Introduction
As we continue through the Gospel of Matthew we are still at the beginning of Jesus final week in Jerusalem before the crucifixion. Jesus has been questioned by just about every religious and political group leadership of his day. To really understand what’s happening here it is important to remember that the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the High Priests, and Teachers of the Law weren’t just religious leaders – they were also political leaders. They, along with the Herodians, and other political parties, legislated the life of the people, working with the Romans to keep the peace during the Roman occupation.

With chapter 23 we enter into the last of the 5 great blocks of teaching into which Matthew’s Gospel has been organized. Remember, Matthew has cast Jesus as the new Moses so organized this Gospel in 5 parts in parallel to the first 5 books of the Law that the Jews believe were given to them by Moses. If you recall, the first section or “book” included the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7. Then came the commission of the disciples in chapter 10 followed by the parables of the kingdom in chapter 13. Next, in chapter 18, came the teachings on living as community, following in obedience to Jesus’ teaching. Now we enter into another long, final block of teaching that balances with the Sermon on the Mount, and looks ahead to the future, warning what is to come.

In all of this, Matthew is inviting his primarily Jewish audience and us in turn, to see Jesus as Moses 2.0 as it were. Just as Moses gave them the 5 books of the law, Jesus gives them the 5 books of the new covenant – the new relationship between God and the world. Moses brought the people through the desert and led them to the point where they were ready to cross over the Jordan and go into the Promised Land. Jesus is leading his people through the wilderness to the point where he will lead them through death itself and on into the new world which God is going to make. Only, unlike Moses, he won’t stay on this side of the river, leaving someone else to take the people across. No, Jesus will go on ahead and like his namesake Joshua he will lead them himself into the new world.

So let’s dive in, shall we? And read this “Final Lecture” Jesus delivers to the crowds, his disciples, and the listening religious and political leaders of his day. Join me in turning to Matthew Gospel, chapter 23, beginning with verse 1…

Before we begin I want to point out something about verse 14. You’ll note the text in your Pew Bible goes from verse 13 to verse 15. Do you see the tiny “a” at the end of verse 13? Look at the bottom of that page and you will see a footnote marked “a13”. There you will find verse 14.
Not all of the surviving manuscripts contain verse 14 but enough do that is cannot be discarded. The translator/editors of the New International Version of scripture have decided to add it here, rather than above in the text itself. Verse 14 is also found in Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47. I’ve chosen to include this verse in the reading so wanted you to see this to understand why I’m reading a verse not included in your text.

**Scripture**

23:1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:

2 “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. 3 So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. 4 They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

5 “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; 7 they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.

8 But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers.

9 And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

13 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

[14“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Therefore you will be punished more severely.]

15 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

16 “Woe to you, blind guides! You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.’ 17 You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred?

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1 A Phylactery is a boxes containing Scripture verses, worn on forehead and arm.

2 Some manuscripts include here words similar to Mark 12:40 and Luke 20:47.
18You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.’ 19You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. 22And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God’s throne and by the one who sits on it.

23“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

25“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

27“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.

28In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

29“You, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. 30And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ 31So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. 32Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!

33“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? 34Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. 35And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.
“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Sermon
Jesus is a Jew; he grew up in a Jewish home with observant Jewish parents. He lived in a Jewish community, steeped in the teachings of the law and the prophets. Jesus is also Messiah, God in flesh. He understands his Father because he comes from the Father. Jesus has spent 3 years living with ordinary people, eating with them, teaching them, healing them, sometimes feeding them himself and releasing them from all sorts of spiritual, mental, and physical disease and bondage. Now, in Jerusalem – the city where the heart of God’s faithful people should be found – Jesus finds himself surrounded with those who should be servants of God telling their fellow Jews about the heavy packs they need to carry on their backs in this life in order to be right with God but who never even dream of carrying such weights themselves.

Consider the legal experts, the teachers of the law – they are always going on about Moses: “Moses said this”, “Moses said that”, “do this – don’t do that”, “watch out for this”, “remember to do that every day or else”, and on and on… It may look like they are wonderfully devoted to every detail of every commandment but if they’ve never themselves experienced the same burden they can have no sympathy for the people upon which they have imposed such burdens. And it’s easy to for these leaders to make harsh judgments.

Jesus accuses the Pharisees along with the teachers of the law and he builds quite devastating list of indictments against them. It’s not that they are wrong to pay attention to Moses. This Gospel has made it quite clear that the Mosaic Law – the Torah – was good and given by God. It should be observed. If you’ll recall, in Matthew 5:17 Jesus said “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” Jesus is pointing out that what really matters in the Law – the most important things – have been lost.

As Pastor Jon explained to us last week, what really mattered then and what matters now are the big central themes – loving God and loving your neighbor4 – which means justice and mercy and faithfulness5. When it came to those things the religious and political leaders, who were so good at telling other people what to do, never lifted a finger to relieve the people’s really heavy burdens. Instead they concentrated on pageantry, on outward show.

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3 Psalm 118:26; Matthew 21:9
4 Matthew 22:37-39
5 Matthew 23:23
They wore large prayer cases wrapped around their arms and head with leather bands that contained prayers - these could easily be seen by others. They also wore long prayer tassels on the four corners of their outer garments, all as signs of piety. Titles of honor, places of honor, all the fame that society offered… Jesus dismisses it all because their attitudes show that they haven’t understood what God was about.

Remember that I said that these teachers of the law and Pharisees were not simply “religious leaders”? They were also what we would call social and political leaders and leaders of popular parties and pressure groups, like lobbyists. They were a lot like many leaders we have in our society today – some elected and some not, who give their opinions claiming authority in media while celebrating “celebrity” status - the ones who make grand pronouncements about public values while running lucrative but shady businesses on the side and who use their position to gain influence for their families and friends all the while allowing private interests to determine public policy.

You see, the problem Jesus identified is not confined to churches and religious leaders but rather it continues to run through most of modern society from the top to the bottom. So there are lessons here we need to learn.

It’s not just about the titles we use for our teachers and leaders – the New Testament gives us a variety of those in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4. It’s about the attitudes that go with them. What matters is the humbling principle of verses 11 & 12 “The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

When we look at these verses we realize that we are called to follow Jesus himself, who issued these indictments – not from a great or pompous place – but rather from his journey on the way to the cross. Jesus had already promised his followers that his lead was easy and his burden was light and that people carrying heavy loads should take his instead.

There are so many things the leaders have gotten wrong…

- They placed higher value on objects that human beings brought into the presence of God then they valued God’s actual presence with them.
- They are condemned as “blind” because they cannot see what is really important or who is important.
- They devote themselves to details of the law which have nothing to do with the real purpose of the law which makes it possible for serious seekers of truth, those drawn to God, to find the way to God.

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6 Ephesians 4:11
7 Matthew 11:28-30
I need to mention that there were plenty of first century Jewish Teachers who were sincere in their teachings and endeavoring to teach and lead with integrity. Paul, when he was Pharisee Saul, was very successful and by all accounts in good standing. And there were great leaders like Gamaliel, whom Luke regards as a fine teacher. There were noble sages like Rabbi Akiba who went on praying the Shema prayer “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One” as the Romans tortured him to death in 135 C.E. But Jesus criticisms were primarily against those of his own time who he could see were leading Israel astray, causing Israel to look in the wrong in the wrong directing, distracting the attention of the people at the very moment Messiah – God – was in their midst.

Sadly, there were many leaders who would rather concern themselves with political agendas of the day – keeping the peace with Rome and profiting from that collaboration; working to restore the kingdom of David or to place another Herod on the country’s throne; or simply revolution and revolt. To be rigorous about the Torah suited their nationalist ambitions.

But when it came to the actual spiritual and moral struggle of making the inside of themselves match the outside trappings they had acquired it seems few cared enough to try. When Jesus compares them to dirty cups and white washed tombs this is what he is talking about.

Jesus’ whole calling out of these religious/political leaders only makes sense within the larger narrative of Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus is on his way to accomplish the real covenant renewal. Soon he will arrive at the moment when, sitting at the meal with his friends, he says to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.” Something all the Pharisees’ strict observance of Torah could not achieve.

Jesus is on his way to take onto himself all the wickedness of the world – including all the indictments he names in this final lecture. And in taking it on, to exhaust it, to overcome it, to defeat it, and to destroy it all – even death itself.

So how should this text change us?

- Take care to live in the presence of God, valuing God, and loving God and loving neighbor above all else.
- In personal discipleship, and in how we conduct ourselves together, remember that is what is on the inside – our motives and attitudes – mean far more than our outward appearance.
- Work to lighten the load of others rather than expecting them to think and be as we think we must.
- And finally, as Jesus longed to take keep his people in safety just as a hen will protect her chicks from harm, run to Jesus every day, moment by moment. Take shelter in him so that in moments of crisis it becomes our nature to run to God, our home and safe place.

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8 Philippians 3:4-6
9 Acts 5:33-39
10 Matthew 26:28