

WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 13, 2026

**5-Day Devotional
based on Sunday's message:**

Woe To The Pharisees
Matthew 23

Provided by



AKRON GRACE CHURCH
101 N. 7th Street, Akron PA
www.akrongrace.com

Listen to the full message on our YouTube channel:
www.youtube.com/@akrongracechurch6363

Matthew 23

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don’t follow their example. For they don’t practice what they teach. They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden. “Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra long tassels. And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues. They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called ‘Rabbi.’ “Don’t let anyone call you ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters. And don’t address anyone here on earth as ‘Father,’ for only God in heaven is your Father. And don’t let anyone call you ‘Teacher,’ for you have only one teacher, the Messiah. The greatest among you must be a servant. But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you shut the door of the Kingdom of Heaven in people’s faces. You won’t go in yourselves, and you don’t let others enter either. “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees.

Hypocrites! For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell you yourselves are! “Blind guides! What sorrow awaits you! For you say that it means nothing to swear ‘by God’s Temple,’ but that it is binding to swear ‘by the gold in the Temple.’ Blind fools! Which is more important—the gold or the Temple that makes the gold sacred? And you say that to swear ‘by the altar’ is not binding, but to swear ‘by the gifts on the altar’ is binding. How blind! For which is more important—the gift on the altar or the altar that makes the gift sacred? When you swear ‘by the altar,’ you are swearing by it and by everything on it. And when you swear ‘by the Temple,’ you are swearing by it and by God, who lives in it. And when you swear ‘by heaven,’ you are swearing by the throne of God and by God, who sits on the throne. “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees.

Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things. Blind guides! You strain your water so you won’t accidentally swallow a gnat, but you swallow a camel! “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence! You blind Pharisee! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too.

Matthew 23

“What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people’s bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness. “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you build tombs for the prophets your ancestors killed, and you decorate the monuments of the godly people your ancestors destroyed. Then you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would never have joined them in killing the prophets.’ “But in saying that, you testify against yourselves that you are indeed the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead and finish what your ancestors started. Snakes! Sons of vipers! How will you escape the judgment of hell? “Therefore, I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers of religious law. But you will kill some by crucifixion, and you will flog others with whips in your synagogues, chasing them from city to city. As a result, you will be held responsible for the murder of all godly people of all time—from the murder of righteous Abel to the murder of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you killed in the Temple between the sanctuary and the altar. I tell you the truth, this judgment will fall on this very generation. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God’s messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn’t let me. And now, look, your house is abandoned and desolate. For I tell you this, you will never see me again until you say, ‘Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!’”

Day 1: Greatness That Lifts Burdens

Devotional

Have you ever received advice from someone who seemed more interested in correcting you than helping you? Rules can identify what is wrong, but rules alone cannot carry a tired person. Jesus confronts leaders who taught others what to do while refusing to share their burdens. Their words demanded obedience, but their lives did not provide a trustworthy example. Jesus does not oppose truth, careful teaching, or visible obedience. He opposes using them for control, recognition, or status. The prayer boxes and tassels described in this passage were reminders of Scripture. The problem was turning reminders of God into advertisements for oneself. When being noticed becomes the goal, even a good practice can become spiritually hollow. Jesus offers another picture of greatness, “The greatest among you must be a servant.” Kingdom leadership does not ask, “How can this position elevate me?” It asks, “Whom can I help become stronger, freer, and more faithful?” Jesus lived this before He taught it. He carried the burden of our sin to the cross and now invites the weary to come to Him.

Going Deeper

Humility is not pretending that our gifts do not matter. It is placing those gifts under Christ’s authority for the good of others. Titles, knowledge, and responsibility can serve the church, but none of them makes one disciple more valuable than another. We remain brothers and sisters with one true Teacher, one heavenly Father, and one Messiah.

Bible Verse

“Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don’t follow their example. For they don’t practice what they teach. They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden. “Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra long tassels. And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues. They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called ‘Rabbi.’ “Don’t let anyone call you ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one teacher, and all of you are equal as brothers and sisters. And don’t address anyone here on earth as ‘Father,’ for only God in heaven is your Father. And don’t let anyone call you ‘Teacher,’ for you have only one teacher, the Messiah. The greatest among you must be a servant. But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” - Matthew 23:1-12

Refection Question

Where are you most tempted to seek recognition rather than quietly serve? Whose burden could you help carry this week in a practical way?

Today’s Practice

Choose one helpful task that usually goes unnoticed. Complete it without announcing what you did or waiting to be thanked.

Prayer

Jesus, free me from the need to appear important. Teach me to use every responsibility and ability to serve others as You have served me. Amen.

Day 2: Truth Without Loopholes

Devotional

How quickly do you look for a technical escape when keeping your word becomes inconvenient? We can become remarkably creative when we want to appear faithful without paying the cost of faithfulness. The religious leaders in Matthew 23 developed distinctions between different kinds of oaths. Some sounded serious but, according to their system, did not have to be kept. Jesus exposes the deeper problem. God cannot be removed from any corner of life by choosing clever wording. The temple, the altar, heaven, and everything made sacred by God ultimately point back to Him. Every promise is spoken in His presence. Integrity does not depend on finding exactly the right formula. It grows from a heart willing to tell the truth. Our influence also matters. Jesus says these leaders shut the kingdom in people's faces and reproduced their errors in those they taught. Spiritual influence is never merely personal. The way we speak, lead, correct, and keep commitments can make Jesus clearer to others or make following Him seem unbelievable. Grace tells the truth and then helps people walk in it.

Going Deeper

Jesus' words echo His teaching in Matthew 5:33–37, let your yes mean yes and your no mean no. The issue is not only courtroom oaths. It is the divided heart that wants the credibility of a promise while preserving an escape route. Christ makes us people whose plain words can be trusted because our whole lives are lived before God.

Bible Verse

“‘What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you shut the door of the Kingdom of Heaven in people's faces. You won't go in yourselves, and you don't let others enter either. “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell you yourselves are! “Blind guides! What sorrow awaits you! For you say that it means nothing to swear ‘by God's Temple,’ but that it is binding to swear ‘by the gold in the Temple.’ Blind fools! Which is more important—the gold or the Temple that makes the gold sacred? And you say that to swear ‘by the altar’ is not binding, but to swear ‘by the gifts on the altar’ is binding. How blind! For which is more important—the gift on the altar or the altar that makes the gift sacred? When you swear ‘by the altar,’ you are swearing by it and by everything on it. And when you swear ‘by the Temple,’ you are swearing by it and by God, who lives in it. And when you swear ‘by heaven,’ you are swearing by the throne of God and by God, who sits on the throne.” — Matthew 23:13-22

Reflection Question

Where have you been tempted to use careful wording, a half-truth, or a technicality to protect yourself? What commitment needs a clear answer or faithful action from you today?

Today's Practice

Review one unfinished promise. Either take the next concrete step to keep it today or speak honestly with the person affected and make the situation right.

Prayer

God of truth, expose every loophole I use to avoid faithfulness. Make my words clear, my promises dependable, and my influence a trustworthy signpost to Jesus. Amen.

Day 3: What Weighs Most

Devotional

Have you ever spent so much energy perfecting a small detail that you neglected what mattered most? Jesus paints an unforgettable picture: someone carefully strains a tiny gnat from a drink and then swallows a camel. Both animals were ceremonially unclean, but the ridiculous difference in size exposes a badly distorted sense of proportion. The leaders were careful to tithe even small garden herbs. Jesus does not condemn their desire to obey. He says they should not neglect it. Their failure was allowing measurable religious activity to substitute for “the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith.” They counted leaves while overlooking people who needed fairness, compassion, and dependable love. We face the same danger whenever easily measured practices become our definition of maturity. Attendance, giving, Bible knowledge, preferred traditions, and public service can all be good. But none can compensate for treating people unjustly, withholding mercy, or living unreliably. Jesus calls us to obedience with a rightly ordered heart—one that loves God and therefore learns to love our neighbor.

Going Deeper

Justice, mercy, and faithfulness echo the Old Testament prophets, including Micah 6:8 and Zechariah 7:9. Jesus is not setting love against God’s commands. He is showing their intended direction. The details of obedience find their purpose within a life shaped by God’s character. When the center is lost, religious precision can become a way to avoid genuine surrender.

Bible Verse

“And when you swear ‘by heaven,’ you are swearing by the throne of God and by God, who sits on the throne. “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens,* but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things.” — Matthew 23:22-23

Reflection Question

Which religious activity is easiest for you to measure and feel good about? Where is Jesus calling you to practice justice, extend mercy, or become more faithful?

Today’s Practice

Before the day ends, take one action in one of the three weightier matters: correct something unfair, show compassion to someone who has failed, or keep a commitment that costs you something.

Prayer

Father, give me Your sense of what matters. Keep my obedience from becoming a substitute for love, and form in me the justice, mercy, and faithfulness of Jesus. Amen.

Day 4: Clean From The Inside Out

Devotional

What part of your life do you work hardest to make look better than it really is? We learn early how to manage impressions. We choose what others see, prepare acceptable answers, and hide whatever might damage the image we want to maintain. Privacy can be wise, but image-management becomes dangerous when appearance replaces honesty. Jesus compares the leaders first to dishes cleaned only on the outside and then to whitewashed tombs. Both pictures reveal the same contradiction: an impressive exterior can conceal greed, self-indulgence, hypocrisy, and lawlessness. External polish cannot heal an inward disorder. A cleaner mask is still a mask. Jesus says, “First wash the inside.” That command could crush us if He only exposed what was hidden and left us to repair ourselves. But the One speaking is also the Savior who goes to the cross for hypocrites and sinners. In Him we can confess without pretending, receive forgiveness without performing, and welcome the Spirit’s work in our desires, motives, habits, and relationships.

Going Deeper

Biblical integrity means wholeness, the outward life increasingly expresses what God is doing within. This growth is not instant perfection. It is an honest life of repentance and faith in which we stop defending the false self and bring the real self into Christ’s light. Grace does not merely cover our image; it begins transforming our character.

Bible Verse

““What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence! You blind Pharisee! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish,* and then the outside will become clean, too. “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people’s bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.” — Matthew 23:25-28

Reflection Question

Where is there a troubling gap between the person others see and the person you know yourself to be? What honest act of confession or accountability would open that area to Christ’s transforming grace?

Today’s Practice

Ask Jesus to reveal one sin you have been hiding behind a polished façade. Name it honestly before Him, receive His forgiveness, and take one concrete step of repentance that brings your outward life into alignment with the change He wants to make within you.

Prayer

Merciful Jesus, You see beneath every image I create and still invite me near. Forgive what I have hidden and change me from the inside out so my life reflects Your work within me. Amen.

Day 5: The Love Within The Warning

Devotional

How do you hear a warning from someone who truly loves you? A warning can sound harsh when we separate it from the heart of the one speaking. Matthew 23 contains some of Jesus' strongest words, but the chapter ends with grief, not triumph. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem," He cries, revealing sorrow over people who repeatedly rejected God's messengers. The leaders honored prophets from the past while resisting God's voice in the present. It is often easier to admire courageous truth after it can no longer challenge us. Jesus warns that their resistance is continuing the very history they claim to condemn. Their choices have real consequences, and judgment cannot be dismissed as an empty threat. Yet Jesus says He has longed to gather Jerusalem's children as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings. The Judge is not cold or spiteful. He desires rescue, but He will not treat unwillingness as willingness. His lament holds together truths we are tempted to separate: God is holy, sin destroys, judgment is real, and divine love continues to call sinners home.

Going Deeper

The abandoned house points toward the coming judgment on Jerusalem and its temple. Jesus' departure makes visible what rejection has produced. Still, Psalm 118:26 remains on His lips, "Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Everyone must finally reckon with Jesus as the Messiah. The urgent question is whether we receive His sheltering grace now or continue resisting His rightful authority.

Bible Verse

"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you build tombs for the prophets your ancestors killed, and you decorate the monuments of the godly people your ancestors destroyed. Then you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would never have joined them in killing the prophets.' "But in saying that, you testify against yourselves that you are indeed the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead and finish what your ancestors started. Snakes! Sons of vipers! How will you escape the judgment of hell? "Therefore, I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers of religious law. But you will kill some by crucifixion, and you will flog others with whips in your synagogues, chasing them from city to city. As a result, you will be held responsible for the murder of all godly people of all time—from the murder of righteous Abel to the murder of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you killed in the Temple between the sanctuary and the altar. I tell you the truth, this judgment will fall on this very generation. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn't let me. And now, look, your house is abandoned and desolate. For I tell you this, you will never see me again until you say, 'Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!'" - Matthew 23:29-39

Day 5: The Love Within The Warning (Continued....)

Refection Question

What warning or correction from Jesus have you been tempted to admire in theory while resisting in practice? What would willing trust look like if you came beneath Christ's care today?

Today's Practice

Read Matthew 23:37 slowly three times. After each reading, answer Jesus honestly: name what you have resisted, receive His mercy, and take one step that expresses willing obedience.

Prayer

Jesus, let me hear both the holiness and the love in Your warning. Soften what has become resistant in me, gather me beneath Your care, and make me willing to follow You. Amen.