

Notes on Matthew Chapters 22 & 23

These Chapters contain a series of teachings on several topics. This was not unusual for a first-century rabbi. This sort of teaching was referred to as “stringing pearls,” presenting a rapid-fire discourse on a variety of subjects.

Paying Taxes to the Emperor—Matthew 22:15-22

The Pharisees and the leadership are trying to trap Jesus. From Matthew 12, we know that they wanted him dead and out of the way. They set out to entangle him in his own teaching, presenting a question about the payment of taxes to the Romans. They flatter him, saying that he teaches the way of God truthfully and does not regard the position of men. Strangely, the Pharisees, who were anti-Rome, come to him accompanied by the Herodians, who were pro-Rome. They were at opposite ends of the political spectrum, but they were united in their opposition to Jesus, so they collaborated in bringing to him the question of whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Rome. If Jesus were to say that the payment of the tax was proper, then the Pharisees would charge him with not being faithful to Judaism. On the other hand, if Jesus said the opposite, the Herodians would accuse him of revolting against Rome. This was the hot-button issue of the day, and the highways leading to Jerusalem were lined with crosses bearing the crucified bodies of Jewish rebels who had fought against Roman taxes.

They think they have Jesus caught in an impossible trap. However, he responds, “Why have you put me to the test, you hypocrites?” (“Hypocrite” means an actor, one who is playing a role different from what he really is.) He asks them to show him the coin to pay the tax, and asks them, “Whose inscription is this, and whose likeness?” The inscription and the image were those of Caesar, and the Pharisees had two problems with this. First, the coin violated the commandment forbidding the making of graven images, and second, the inscription declared Caesar to be divine, “son of God and high priest.” Jesus refuses to answer the question about the lawfulness of the tax, stating simply that they should give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. But then he adds that they should give to God what is God’s.

Jesus is making three points here. First, he is playing on the word “likeness,” the same word that is used in Genesis in stating that Adam was made in the image and likeness of God. Second, if the coin must be given back to Caesar because it is made with his image, what must be given back to God? The answer: that which has been made in God’s image, i.e., each of us, including the Pharisees, whom Jesus is accusing of not having given of themselves back to God. We are stamped with the image and likeness of God, so we have the obligation to give ourselves to God. Third, Jesus is reminding them that the whole reason they are subject to Rome and obliged to pay taxes is that they failed to give of themselves to God in the first place. Their occupation by Rome is the consequence of their failure to be faithful to their covenant with God.

Leviticus chapter 26 had set out the consequences of breaking the covenant and failing to keep the commandments: “I will make the sword, the avenger of my covenant, sweep over you. Though you then *huddle together in your walled cities, I will send in pestilence among you, till you are forced to surrender to the enemy.* And as I *cut off your supply of bread,* ten women will need but one oven for

baking all the bread they dole out to you in rations—*not enough food to still your hunger*. ...[I] will chastise you with sevenfold fiercer punishment for your sins, *till you begin to eat the flesh of your own sons and daughters*. I will *demolish your high places*...***So devastated will I leave the land that your very *enemies who come to live there will stand aghast at the sight of it.*" Lv. 26:25-26, 28-30, 32; see also Dt. 28. Jesus had predicted the fall of the Temple, which took place in 70 A.D. after a Jewish rebellion against Rome. The Romans had captured many prisoners, including Josephus, a Pharisee historian who recorded for the Romans all that he saw in the destruction of Jerusalem. He describes famine, plague and sword, exactly what was foretold in Leviticus 26. The Romans entered the houses of the Jews and were shocked to find that because of the famine, Jewish women had baked their sons and daughters for food! Josephus wrote: "I bear witness against my own people, that never was there a generation more worthy of this suffering." Jesus will pronounce seven "woes" against Jerusalem in Chapter 23. He speaks in a prophetic way of what will happen to Israel if she does not repent.

The Catechism states in par. 2242: "The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or the teachings of the Gospel. Refusing obedience to civil authorities, when their demands are contrary to those of an upright conscience, finds its justification in the distinction between serving God and serving the political community. 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' Mt. 22: 'We must obey God rather than men.' Acts 5:29. 'When citizens are under the oppression of a public authority which oversteps its competence, they should still not refuse to give or to do what is objectively demanded of them by the common good; but it is legitimate for them to defend their own rights and those of their fellow citizens against the abuse of this authority within the limits of the natural law and the Law of the Gospel.' *Gaudium et Spes*, 74 sect. 5." So Jesus affirms civic duty and the primary duty of honoring God.

The Saducees' Question about the Resurrection—vv. 23-33

The same day, the Saducees came to him and posed a question about the resurrection. They did not believe in the resurrection, the spirit, the afterlife, oral tradition or any Scripture other than the first five books of Moses. Jesus had nothing in common with them at all. Referring to Dt. 25, which requires the brother of a married man who dies without children to marry the widow and bring up children for his deceased brother, they ask Jesus which of a series of brothers, all of whom have married the same woman, will be her husband after the resurrection. Jesus replies, "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." The resurrection ends marriage as we know it. Marriage exists to raise up children, but there will be no procreation in heaven. Marriage is to help your spouse become a saint; your spouse will already be a saint, if he or she is in heaven. Life in heaven will be like the angels, who do not beget children but worship God continually. See Is. 6:2-3; Rev. 5:11-12.

The Saducees only accepted the authority of the first five books of the Bible, so they rejected the prophets other than Moses. Jesus knew this. He could have answered them by citing references to the resurrection in Is. 26:19; Ezek. 37:1-14; or Dan. 12:2, but because they don't believe any of those prophets, instead he quotes Ex. 3:6 about Moses and the burning bush: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." God speaks in the present tense about

these patriarchs, because even though they are physically dead, as men of faith they have life after death.

The Greatest Commandment—vv.34-40

Having heard that Jesus had silenced the Saducees, the Pharisees bring out one of their big guns, a legal scholar, to try to trap him with a question about which of the commandments is the greatest. The Pharisees had identified 631 commandments in the law of Moses, but there was an orthodox answer about which of these was the greatest. As any good Pharisee would, Jesus answers from Dt. 6:5: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” But then he goes on to add from Lv. 19:18: “The second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.” He ties these two commands together, saying that loving God is the same as loving one’s neighbor as oneself. If you’re going to love God, you’ve got to love your neighbor as yourself. Love is not just between God and me; it has to include my neighbor. 1 Jn. 4:20: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”

The Question about David’s Son—vv. 41-46

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asks them a question: “What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?” The Pharisees answer, “The son of David.” Jesus replies, “How is it, then, that David, inspired by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’?” He makes reference to Ps. 110:1: “The Lord said to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I place your enemies under your feet?’” Psalm 110 is a coronation psalm, for the enthronement of a king. It implies that the Messiah will be greater than David. Jesus tells them that he is the Messiah and that he is greater than David. The Pharisees cannot answer and they no longer ask him any questions.

The Denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees—Mt. 23:1-36

Jesus pronounces seven “woes” upon the Pharisees and the Jewish leaders. This is covenantal judgment related to Leviticus 26. These seven woes are curses which stand in opposition to the Beatitudes, the “blessings.” Jesus says that the Scribes and Pharisees speak with the authority of Moses, so they should be listened to, but they should not be imitated because they do not practice what they preach. The Pharisees place burdens on the shoulders of others, but they do not lift a finger to help them bear them. The Pharisees took pious practices to the extreme so that their piety would be noticed by others. They wore oversized phylacteries (boxes containing Scripture verses—see Dt. 6:8 and 11:18) on their heads and arms and lengthened the tassels on their prayer shawls; a Catholic equivalent would be carrying a rosary with beads the size of tennis balls. Jesus had condemned these practices in Matthew Chapter 6 and encouraged instead the truly pious acts of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, all done in private.

“Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven.” Mt. 23:9. This is not meant literally; Jesus is using hyperbole or overstatement to make the point that we should not seek after great or lofty titles. It does not mean that we are forbidden to call a priest, or our own male parent, “Father.” Those who read this sentence literally are ignoring the rules of interpretation set forth in the

Catechism at par. 112-114: 1. Be especially attentive “to the content and unity of the whole Scripture,” i.e., don’t take a single verse out of the context of the whole Bible. 2. Read the Scripture within “the living Tradition of the whole Church,” i.e., “according to the spiritual meaning which the Spirit grants to the Church. 3. Be attentive to the analogy of faith, i.e., the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole plan of Revelation. Otherwise, Mt. 23:9, taken purely literally, would be contradicted by Hebrews 12:9: “...we have had our earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them.” In 1 Cor. 4:15, St. Paul also states that “I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Was St. Paul ignoring the words of Christ? The deeper meaning of “call no man father” is that we should not acknowledge anyone as starting or “fathering” a legitimate new movement. Jesus is telling us that he has established his kingdom and there will be no more legitimate movements after this.

Mt. 23:24: “Blind guides, who strain out the gnat and swallow the camel!” The gnat was the smallest of the unclean animals. The Pharisees would drink through cheesecloth to avoid swallowing a gnat and becoming ritually unclean, but Jesus is saying that they would not blink at some greater moral offense. How often are we critical about the liturgical errors of others, only to do far worse by gossiping about them?

Mt. 23:27: “You are like white-washed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful but within they are full of dead men’s bones.” Sepulchers were white-washed not to make them beautiful but to warn others not to have contact with them, which would make them ritually unclean. The hyper-technical observances of the Pharisees did nothing to improve them; they only served to separate them from their fellow men.

The Lament over Jerusalem—Mt. 23:37-39 and Mt. 24:1

Mt. 23:38: “Behold, your house is forsaken.” Jesus leaves the Temple, which recalls Ezekiel 10:18 and 11:23, in which Ezekiel saw the glory of God leaving Jerusalem and coming to rest on the Mount of Olives. Just as in the vision of Ezekiel, Jesus now leaves the Temple and goes to the Mount of Olives. (Note: Some translations transpose Ezek. 11:23 to the end of Ezekiel Chapter 10.)