's child gets to do something he wants his child to do. Seeing others excel, seeing other children get ahead of his child in certain scenarios brings a smile to his face because he is for the advancement of the body of Christ.
- He doesn't showcase his family at the expense of other families.

Those who live contrary to the ways of a humble servant will face the great eschatological reversal one day when they stand before God. God elevates the humble, but deflates the prideful. As He continues to work in and through us as a church, it is my prayer we would not be full of ourselves, but full of Him and rich in good deeds based in humility.

The disciples got the message. Acts shows us this much.

Will we all get the message is the question.

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<sup>3</sup> K. Kohler, *Abba Father: Title of Spiritual Leader and Saint*, JQR 13 [1900-1901]: 567-580.

So what about it? Are you a walker or a talker?