

THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

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

STUDY SEVEN

Exposing Religious Phonies

Matthew 23:1–12

*The Pharisees Jesus condemned looked so religious and sounded so righteous.
They came across like pious saints, but they were deceivers.*

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

Ahurricane is coming! A weather forecaster warns people in the path of a storm to prepare now to avoid disaster. Warnings can save lives, but if ignored, they are just words in the wind.

In Matthew 23–25, Jesus warned people about the proud religious elite and the coming judgment because of those leaders' failures. Dark clouds of war with Rome loomed on the horizon, and the temple would be reduced to rubble in AD 70. But this disaster was merely a harbinger of more severe judgments. Jesus forecasted even greater storms in the distant future—God's judgments at the end of the age.

In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we'll witness the first wave of Jesus' warnings as He exposes the spiritual phonies in leadership to be nothing more than hypocritical deceivers. Sadly, not many of Jesus' listeners heeded His warnings about false leaders and the damage they cause . . . but we can take heed today.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

The Lord is our surest shelter in any storm. As you open His Word, draw near to Him. Use the psalmist's words to inspire your prayer.

*From the end of the earth I call to You when my heart is faint;
Lead me to the rock that is higher than I. . . .
Let me dwell in Your tent forever;
Let me take refuge in the shelter of Your wings. (Psalm 61:2, 4 NASB)*

Exposing Religious Phon Mas

Matthew 23:1–12



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Understandably, Jesus' tone was urgent. Time was ticking away His final opportunities to issue lifesaving warnings, and He measured every word with care. Read [Matthew 23:1–12](#) and pay special attention to whom Jesus addressed. Then we'll look closer at Jesus' words to each group.



Observation: How to Spot a Phony

Using our skills of observation, we can see patterns in the passage that reveal Jesus' flow of thought.¹ Observing the context is crucial. Jesus had just confronted the Pharisees with questions they refused to answer about His messiahship (Matthew 22:41–46). With the Pharisees in silent retreat, Jesus took this ripe moment to warn the crowd and His disciples.

What did Jesus say was the role of the scribes and Pharisees, according to [23:1–2](#)?

According to [23:3](#), what did Jesus tell the people to do and *not* to do?



Exposing Religious Phon M as

Matthew 23:1–12

In *Matthew 23:3–5*, Jesus listed three reasons not to follow the Pharisees. In *23:5–7*, He offered three examples of their spiritual pride. List the reasons and the examples in the space below.

Reasons Not to Follow	Examples of Spiritual Pride

Turning to His disciples, Jesus issued three commands in the form of “don’ts,” according to *23:8–10*. List the “don’ts” and the reason that Jesus gives for each one.

Jesus’ “Don’ts”	Jesus’ Reasoning

In *23:11–12*, Jesus concludes with a positive command in the form of a statement, “you must be,” followed by a principle. Write down what you observe in these verses.



Exposing Religious Phonies

Matthew 23:1–12

*If we teach one thing and live another way, we're hypocrites. We're phonies. We speak well but we don't live well. Because the Pharisees did that, Jesus said, "Don't follow them."
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll*



Interpretation: Spiritual Leaders Not to Follow

When we hear God's Word, regardless of who is teaching it, we should "practice and obey" what God says (Matthew 23:3). However, not all Bible teachers live what they preach, and Jesus told His followers to do what they say *not* what they do. Why not? Because they lack character.

Identify the character qualities Jesus said the Pharisees lacked.²

"They don't practice what they teach" (23:3).

Lack of: _____

"They crush people with unbearable religious demands" (23:4).

Lack of: _____

"Everything they do is for show" (23:5).

Lack of: _____

One way the hypocritical Pharisees paraded their piety was to "broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels" (23:5 NASB). *What does that mean?* Read page 192 of Pastor Chuck Swindoll's commentary, *Insights on Matthew 16–28* and write down what phylacteries and tassels are and how the Pharisees turned these symbols of faith into signs of pride.



Exposing Religious Phonies

Matthew 23:1–12

Reflect on what Jesus taught in 23:1–7 and write down a principle or two about how to spot religious phonies and what to do when you see them in leadership.

The Pharisees had no shame. Their religion was an outrageous display of over-the-top ostentation. Everything they did called attention to themselves. How they loved the limelight! —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Spiritual Leaders Worth Following

After exposing the self-glorifying behavior of the Pharisees, Jesus instructed His disciples to shun titles that convey superiority, reminding His followers, “All of you are equal as brothers and sisters” (Matthew 23:8). He also affirmed that true leaders promote Christ as teacher, not themselves; and instead of seeking the limelight, they point people to God as the preeminent One.

Jesus concluded, “The greatest among you must be a servant” (23:11), which echoed His previous teaching. “Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave” (20:26–27).

How did Peter apply Christ's principles on leadership to the role of elders in the early church, according to *1 Peter 5:1–3*? What practical ways did Peter say leaders should serve?



Exposing Religious Pharaohs

Matthew 23:1–12

In a nutshell, servant leaders follow Jesus' example of humble love—setting aside self-interest for the sake of others. So can we, if we heed Jesus' warning to not follow the Pharisees!

Cultivate a servant's heart. That's the path to greatness. All of us would do well to improve our serve and look for ways to help others get ahead. The Message reads, "Do you want to stand out? Then step down" (Matthew 23:11 MSG). —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: A Map to Servant Leadership

In his book, *Dangerous Calling*, Paul David Tripp details what happens when we ignore Jesus' warning. Here is an abbreviated list of the consequences of pharisaical self-glory:

1. Self-glory will cause you to parade in public what should be kept in private.
2. Self-glory will cause you to be way too self-referencing.
3. Self-glory will cause you to talk when you should be quiet.
4. Self-glory will cause you to care too much about what people think of you.
5. Self-glory will cause you to resist admitting your sins, weaknesses, and failures.
6. Self-glory will cause you to struggle with the blessings of others.³

Do any of these characteristics hit home with you? If so, which one? Is this a recent tendency or an ongoing one?



Exposing Religious Phon M as

Matthew 23:1–12

In contrast is Christ's way of humility. How can you pursue the better path of humility and avoid the deceptive tendency toward self-glory?

Paul followed Christ's map of humility well, and he offered a surefire way to avoid the pitfalls of self-glory: "May I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14). Memorize Paul's motto and repeat it to yourself often today to avoid the pitfall of hypocrisy and stay on Christ's humble path.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, help me to focus on the cross. Center my thoughts on Christ who bore my sin and gave me all the blessings I possess—my secure standing with You, my direct line to Your throne, and guaranteed inheritance in heaven. My hope, my peace, my life I owe to Christ because of His death on the cross and resurrection. Help me to follow His downward path of humility as I ascend His upward path of serving others. In His name I pray, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Learn more about Pastor Chuck's *Searching the Scriptures* method on the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](http://insight.org)" at insight.org.
2. In his message, Pastor Chuck Swindoll identified the character qualities the Pharisees lacked as integrity, sympathy, and humility.
3. Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 174–80.

