

Matthew Survey — Section Three

Final Denouncement & Exhortation

Matthew 23:1 – 39
Topical Study Overview

About This Section

Matthew 23 forms the climactic conclusion of Section 3 of Matthew's gospel (Matt 16:21–23:39), presenting the Lord's threefold final denouncement of Israel's vain religious system just days before his crucifixion. The chapter opens with an exhortation to the disciples not to emulate the scribes and Pharisees, followed by eight indicting woes against the leaders of the vain religious system that deliberately parallel the eight woes first pronounced in Isaiah 3–5 at the time of the system's first destruction. The woes are structured around three components of ungodliness — ungodly labor, ungodly living, and ungodly thinking — presented in reverse order from Isaiah so as to end on the foundational issue of their ungodly thinking. The chapter closes with a lament over Jerusalem itself, as the Lord departs the temple and pronounces it desolate until his return.



Topics at a Glance

Topic	Core Content
Structure of the Denouncement	Three-part address: to disciples (vv. 1–12), to the vain religious system (vv. 13–36), and to Jerusalem (vv. 37–39).
Exhortation to Disciples	Disciples warned not to emulate the pride, self-exaltation, and hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, but to serve one another in lowliness of mind.
Eight Woes & Isaiah Parallel	Eight woes against the scribes and Pharisees deliberately echo the eight woes in Isaiah 3–5, the original indictment at the time of the vain religious system's first destruction.
Three Components of Ungodliness	The woes address ungodly labor (vv. 13–15), ungodly living (vv. 16–26), and ungodly thinking (vv. 27–33) — the reverse order of Isaiah — ending on the foundational issue.
Filling Up the Measure	The Lord announces that this generation will complete the measure of their fathers' rebelliousness through phase one (crucifixion), phase two (persecution), and phase three (antichrist).
Lament Over Jerusalem	The Lord closes with a lament over Jerusalem, pronounces the house desolate, and declares he will not be seen again until the remnant cries 'Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord.'

Topic Summaries

P1

Structure of the Final Denouncement *Lesson 35 · Matt 23:1–2*

- Matthew 23 is the concluding section of Section 3 of Matthew's gospel, which runs from Matt 16:21 through 23:39.
- The chapter takes place just days before the Lord's crucifixion — phase one of the vain religious system's climactic rebelliousness against God and his Christ.

Three Distinct Sections

- Section 1: Addressed to the disciples — Matt 23:1–12
- Section 2: Addressed to the scribes and Pharisees of the vain religious system — Matt 23:13–36
- Section 3: Addressed to Jerusalem itself — Matt 23:37–39
- The disciples are always in the audience — even the woes addressed to the Pharisees serve to edify the disciples as they face phase two and phase three of the vain religious system's opposition.
- Matt 23:32 — Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers.
- The Lord's final denouncement is set in the context of this verse — the generation present will fill up the measure of their fathers who killed the prophets.

P2

Exhortation to the Disciples *Lesson 35 · Matt 23:1–12*

- The first twelve verses consolidate all the corrective doctrine the Lord has given since the Sermon on the Mount — summarized into two major issues: not following the works of the scribes and Pharisees, and not emulating their self-exaltation.

Issue 1: Hearing the Law Discerningly (vv. 2–4)

- Matt 23:3 — All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.
- The disciples, equipped with the Lord's corrective doctrine, can now distinguish between what Moses truly said and the corruptions, additions, and traditions the scribes and Pharisees have layered upon it.
- James 1:25 applies this directly — the disciples possess the 'perfect law of liberty,' liberating the law from the vanity of the vain religious system, enabling them to be doers of the word and to be blessed in their deeds.

Issue 2: Not Emulating Their Self-Exaltation (vv. 5–12)

- Matt 23:5 — But all their works they do for to be seen of men:
- The Pharisees' broad phylacteries, enlarged garment borders, love of the chief seats, and desire to be called 'Rabbi' all flow from pride, self-love, and the desire to exalt themselves.
- Matt 23:11–12 — But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.
- The criterion for rewards in the kingdom is the opposite of the vain religious

system's standard — not self-exaltation but servant-heartedness and genuine lowliness of mind.

P3

The Eight Woes & Their Isaiah Parallel *Lessons 35–36 · Matt 23:13–33*

- The eight woes of Matthew 23 deliberately parallel the eight woes first pronounced in Isaiah 3–5, when God indicted the vain religious system at the time of its first destruction under the first installment.
- Just as eight woes were used in the original indictment, eight woes are used here as God prepares for the vain religious system's final, complete, and total destruction in the fifth installment.

The Isaiah Woes (Isa 3–5) — Original Order

- Woes 1–2 (Isa 3:9, 11): Against their ungodly thinking — they profess to be naturally righteous and holy but are not.
- Woes 3–5 (Isa 5:8, 11, 18): Against their ungodly living — despising the poor, living for pleasure, and worshipping God in their own vain ways.
- Woes 6–8 (Isa 5:20, 21, 22): Against their ungodly labor — calling evil good, teaching their own commandments as doctrine, and perverting judgment.

The Matthew Woes — Reversed Order

- The Lord reverses the order in Matthew 23 — addressing ungodly labor first (vv. 13–15), ungodly living second (vv. 16–26), and ungodly thinking last (vv. 27–33) — ending on the foundational issue upon which all the system's rebelliousness rests.
- The three components correspond to the three components of godliness God created man for: to think like God, to walk in God's ways, and to labor with God in what he is doing.

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Woes Against Ungodly Labor & Ungodly Living *Lesson 36 · Matt 23:13–26*

Woes 1–3: Ungodly Labor (vv. 13–15)

- Matt 23:13 — But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.
- Woe 1 (v. 13): They oppose God's labor in the climatic stage — the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom — by shutting up the kingdom of heaven against those who would enter.
- Woe 2 (v. 14): Entrusted to rule righteously and care for widows and the fatherless, they instead devour widows' houses and make a pretense of long prayers.
- Woe 3 (v. 15): They compass sea and land to make proselytes — and their proselytes become twofold more the child of hell, ultimately becoming the worse false teachers of phase three and the fifth installment.

Woes 4–6: Ungodly Living (vv. 16–26)

- Woe 4 (vv. 16–22): As blind guides they lead the people to live by their own commandments, making void the commandments of God — the same issue the Lord exposed in Matthew 15.

- Matt 23:23 — For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.
- Woe 5 (vv. 23–24): As blind guides they lead the people to omit the weightier matters of the law — judgment, mercy, and faith — straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel.
- Woe 6 (vv. 25–26): They make clean the outside of the cup and platter while the inside is full of extortion and excess — leading the people in vain religious observances that do nothing to address what is within.

Woes Against Ungodly Thinking & Filling Up the Measure

Lesson 36 · Matt 23:27–36

Woes 7–8: Ungodly Thinking (vv. 27–33)

- Matt 23:27 — Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness.
- Woe 7 (vv. 27–28): They appear righteous outwardly but are inwardly full of hypocrisy and iniquity — paralleling Isaiah 3:9's woe against the show of their countenance.
- Woe 8 (vv. 29–33): By acknowledging their fathers killed the prophets while claiming to be naturally righteous, they become witnesses against themselves — if their fathers were murderers, they cannot be naturally righteous.
- Matt 23:33 — Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?
- The ungodly thinking — their doctrine of natural righteousness and natural holiness — is the foundation upon which the entire vain religious system rests and upon which all three phases of their rebelliousness will be carried out.

Filling Up the Measure (vv. 32, 34–36)

- Matt 23:34 — Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute *them* from city to city:
- After phase one (crucifixion of Christ), phase two will see the vain religious system persecute the prophets, wise men, and scribes sent to Israel — the members of the remnant functioning in those roles.
- Verse 35 takes the indictment all the way back to Abel — the vain religious system's lineage goes back to Cain, whose father was the devil (John 8:44), establishing that this 'generation of vipers' is not naturally righteous.

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Lament Over Jerusalem Lesson 36 · Matt 23:37–39

- The third and final section of the Lord's denouncement is addressed not to the disciples or the Pharisees but to Jerusalem itself — his capital city.
- Matt 23:37 — O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!

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- Verse 37 gives a synopsis of the Lord's entire history of dealings with Jerusalem from the second course of punishment onward — his repeated desire to gather her children and her repeated refusal.
- Matt 23:38 — Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.
- The Lord calls the temple 'your house' — no longer identifying it as his Father's house — as he formally departs and leaves it to its coming desolation in his day of wrath.
- Matt 23:39 — For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, *Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.*
- The condition for seeing him again is drawn from Psalm 118:26 — the remnant of Israel must cry out that acknowledgment at his return, which is the cry that will accompany the establishment of the kingdom.
- This verse closes Section 3 of Matthew's gospel (Matt 16:21–23:39) and looks forward to the Lord's return in glory when the remnant, having endured through phase two and phase three, will welcome their Messiah.

Key Doctrinal Distinctions

Eight Woes in Matthew 23 vs. Eight Woes in Isaiah 3–5

Keith makes it explicit that the eight woes of Matthew 23 are not a random number but a deliberate parallel to the eight woes God pronounced through Isaiah (Isa 3:9, 11; 5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22) when the vain religious system was first indicted and destroyed. The parallel goes beyond mere number — the woes address the same three components of ungodliness: ungodly thinking, ungodly living, and ungodly labor. The key difference is that Isaiah presents them in the order of ungodly thinking → ungodly living → ungodly labor, while the Lord deliberately reverses the order in Matthew 23 (ungodly labor → ungodly living → ungodly thinking) so as to end on the foundational issue — their ungodly thinking — which is the bedrock upon which the entire vain religious system and all three phases of its climactic rebelliousness rest.

Three Components of Godliness and Ungodliness

Keith grounds the structure of the eight woes in the three components of godliness established from Genesis 1 — that God created man to be a Godlike creature who thinks like God, walks in God's ways, and labors with God in what he is doing. The vain religious system is indicted in all three components: they do not think like God (they profess natural righteousness and reject the counsel of God against themselves), they do not walk in God's ways (they are blind guides leading the people in their own vain traditions and commandments), and they do not labor with God (they shut up the kingdom of heaven, devour widows, and make proselytes who become children of hell). ETB's video series on 'Godliness' is cited as the resource for a fuller treatment of this foundational issue.

The Disciples' Capacity to Discern Moses from the Pharisees' Corruptions

Keith draws a critical distinction regarding Matt 23:2–3 — the Lord is not contradicting himself by telling the disciples to observe what the scribes and Pharisees bid them from Moses' seat. Rather, the disciples have been equipped by three-plus years of corrective doctrine with the 'perfect law of liberty' (James 1:25) — the law freed from all the traditions, additions, and corruptions of the vain religious system. They can now hear the scribes and Pharisees read from Moses and obey what Moses said, while simultaneously recognizing when those same leaders begin to corrupt, append, or void the commandments through their own teachings.

The Generation of Vipers — Lineage Back to Cain

Keith makes the distinction that 'generation' in the phrase 'generation of vipers' is not primarily a reference to a time period but to lineage — who they were generated from. When the Lord takes the indictment in Matt 23:35 all the way back to the blood of righteous Abel, he is tracing the vain religious system's ancestry back to Cain, whose father was the devil (John 8:44). This is confirmed in 1 John 3:12 and in Jude's description of the phase-three false teachers who 'have gone in the way of Cain.' The Pharisees' proselytes — made in phase two — are those who will ultimately go the way of Cain in phase three, accepting the antichrist and being twofold more the child of hell.

Key Scripture References

Matt 23:1–2	Keith uses this to establish that the Lord addressed three distinct audiences in Matthew 23: the multitude and disciples (vv. 1–12), the scribes and Pharisees (vv. 13–36), and Jerusalem (vv. 37–39).
Matt 23:3	Used to show that the disciples, equipped with corrective doctrine, can discern what Moses truly commanded from the Pharisees' corruptions — and are to obey the former while rejecting the latter.
Matt 23:11–12	Key verses establishing the kingdom criterion: self-exaltation leads to abasement; humble service leads to reward and exaltation in the kingdom.
Isa 3:9, 11	The first two of the eight original woes — against their ungodly thinking, specifically their doctrine of natural righteousness.
Isa 5:8, 11, 18, 20–22	The remaining six woes in Isaiah — three against ungodly living (despise of the poor, living for pleasure, vain worship) and three against ungodly labor (corrupting the law, perverting judgment).
Matt 23:13	The first of the eight woes — against shutting up the kingdom of heaven against men entering through the gospel of the kingdom.
Matt 23:15	Third woe — the scribes and Pharisees compass sea and land to make proselytes who become twofold more the child of hell; the engine of phase-three opposition.
Matt 23:23–24	Fifth woe — the blind guides omit the weightier matters of the law (judgment, mercy, faith), straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel.
Matt 23:27–28	Seventh woe — the whited sepulchre image exposes the fundamental

	disconnect between their outward appearance of righteousness and their inward reality.
Matt 23:29–31	Eighth woe — acknowledging that their fathers killed the prophets is self-incriminating: the claim to natural righteousness is self-refuted.
Matt 23:34–36	The Lord announces the coming of phase two — prophets, wise men, and scribes sent to Israel will be killed and persecuted; verse 35 traces the lineage from Abel to Zacharias.
Matt 23:37–39	The lament over Jerusalem — the Lord's synopsis of his history of dealing with the city, the pronouncement of desolation, and the condition for his return: the remnant's cry from Psalm 118:26.
James 1:22–27	Keith references James to show how the 'perfect law of liberty' equips the disciples to have pure and undefiled religion in contrast to the vain religion of the Pharisees.
John 8:44	Used to confirm that the vain religious system's lineage goes back to the devil — 'He was a murderer from the beginning' — connecting the generation of vipers back to Cain's murder of Abel.

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