

## Chapter 97: Formalism and Hypocrisy

*Matthew 23:25–39*

In John Bunyan’s classic story, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian meets two strange figures named *Formalist* and *Hypocrisy* as they tumble over the wall on the left side of the narrow way. Christian is astonished, since they have not gone through the gate of repentance from sin and faith in Christ, as he had. He challenges them, “Do you not know that it is written that the one who does not enter by the gate, but climbs up some other way—that person is a thief and a robber?” But Formalist and Hypocrisy dismiss Christian, insisting that to do back to the gate would be too difficult, and that it is much easier to take their short-cut. Besides, their shortcut was a tradition that had been followed for more than a thousand years, so they felt very confident in what they were doing. When Christian continued to point out the great differences between his life and theirs, they only laughed at him.

As Jesus continues his woes against the scribes and the Pharisees, he points out with perfect clarity the falseness of their professed religion. Moving from their smallest infractions against God’s righteous law, up to the most extreme, he shows how they are formalists and hypocrites through and through. Worst of all, in clinging to their false, human religion, they rejected God’s own mercy and grace toward them. In this passage, Jesus teaches us to *seek refuge under the shadow of Christ’s wing*.

### **Formalism (Matt. 23:25–28)**

In the next two woes, Jesus condemns the formalism of the scribes and Pharisees. He begins by observing the absurdity of their pursuit of ceremonial cleanness, while remaining spiritually corrupt: “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. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean” (vv. 25–26). The rabbis did debate whether the cleaning the inside of cups and plates made those dishes clean, or whether it was necessary to clean them, both inside and outside.<sup>1</sup> While Jesus may be touching on that debate, he is not entering into it, because his point is not to argue one kind of formalism against another; rather, he is arguing that their debates on formalism (religious practices guided purely by external forms rather than internal realities) have blinded them to the spiritual uncleanness that runs rampant within them. Ceremonial laws for cleansing vessels and dishes were meant to provide a picture of spiritual realities, and not to serve as an end in themselves.

Jesus, then, excoriates the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites for the way that their cups and plates remain “full of greed and self-indulgence.” In the parallel account in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus makes his point even more explicit: “Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside *you* are full of greed and wickedness” (Luke 11:39). Jesus is saying that the Pharisees

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion, see Carson, “Matthew,” 541.

themselves—and not merely their dishes—are unclean because of sin. To translate the nuance of Matthew’s version, Blomberg suggests translating these two words (“greed” and “self-indulgence”) as a hendiadys (“two nouns coordinated so as mutually to define each other”), and he commends the Good News Translation: “full of what you have gotten by violence and selfishness.”<sup>2</sup>

This is possible, but I would suggest that Jesus may have at least two specific purposes behind each of these words that would suggest that we should keep them distinct. First, I wonder whether the word for “greed” may refer to the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment prohibition against stealing, and “self-indulgence” may refer to the 7<sup>th</sup> Commandment concern about adultery. The word for “greed” (ἄρπαγῆς; *harpagēs*) suggests the idea of “robbery”: “the practices in which they engaged meant that they took from others that to which they were not entitled.”<sup>3</sup> Here, the word probably refers to the “inner state of mind that leads to seizure.”<sup>4</sup>

Then, the word for “self-indulgence” (ἀκρασίας; *akrasias*) is a negated word (*a-krasia*, not under control; like *a-theist*, not a theist), the opposite of which would be “self-control” (noun: ἐγκράτεια; *enkrateia*; verb: ἐγκρατεύομαι; *enkrateuomai*). While words for “not-self-controlled” and “self-control” appear in general contexts elsewhere in the Bible (Acts 24:25; 1 Cor. 9:25; Gal. 5:23; 2 Tim. 3:3; 2 Pet. 1:6), both words also appear prominently in Paul’s discussion about marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. There, he encourages spouses not deprive one another of sexual intimacy for more than a very limited time, and for a very limited purpose (prayer), “so that Satan may not tempt you because of your *lack of self-control* (ἀκρασίαν; *akrasian*)” (1 Cor. 7:5). Then, while he encourages the unmarried and widows to remain single, he concedes that “if they *cannot exercise self-control* (οὐκ ἐγκρατεύονται; *ouk enkrateuontai*; ‘not self-controlled’), they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Cor. 7:9). Thus, the word translated “self-indulgence” often refers to self-control in sexual matters.<sup>5</sup>

If these two words (“greed” and “self-indulgence”) carry these meanings, then we may observe that Jesus addresses concerns from the Ten Commandments in reverse order, beginning with oaths (9<sup>th</sup> Commandment) in Matthew 23:16–22, then here to theft and adultery (8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Commandments; v. 25), and finally to murder in the last woe (vv. 29–36). Jesus is showing how their corruption is complete, from the smallest things to the greatest.

The second reason that Jesus may have for considering these two words separately (and not as a hendiadys; *pace* Blomberg) is what they suggest about the failure of formalism. Formalism attempts to display one’s righteousness through a careful observance of external forms. Hidden inside those external displays, however, is a heart that is both greedy for ill-gotten gain, and also unable to control their own impulses. Paul touches on the same point in Colossians 2:

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<sup>2</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 347.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 584.

<sup>4</sup> “ἄρπαγῆ” in BDAG. BDAG, however, argues that this definition fits Luke 11:39 (“you are full of...”), and instead suggests “the produce of seizure” for Matthew 23:25 (“[the cup and the plate] are full of...”). Whether to the internal state of greed or to stolen items as the result of greed, the point is the same.

<sup>5</sup> Nolland does not consider the possibility of an allusion to the Ten Commandments when he writes, “ἀκρασία (‘self-indulgence/lack of self-control’) is often applied to sexual immorality, but it has a much wider remit and is unlikely to be focused here on sexual matters.” (Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 939–40.)

[20] If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—[21] “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” [22] (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? [23] These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. (Col. 2:20–23)

The “indulgence of the flesh” (πρὸς πλῆσμονῆν τῆς σαρκός; *pros plēsmonēn tēs sarkos*) is not related to the word translated as “self-indulgence” in Matt. 22:23; however, the ideas are the same. However strict the scribes and Pharisees may have seemed, their rules and regulations were of “no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.”

Similarly to the question of cleansing cups and dishes, Jesus makes his critique more pointed in the next two verses: “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. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (vv. 27–28). Here, it is likely that Jesus is referring to a practice that took place just before the Passover (which was approaching at this time). In preparation for all the pilgrims who would be arriving into Jerusalem, workers would “whitewash all graves and tombs with lime. We are told that this was done in order to mark them, so that no Jew would touch one unawares and become Levitically defiled.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the purpose was not to beautify the graves, but to identify them as unclean.<sup>7</sup> The result, then, was a jarring sight: visibly, those graves looked clean, but everyone knew that they were defiled and unclean. The same was true for the Pharisees—clean on the outside, but “full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” on the inside.

### **Hypocrisy (Matt. 23:29–36)**

To be sure, Jesus has called the scribes and Pharisees “hypocrites” in all but one of the other woes (Matt. 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27; cf. 23:16). In this final condemnation, however, the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees is most blatant. On the one hand, the scribes and Pharisees “build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous” (v. 29). Furthermore, they profess, “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” (v. 30). On the other hand, Jesus insists that, by this, they only “witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets” (v. 31). That is, they claim innocence in regard to the violence of the prophets and righteous from the past, even while they do the exact same thing in their own day. Calvin observes that this kind of behavior is common among hypocrites:

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<sup>6</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 911.

<sup>7</sup> “The marking of graves with lime-plaster was intended not so much for cosmetic purposes as to warn people against touching them and so contracting uncleanness (*m. Šeq. 1:1; m. Ma’as. Š. 5:1*.)” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 875–76.)

It is customary, indeed, with hypocrites thus to honor, after their death, good teachers and holy ministers of God, whom they cannot endure while they are alive. Nor does this arise merely from the common fault, which Horace thus describes: “We hate virtue while it is in safety, but when it has been removed from our eyes, we seek it with envy;” but as the ashes of the dead no longer give annoyance by harsh and severe reproofs, they who are driven to madness by the living voices of those men are not unwilling, by adoring them, to make an empty display of religion. It is a hypocrisy which costs little to profess warm regard for those who are now silent.<sup>8</sup>

The righteousness of the faithful, then, is a two edged sword for the hypocrites. While the faithful are alive, their righteousness bears witness against the evil of the hypocrites. Yet, when those faithful are dead (whether at the hands of the hypocrites or otherwise), the hypocrites can then use the faithful for their own propaganda.

Jesus, then, prompts them to fill out the full measure of what their fathers had done (v. 32)—especially by condemning him to death. Even so, he warns them of the consequences of doing so: “You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?” (v. 33). Yet, their violence will not be satiated by the crucifixion of Jesus alone. Jesus insists that he himself will send others (“prophets and wise men and scribes”), whom they will also persecute, whether by killing them or beating them or pursuing them into hiding (v. 34). Intriguingly, the parallel passage in the Gospel of Luke has, “Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute...’” (Luke 11:49). Here in Matthew, Jesus does not speak in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person about “the Wisdom of God,” but in first person speech declares, “I will send.” Carson writes, “Not only is there little doubt that Christians identified Jesus with God’s wisdom, but he who assigned to himself messianic titles and even OT texts referring exclusively to Yahweh would not have hesitated to make the same conclusion.”<sup>9</sup>

The final verse of this passage of woes raises a question of interpretation. Jesus, in telling the scribes and Pharisees to fill up the measure of their fathers by inflicting their own violence, explains, “so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar” (v. 35). We know that Abel was the son of Adam and Eve, who was murdered by his brother Cain (Gen. 4). Who, though, is Zechariah the son of Barachiah? We know that the prophet Zechariah, who wrote the book of Zechariah, was the “son of Berechiah” (Zech. 1:1, 7; 6<sup>th</sup> century BC); however, we have no record that he was martyred in this way. On the other hand, the description of this Zechariah’s being “murdered between the sanctuary and the altar” fits the description of “Zechariah the son of Jehoida the priest” in 2 Chronicles 24:20–22 (8<sup>th</sup> century BC). There are various proposals for harmonizing these two possibilities.<sup>10</sup> The main point Jesus is making, however, is reasonably clear. If this is the Zechariah who wrote the Book of Zechariah, then

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<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:96.

<sup>9</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 544.

<sup>10</sup> Osborne, *Matthew*, 856–57.

Jesus has in mind the first and last martyrs *chronologically*.<sup>11</sup> If, however, this is the Zechariah whose murdered is recorded in 2 Chronicles 24:20–22, we must remember that Chronicles was the last book of the Bible in the Hebrew order. Thus, Jesus has in mind the first and last martyrs *canonically*.<sup>12</sup> The scribes and Pharisees will follow in the footsteps of their fathers by murdering Jesus and his servants: “Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation” (v. 36).

### **Gospel (Matt. 23:37–39)**

At this point, Jesus cuts off his condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees to lament the fate of Jerusalem because of their corrupt leaders: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (v. 37). The language of gathering children under a wing as a hen gathers her chicks is biblical, where God often describes himself as protecting and defending his people under his wing (see esp. Ps. 91:4–6; Isa. 31:5).<sup>13</sup> The lament here contrasts the will of Christ and the will of people, as Jesus uses the same word to describe his own desires (“how often *I willed*...”; ESV: “how often would I have...”) and the desires of Jerusalem: “and you were *not willing!*”<sup>14</sup> They did not want to depend upon the Lord for their protection, even as they professed that they did.

Ultimately, this leaves Jesus and these leaders at a crossroads. There will be a showdown, and for them, their house will be “left...desolate” (v. 38). For him, Jesus will be crucified in such a way that they “will not see [him] again,” but his absence will only be temporary: “until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’” (v. 39). The scribes and Pharisees will murder him, but will not gain the victory over him that they think they will have. Ultimately, even their knees will bow down before him.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Historically, what did the scribes and Pharisees debate about the cleanliness of dishes? Why was that ceremonial detail so important to them? How does Jesus use that debate to talk about internal uncleanness in their own lives? What is the uncleanness that Jesus identifies that lurks within their hearts? How does this make them like whitewashed tombs? What were the whitewashed tombs to which Jesus was comparing them?
2. How did the scribes and Pharisees talk about the righteous prophets who had been murdered in the past? Why did they profess that they would not have taken part in the persecution and murder of those prophets, if they had lived in those days? How does Jesus show that violent bloodshed against the righteous in the Old Testament was not the exception, but the rule? Why does hypocrisy seem so self-justified to the hypocrite, and so absurd to everyone else?

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<sup>11</sup> So Blomberg, *Matthew*, 349.

<sup>12</sup> So Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 919; France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 881.

<sup>13</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 922.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:110.

3. Why does Jesus compare himself to a hen gathering her chicks under her wings (see Ps. 91:4–6; Isa. 31:5)? How does this image convey the protection and refuge that God promised to give to his people? How do these Old Testament gospel promises underscore the stark tragedy of God's rejection at the hands of Israel's leaders? What fate does Jesus promise will await these leaders who have rejected him?

4. In what ways may formalism have crept into your own spiritual life? In what areas might you be more hypocritical than you allow yourself to believe? What do you think makes these false gospels so attractive to us? What does the Bible tell us about God's mercy toward his people, especially in his Son Jesus Christ? Where do you need to repent from your sins and turn again to Christ for forgiveness and cleansing and sanctification?