

THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Commission: A Study of Matthew 21–28

STUDY EIGHT

Seven Woes and a Wail

Matthew 23:13–39

The scribes and Pharisees were in authority, but their voices had a hollow ring because they were eaten up with hypocrisy. But who could tell those in authority the truth? Only one person, Jesus.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

SINCE few people in Jesus' day had access to the Scriptures, they depended on their spiritual shepherds to lead them in God's way. Scholarly scribes specialized in Bible interpretation and teaching, and the Pharisees focused on religious practice. Together, they had more influence on the spiritual life of the nation than any other leaders.

However, the scribes and Pharisees were more interested in wielding their power and promoting themselves than tending the sheep. They were just as arrogant and abusive as the spiritual shepherds in the Old Testament whom God told Ezekiel to denounce:

“Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? . . . Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them.’” (Ezekiel 34:2, 4 NASB)

Jesus echoed Ezekiel's rebuke with seven “woes” upon the wicked shepherds of His day. These pronouncements represented the most severe judgments Jesus ever uttered. What deeds unleashed His righteous fury? In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we'll examine their wrongdoings, as well as the tragic consequences of their corrupt leadership—a shepherding malpractice that moved Jesus to tears.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Seven Woes and a Wail

Matthew 23:13–39



PREPARE YOUR HEART

In contrast, our Good Shepherd seeks us when we stray, tenderly binds our wounded hearts, and restores us with truth and love. As you begin your study, invite Him to lead you through His Word, using the following prayer as a prompt.

Father, as I read the sinful traits of the scribes and Pharisees, remind me that Jesus is the opposite. He is trustworthy and true, righteous and good. Help me, through Your Word, to follow His example and model His character as I apply His words. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Read *Matthew 23:13–36* in the New American Standard Bible, noting the repetition of the words, “woe” and “hypocrites.”¹ We’ll define these terms in the interpretation section of our study to shed light on Jesus’ meaning. For now, let’s examine the content of His pronouncements.



Observation: Woes upon the Leaders, Wail for the Nation

Using your imagination to enter a biblical scene is an effective technique for *Searching the Scriptures*.² Picture the scribes and Pharisees as grim-faced judges dressed in black garments which drape down the length of their bodies. Opposite them is the lone figure of Jesus who stands erect and confident. His eyes piercing into their dark souls. With unyielding power, He issues His statements as if tolling a death knell, slowly, somberly, and decisively.



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Declaring Righteous Anger—Matthew 23:13–36

As you read each section, you’ll notice a pronouncement (“Woe”), an indictment (“Hypocrites!”), and then examples of wrongdoing. Use the following chart to record in your own words what you observe in each section of woes in Matthew 23:13–33.

Woes	Observations
23:13	
23:15	
23:16–22	
23:23–24	
23:25–26	
23:27–28	
23:29–33	



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Matthew 23:13–39

What does “therefore” indicate (Matthew 23:34)? What consequences did Jesus issue, according to 23:34–36?

Jesus’ prophecy, “judgment will fall on this very generation” (23:36), was fulfilled in AD 70 when Jerusalem fell to the Romans and the temple was destroyed. Like Jeremiah weeping over Jerusalem in ruins, Jesus lamented the coming judgment that could have been avoided had the people embraced Him as their Messiah.

Lamenting Rejected Love—Matthew 23:37–39

What heart-wrenching figures of speech did Jesus use to describe His sorrow, according to *Matthew 23:37–39*?

Jesus issued judgment on the nation because the people rejected Him, but never think that God delights in judging. The tears of Jesus poured out of the heart of God whose heart was broken over the rejection by His people.

Jesus said to His people, “I had so much to offer you, but you fought against Me. I could have set you free, but you would have nothing to do with Me.” —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Interpretation: Why Jesus Pronounced “Woe”

Deep emotion flowed through each woe Jesus pronounced. The Greek word for “woe,” *ouai*, is a cry of anguish that blends condemnation with compassion. One commentator describes Jesus’ meaning this way:

[*Ouai*] includes not only *wrath*, but also *sorrow*. There is righteous anger here, but it is the anger of the heart of love, broken by the stubborn blindness of men. There is not only an air of savage denunciation; there is also an atmosphere of poignant tragedy.³

What does the meaning of “woe” reveal about Jesus’ nature?

Permeating Jesus’ rebuke was the theme of hypocrisy. Consult pages 194 and 196 of Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s commentary, *Insights on Matthew 16–28*, and write down your definition of *hypocrisy* and the reason Jesus so vehemently condemned it.



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Review each statement of woe and write down a specific charge for each wrongdoing Jesus listed. For example, we can summarize the first woe in Matthew 23:13 with the charge, *exclusion*. As a result of their hypocrisy, the scribes and Pharisees excluded the people from entering the kingdom of heaven. For Pastor Chuck Swindoll's complete list of charges, consult page 197 of his commentary.

First woe (23:13): _____ *Exclusion* _____

Second woe (23:15): _____

Third woe (23:16–22): _____

Fourth woe (23:23–24): _____

Fifth woe (23:25–26): _____

Sixth woe (23:27–28): _____

Seventh woe (23:29–36): _____

What do you learn from Jesus' woes about the damage caused by the hypocrisy of spiritual leaders?

The scribes' and Pharisees' outward religious observances were empty. They were living a lie. Deep within them was bitterness, envy, hatred, pride, arrogance, and even murder.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Correlation: Woes versus “Blesseds”

Jesus’ woes in His final public address at the temple form a striking antithesis to His Beatitudes in His first major public address, the Sermon on the Mount. The woes expose the showy piety of the scribes and Pharisees while the true righteousness of those who live in God’s kingdom shines through the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–11).

Take a moment to review the *Beatitudes* and then contrast Jesus’ “blesseds” with His woes below.

How can we avoid the downdraft of religious hypocrisy and soar on the currents of kingdom living? Let’s explore a few ways as we apply our passage.



Application: What Is This Saying to Us?

The Lord condemned hypocrisy because of its destructive influence. A lifestyle of religious performance masks our real selves and gives sin cover to grow. Under our shiny exterior, anger, bitterness, envy, or pride can foment and churn. So, we all need someone to caringly pull down our religious mask and shed light on our secret struggles. Openness to another person and honesty are the surest antidotes to hypocrisy.

In his message, Pastor Chuck Swindoll wisely advises,

When you walk with Christ, you open yourself to His accountability. When you’re willing to be mentored by someone, you are saying, “Probe my life. Point out areas that I need to acknowledge because I want to be pure and clean.”



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Is there someone to whom you can open your life, perhaps a mentor, friend, or Christian counselor? Who might this person be, and what can you do soon to have a deep-level conversation?

Use the space below to invite your Good Shepherd to reveal any hidden issues that need attention and to lead you to the green pastures of freedom from sin.

Although difficult to hear, the Lord's rebukes are lifelines of hope, invitations to heal and change. Hear the compassion in His words and steer clear of hypocrisy's shadows.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, just as Jesus longed to gather His people under His wings, You long to pull me close to experience Your love and protection. Forgive me for going my own way and resisting Your call. I confess my hypocrisy, the ways I've hidden behind religious masks and not allowed others to truly know me. Help me feel safe enough to open myself to others and, in turn, make them feel safe to open up to me. In Jesus' name, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Matthew 23:14 appears in brackets in the New American Standard Bible, indicating that it is not included in the earliest and most reliable manuscripts of Matthew. Later copyists may have borrowed this verse from Mark 12:40 and inserted it into Jesus' series of woes because of its similarity.
2. Learn more about Pastor Chuck's *Searching the Scriptures* method on the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](https://www.insight.org/how-to-study-the-bible-for-yourself)" at [insight.org](https://www.insight.org).
3. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2, rev. ed., The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 288, author's emphasis.

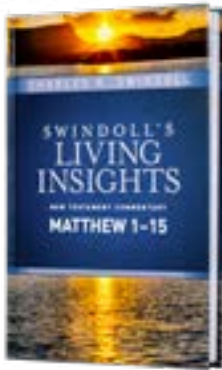


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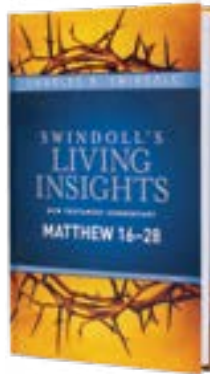
Matthew 23:13–39



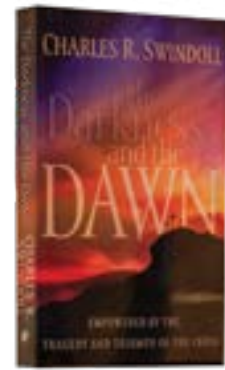
Tools for Digging Deeper



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For the 2021 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.

