



# International Bible Lessons Commentary

Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series

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## **Matthew 23:1-4, 23-26** **New Revised Standard Version** **July 8, 2018**

The [International Bible Lesson](#) (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, July 8, 2018**, is from **Matthew 23:1-4, 23-26**.

**Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the [International Bible Lessons Commentary](#) website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Lesson Forum](#).

**(Matthew 23:1) Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,**

Jesus taught the crowds and His disciples because they needed a Shepherd. What He taught His followers, the scribes and Pharisees also heard, but many of them only listened to Him so they could discover some sin or fault in His teaching that they could then use to condemn Him using the laws of Moses and their human traditions. The scribes and Pharisees did not have a teachable spirit but a condemning spirit. When Jesus taught, He sometimes used the scribes and Pharisees as bad examples to avoid. If they had had a teachable spirit, some of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees would have repented and followed Him after hearing His accurate accusations.

**(Matthew 23:2) “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat;**

Jesus declared that the scribes and Pharisees who sat in Moses' seat had been given a place of mostly religious authority in Jesus' day over God's people. They ruled in religious matters, while the Romans ruled over the Jews in political matters. Those who sat in Moses' seat were the rulers of the synagogues, the Sanhedrin, and the high priests in the temple. They maintained a religious government as they interpreted and applied the Jewish laws (the Law of Moses and their traditions) over the Jews. Jesus did not teach His disciples to disregard or disrespect established human government, authority, or rulers. Jesus was not anti-government (whether religious or political); but as the Messiah, Jesus represented the Kingdom of God, God's rightful government, authority, and rule over all (including over all human governments). Those who sat in Moses' seat should have listened to Jesus, because if they had truly known and believed the Scriptures they would have known that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

**(Matthew 23:3) therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.**

The dictionary definition of irony is: "the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning." Jesus may have been using irony and perhaps smiling to convey that irony when He said, "So you must be careful to do everything they tell you." If Jesus had not said what He said in those words with a wink or a smile, He could have been arrested before His time for treason and for advocating disobedience to the Law of Moses, which He came to fulfill. The context and the totality of Jesus' teaching and practice must help us understand that Jesus would never tell anyone to disobey God just because a government or religious leader told them to do so. Jesus opposed lawlessness, but Jesus did not teach His disciples and the people to blindly obey whatever their leaders taught, because sometimes they did not truly teach the Law of Moses. When they truly taught the Law of Moses, they were to be obeyed by the Jews, but Jesus said some of these rulers did not obey their own human rules or the Law of Moses. Jesus warned against following the bad example of those who accurately declare the Law of God or the Scriptures but do not obey the

Law of God or the Scriptures. To fully understand how Jesus was mainly condemning the hypocrisy of some leaders, we must consider Jesus' practices and discussions with the Pharisees. Jesus would never want someone to disobey God or the Word of God to do what someone else wanted – even a religious or political leader. Jesus did not obey or require His disciples to obey the human traditions of the scribes and Pharisees, especially when these traditions set aside the Law of God. Jesus taught, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28). As the Messiah, who was the Ruler over those who sat in Moses' seat, Jesus taught, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23). Furthermore, the disciples did not obey those who sat in Moses' seat when the Sanhedrin ordered them to disobey Jesus; with respect for their places of authority, Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:29).

**(Matthew 23:4) They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.**

The heavy, cumbersome burdens of the scribes and Pharisees included their interpretations of the Law of Moses and human traditions that made it more and more difficult for people to live or follow God rightly. They did not make their rules easy to obey, but hard to obey, which gave them more authority over others. They took unjust advantage of those under their authority. They did not teach those they ruled over how to bear the burdens of their laws and rules or provide the means to bear their burdensome requirements. They did not teach people how to have the spiritual power or understanding to obey God. They used their religious authority to demonstrate that they were superior to others (or so they thought), rather than help people obey God. “Not willing to lift a finger” indicates that these religious leaders were unwilling to do the slightest thing to help anyone, for they were concerned only about themselves. They ruled solely for their own selfish benefit, which is not an example that anyone should follow. In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, the religious leaders refused “to lift a

finger” to help the beaten and robbed man they saw at the side of the road (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus accused these scribes and Pharisees of refusing to be good neighbors. They did not truly love God or their neighbors.

**(Matthew 23:23) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.**

A hypocrite tries to appear on the outside as something they are not on the inside. The teachers of the law (the scribes) and the Pharisees may have had official sounding religious titles and looked important, but they did not do as they taught. They stole the honor of a true Pharisee or scribe, the honor of one who tried to live according to the law of Moses and in the presence of God (as Saul tried to live unsuccessfully before he met Jesus and became the apostle Paul). Jesus said that those who kept and wanted others to keep the fine points of the ceremonial laws, while disobeying the moral laws that required them to love God and their neighbors, would suffer. The law of love should motivate people to work hard to promote justice, mercy, and faithfulness in every way they wisely can according to the Scriptures. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees that Jesus said would come under condemnation were those who did not rule rightly or teach or help their fellow Jews (and others) receive justice and mercy. They did not teach and act upon the importance of living faithfully before God. They lived for themselves instead of for God.

**(Matthew 23:24) You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!**

Imagine a guide who had never been on a mountain before leading tourists around the edge of a crater of an erupting volcano, or a guide who had never been in a desert before leading stranded fellow victims to water. Jesus directly accused the religious leaders standing before Him of knowing nothing about the true God and His purposes. They were spiritually blind, and leading others into disastrous thinking and acting. God the Father sent Jesus to save people from their sins by dying in their behalf, which

demonstrated the justice, mercy, and faithfulness of His Father and himself. Jesus accused these leaders to their face of hypocrisy and of knowing nothing about the ways of God. Rather than break one of their traditions, they would strain out an unclean gnat if it landed in their drink; then, they would swallow a large unclean camel when they disregarded justice, mercy and faithfulness. They focused on little outward matters regarding their traditions that made them look holy to others, while inside they were selfish and sinful and always looking for ways to cheat their neighbors to enrich themselves. Or, they would use their traditions on small matters to accuse Jesus and His disciples of sin to keep others from following Jesus the Messiah and His teachings.

**(Matthew 23:25) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.”**

To suffer “woe” is to experience deep sorrow or distress or heartache or tribulation. Jesus foretold these religious leaders that they would suffer these consequences among others if they persisted in their hypocrisy rather than repent as He called them and others to do. Their traditions required them to wash their hands before eating and to clean their dishes before they filled them with food – good habits to follow, but not necessary for salvation and growing spiritually. Many of the scribes and Pharisees who heard Jesus teach refused to repent and follow the true interpretations of the law of God that required them to love God and their neighbors. Instead, they loved themselves supremely and were greedy for all types of personal gain and power. They would lie, cheat, steal, or kill to achieve their personal goals or the goals of their party – they were plotting to kill Jesus. They indulged their selfish desires while maintaining a show of holiness outwardly to hide their inner motivations and deceive others. Jesus declared that if they persisted in these hypocritical ways that they would suffer deep regrets for refusing to truly honor God with sincere obedience to His law and true love for God from their hearts.

**(Matthew 23:26) You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.”**

Jesus used the outward religious behavior of the Pharisees to illustrate their spiritual blindness. In teaching these truths to them before His disciples and the crowds, Jesus warned His followers not to follow the spiritual example of spiritually blind teachers. Jesus insisted that people cleanup their lives from the inside out. Those who try to clean up their lives from the outside in by trying to keep laws and traditions as carefully as they can, as these Pharisees did, or by trying to be and look holy to others will not change them on the inside. The only way to become and remain clean on the inside is to come to Jesus with a repentant heart requesting that He cleanse us from all sin, and then continuing to come before Him daily as our Lord and Savior to prayerfully follow Him according to the Scriptures. But the Pharisees refused to believe Jesus was the Messiah; they refused to acknowledge their sins; they refused to come to Jesus for forgiveness and cleansing. If the scribes and Pharisees would have turned to Jesus in repentance and faith, He would have cleansed them from all unrighteousness and have changed their motivation from love of self to love for God and others. Furthermore, on the Day of Pentecost, Jesus would have sent the Holy Spirit to indwell, guide, and empower them to love God and their neighbors as themselves. Going to Jesus was the only way they could cleanse themselves from the inside out; following religious practices, rules, and traditions will not cleanse anyone inside. Jesus remains the only way for anyone to become and remain clean on the inside, which results in loving, merciful, just, and faithful behavior. The apostle Paul is the perfect example of one Jesus cleansed from the inside out and the difference that cleansing can make in a believer's life.

### **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further**

1. In what places did the teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit? What did that mean?

2. Why do you think Jesus talked about the sins of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees where the crowds and His disciples could hear Him rebuke them?
3. Why did Jesus tell His hearers not to do as the Pharisees did? How might His words be translated into a general principle for everyone to follow?
4. What were some of the heavy, cumbersome loads or burdens that the Pharisees put on the backs of the Jews?
5. What did Jesus say were the more important matters of the Law that the religious leaders neglected?

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*International Bible Lesson.*

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