

Seven Woes of the Pharisees (Matt 23:13-32)

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There are two observations to make of this passage:

1. With literary beauty, Jesus presents His woes in a structured chiasm with its apex emphasizing the main reason for the Pharisees' failure as teachers.
2. Did you notice that this passage is missing Matthew 23:14? Because the best and earliest manuscripts do not have Matthew 23:14, many Bible translations omit it. Translations using later manuscripts containing Matthew 23:14 will present eight woes.

A chiasm is a Hebrew literary device that presents ideas or clauses that mirror each other in a pattern that places a focus on the apex of the literary structure. As you learn more about how to study the Bible, you too will be able to identify these devices and enable a greater understanding of God's word. Here the chiasm of Matthew 23:13-32 (ESV) can be observed with an **x** marking the apex:

A: 13) "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For **you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces**. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.

B: 15) Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and **when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves**.

C: 16) "Woe to you, **blind guides**, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' 17) You **blind fools!** For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? 18) And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' 19) You **blind men!** For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20) So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21) And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. 22) And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

X: 23) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. 24) You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

C': 25) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26) **You blind Pharisee!** First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

B': 27) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. 28) So **you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness**.

A': 29) "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, 30) saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31) Thus you witness against yourselves that **you are sons of those who murdered the prophets**. 32) Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. (Matt 23:13-32, ESV)

A good way of studying a chiasm is to make a table pairing the first half of the chiasm with its corresponding parallel of the second half. This makes it easier to observe and understand the chiasm.

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C': 25) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. 26) **You blind Pharisee**, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.

Observations:

Inflection Point:

X: 23) “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. 24) You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

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Teacher Notes

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Inform the student that God's word uses literary devices like a chiasm to emphasize something important. When you miss a chiasm, you might miss what God is emphasizing.

How the Bible came to us through translation and transmission is something worth knowing for anyone who takes God's word seriously. Matthew 23:14 presents an example of a textual error. To learn more, see "What is an Emendation" at <http://Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/5Bible/TransWhatIsEmendation.aspx>.

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Show the student that a chiasm can be recognized by a pattern of similar words or concepts that inversely repeated in mirror image. This chiasm is one of concepts and the bold text shows the pattern defined by each section that begins with "woe."

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Observations:

Ask the student: how did the Pharisees prevent people from the kingdom of heaven?

A: The Pharisees did not point people to Jesus as the Messiah. By failing to recognize the Messiah, "you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people."

A': By persecuting and murdering the Old Testament prophets, Jewish religious authorities of the past disregarded those who prophesied and pointed to the Messiah – "you are sons of those who murdered the prophets."

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Observations:

Ask the student: what was Jesus saying about the Pharisee as a teacher?

B: The Pharisee was a false teacher who led others astray and could not show another how to be a child of Abraham (Believer).

B': The Pharisee was also a deceitful teacher who acted as though he was holy but was not a genuine child of Abraham (Believer).

C: 16) “Woe to you, **blind guides**, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’ 17) You fools and **blind men**! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? 18) And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.’ 19) You **blind men**, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? 20) Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. 21) And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. 22) And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.

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Observations:

Ask the student: what does it mean to be sanctified? What does it mean to be holy? How would you research this?

A Bible dictionary is perhaps the easiest resource to use in this instance. An online Bible dictionary can be accessed by searching: StudyLight Holman Dictionary and searching within the dictionary: sanctification.

Sanctify is to dedicate and set something apart for God – people, objects, places, or time. To set apart from the profane can be more easily understood as “to set apart from the common.”

C: The Pharisees were “blind guides,” who cannot lead others, because they believed the temple’s wealth and how much you gave sanctified a person. They did not recognize God’s holy temple and His holy altar as the focus of sanctification. The Pharisees did not know how to be holy.

C’: The Pharisees were blind because they did not know that holiness comes from within.

Inflection Point:

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Observations:

Ask the student: what do you observe at the inflection point? What is Jesus emphasizing about the Pharisee that is important for us to know?

The inflection point of the chiasm: “for you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness,”

By “neglecting the weightier provisions of the law,” the scribes and Pharisees did not know God’s word.

The inflection point of the chiasm is well worth evaluating for all teachers of the faith. Neglecting and not knowing God’s word renders one blind to: a) a hypocritical life and b) as a deceitful guide in leading others to faith. Worse is the misrepresentation of Jesus Christ to the world with an utter lack of agape love.