

# The Anatomy of a Pharisee's Heart (23:13-39)

Good morning church. It is great to be here with all of you as always. My name is Colton LeBoeuf and I serve here as the director of groups and discipleship. It is an honor to be a part of this church and to serve on staff here. Here's a few things you should know about me if we haven't had the chance to meet: I grew up here in Knoxville and my wife **Mary Cate and I** have been a part of City Church for almost three years now. Today is our seventh anniversary! Happy anniversary to me. I decided that to celebrate, I would stand here in front of all of you with the bright lights on my face. As an enneagram 9 and an introvert, this is my favorite place to be: in the spotlight. Here. Now. Today. With all of you.

**We have two beautiful daughters,** **Selah Joy** and Ellie June. Somehow, I always knew I would be a girl dad and Selah makes sure I know it every day. We play dress up and throw dance parties and play 'mommy', which for those of you who haven't played, the 'mommy' game is where Selah pretends to be *my* mom and bosses me around. It's a really great time. **Ellie** is in the same boat with me. Fittingly, she earns the role of baby as well in the mommy game and Selah bosses us both around. Which is fun. Ellie is just sweet as can be, man. We always say that she's just happy to be here.

This morning I've got the easy part of this section of **Matthew** where Jesus has absolutely zero chill and publicly roasts the pharisees. Really appreciate the slow pitch here for my first teaching - thanks for that, guys. In all honesty though, this is an intimidating passage to just read! And if it's intimidating for you to read on your own, just imagine how intimidating it is to teach...your first time teaching...at City Church. So that could be intimidating. So maybe we should be incredibly understanding and gracious and kind towards anyone who might possibly, hypothetically find themselves in that type of situation....all hypothetical of course... Welcome to my first teaching at City Church and quite possibly my last.

**Thankfully,** the way that we develop all of our teachings here at city church is through what we call 'teaching team'. In case you don't know, Teaching Team is a small group that meets every week to review and shape our upcoming teachings before they are presented here on Sunday mornings. This team is made up of members of our church of different ages and stages of life, both men *and* women, different ethnicities, and includes all the pastors of our church. **So when something gets taught here on a Sunday morning, regardless of who teaches it, it has been read and approved of by the leaders of our church.**

All of those people have already signed off on everything I'm about to say. Which makes everything I'm about to say a little easier to *teach*, even if it doesn't make any of what Jesus says easier for any of us to *hear*. So on that note...

**Please turn with me to Matthew 23.** Jesus has just finished talking to the crowds **about** the Pharisees and teachers of the law, now he's going to speak **to** the Pharisees and teachers of the law directly. **Starting here in verse 13**, Jesus looks the Pharisees directly in the face and calls them out explicitly. Best we can tell, this is the final interaction Jesus has with them before his trial and crucifixion commences. Right here, in his last message to the religious leaders of the time, Jesus pronounces an incredibly direct set of charges. There is no confusion, there is no wondering who Jesus is speaking to or what He is really trying to say. He does not mince words here. If Jesus ever spoke directly and to the heart, this is it. In this passage Jesus will outline for us some direct charges to the Pharisee on what *exactly* He is outraged by.

**Let me just offer a word of caution:** The tendency, I think, is to always assume that we could never be like the Pharisees. But as soon as we do that, we've missed the point of the passage. There's a place in Luke where Jesus describes a Pharisee as someone who **'trusts in themselves that they are righteous, and treats others with contempt'**<sup>1</sup>. That is the heart of a Pharisee. So if at any point you and I find ourselves trusting that we are right because of what we think, what we believe, how we act, how we behave—and treating other people that are different with contempt—**that** is the spirit of a Pharisee at work. And I would imagine that most of us have at least a little bit of that going on in us. So let's let Jesus help us identify it and repent of it...

Jesus is about to pronounce several 'woes' unto the teachers of the law and the pharisees. Pronouncing woes on people is probably not something we are familiar with, and you are familiar with it, I would love to grab coffee with you and hear about your life because it is way more interesting than mine. So I'd like to briefly explain what a "woe" is exactly... A woe is somewhat like saying "oh honey bless your heart"... but more like "oh no you didn't!" (\*several snaps\*) Yep. There you go. That's what a woe is, I hope you enjoyed that because you will never hear it from me again. **When Jesus says "woe" here it is an exclamation saying "how greatly one will suffer"**. Essentially, it's the opposite of a blessing. If blessing someone is saying "things are going to go well for you" then a woe is saying "things are gonna go really terribly for you".

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 18:9

Through these woes, Jesus is about to outline what I will argue are four specific ways here where the Pharisees are exposing the true posture of their hearts like we described earlier: The Pharisees are confident in their own righteousness and they treat others with contempt.

The first component of the pharisaical heart is what we will call **guarding the gate**. Look with me *starting at verse 13*.

*13 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. [14]*

*15 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.*

The Pharisees and teachers of the law saw themselves as responsible for bringing people **INTO** the kingdom! They claimed to be showing God’s people what He is like and to help them draw near to Him. Instead, Jesus says, it’s like they are **shutting the doors to the kingdom in people’s faces** as soon as they want to enter. They’re saying “well, no, actually, you need to do this first. And this. And follow this tradition. And you need to be this type of person and live exactly in this kind of way.” People are hungry for the kingdom life Jesus offers, and the Pharisees are setting up barrier after barrier to keep people from entering.

And then, Jesus says, even the people that they do let in, have been so shaped and deformed by the Pharisee’s view of worshiping God that they are twice as bad as the Pharisees are! They embody all the unhealthy postures the teachers of the law embody. The Pharisees and teachers of the law have so narrowly defined what obedience to God looks like that it no longer resembles the kingdom of God at all.

Now, that might sound extreme, but we do this sometimes too. We guard the gate when we decide that someone is disqualified to be a part of God’s kingdom based on something they do or fail to do. **We’ve taken the beautiful diversity of the kingdom: where God calls people from every nation, every tribe, every tongue, every ethnicity, every background, and started narrowing it to fit our personal perception of what a Christian should be.** We decide that unless someone votes a certain way, speaks a certain way, looks a certain way, or even dresses a certain way that God cannot be pleased with them. We decide there is no way “that person can be a christian”. They

have tattoos, they drink and party, their car runs on gas, they don't compost, they DON'T believe in global warming, they DO believe in global warming, they aren't married, they don't even tithe...

They don't care about what **I think is important** so there is no way that Jesus has space or time for them. There is no way "they" can be a part of God's kingdom, not until they get their life sorted out. When we do this, we are appointing ourselves as the authority on who does or does not get to be a part of the Kingdom of God. A lot of the time what we are doing is saying that unless this person's relationship with God looks exactly like mine they cannot be a part of the kingdom. Do we realize how arrogant that sounds? Do we see here that we are taking on a responsibility that is not ours? We are guarding the gate of the kingdom.

The second component of the pharisaical heart is what we will call **majoring on the minors**. Look with me starting at **verse 16**.

*16 "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.' 17 You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? 18 You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.' 19 You; blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. 22 And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.*

*23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.*

Jesus here is pointing out that the Pharisees and teachers of the law have **made a big deal out of things that are of relatively little significance**. For starters, they encourage people to swear by the *gold* in the temple, while discounting anyone who swore by the temple itself. He then says that they've meticulously given a tenth of everything they have, all the way down to the spices in their herb garden, but have ignored the major themes of the Scriptures: justice, mercy, faithfulness.

They've taken things that are relatively insignificant in the kingdom, and made them **the measures** of a person's devotion to God.

From my own life, we see this play out in how we parent our girls. Often we find ourselves frustrated with Selah's behavior. We focus on the little things: Come on dude, I told you fifteen hundred times - pick up your toys, put your shoes on, clean up your mess, don't touch that, don't talk like that, you know better. We obsess over their behavior and how we think they should act. Do they need to sort through these things? Absolutely, but for Mary Cate and me, if we are not careful, we can find ourselves so wrapped up around making our kiddos behave that we miss the longing of their hearts: to be seen, to be loved, and to be understood. God wants us to experience His love and His comfort more than he needs us to do everything perfectly.

And when we look back to the passage... Swearing by the temple and tithing our spices might be very foreign concepts to us—I'm guessing—I would argue we often are guilty of something very similar. I can't tell you how many times I have witnessed Christians (and even myself) making a really big deal out of things that are not actually that big of a deal. Making relatively insignificant things into *measures* of faithfulness to God. The idea of church denominations comes to mind. Having a *preference* in terms of a denomination or church tradition can be totally fine. But some people don't just have a *preference*; they have *one* that they think is right, and a long list of others they think are *wrong*. Not just *different*; *wrong*.

Same with styles of worship: *I just HAVE to be at a church that sings hymns. I just CAN'T be at a church that sings hymns. I can't believe some churches do topical sermon series. I can't believe some churches DON'T do topical sermon series.* Some of the things that churches will split over, and people will leave their church over are of absolutely infinitesimal significance in the grand scheme of things. But we are convinced they matter so much. Such that we are willing to make judgment calls about other people's faithfulness to God and/or the bible by whether they align with us on those things or not. And sometimes I just envision Jesus watching us say and think things like this and going, "really? You guys think *this* is what matters most? You guys think what matters most in the kingdom of God is what style of music your church sings? You guys think what matters most in the kingdom is what style of teaching your pastor prefers? You think what matters *most* is whether you do Sunday school or small groups? Those are the things you think *I care most* about?" The reality is that there *are* things the Scriptures name as measures of a person's relationship with Jesus: things like

love for him, love for neighbor, love for other followers of Jesus, fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control<sup>2</sup>. There are things that do matter greatly...and then there are things that don't. Jesus says "major on the majors, not the minors."

Jesus is not saying tithing is bad. But what Jesus is saying here is that if you obsess over your tithe amount while neglecting to put care and energy into loving your spouse - you also neglect the very heart of obedience to God. **When we major on the minors, we prioritize the wrong things within God's kingdom and we miss out on showing the world who God really is.**

The third component of the pharisaical heart is what we will call **Fixating on the superficial**. Look with me starting at [verse 25](#).

*25 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.*

*27 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.*

The Pharisees spend all of their time and energy on **doing things that make them APPEAR healthy** but at heart are self elevating and self serving. This is what Jesus is talking about with the picture of cleaning dishes: they spend a lot of time cleaning the outside of the dish, but not the inside. Inside they are full of greed and self indulgence. Jesus exposes the selfishness in their hearts as they are obsessing over their external appearances. Jesus likens this posturing to the Pharisees beautifying their graves - graves as in the place their bodies will be buried. He is equating what *they* see as their righteousness with a fancy headstone, a neat little signifier to announce where the bones are to be buried. He gives the perfect summary in verse 28, "On the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."

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<sup>2</sup> Galatians 5:22-23

Today, this can take shape in our social media presence. We spend ten minutes taking the perfect selfie, thirty minutes writing the perfect, two sentence caption about our life, and then the next three hours tallying up all the likes and shares, and if we are honest with ourselves, it's only a matter of time before our insecurity resurfaces and becomes unbearable, and we start all over again.

Maybe we bury our sin and distract our hearts in the name of serving the Lord... We occupy our time serving and giving and attending every gathering and LifeGroup hangout. We constantly share spiritual advice and engage others on their sin, yet secretly we are drowning under the weight of our own sin and shame. We are trapped in addiction, powerless to quit and terrified of being found out. If you only knew what I had done Jesus... If these people only knew what I was struggling with, there is no way they would want to be around me. Who would? Maybe if I do enough outward good, It doesn't matter what is going on inside.

Maybe we indulge ourselves and spend lavishly on a new home. We buy the most perfect, picturesque, magazine worthy house, we fill it with fancy decorations and furniture and a sign that reads, "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord".... All the while we and those closest to us are deeply, deeply struggling. Our kids are scattered and broken, our friends are nowhere to be found, we don't even know what is going on in our marriage. And if we're honest, we'd rather not think about those things. We just look at what we can control: the yard, the car, the sun tan, and the smile - and we pretend that everything is okay.

**When we fixate on the superficial, we can distract ourselves from the very thing causing the most destruction in our lives, the condition of our heart.**

The fourth component of the pharisaical heart is what we will call **Silencing the opposition**. Look with me starting at [verse 29](#).

*29 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. 30 And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started! 33 "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? 34 Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. 35 And so upon*

*you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.*

This section is the epitome of the Pharisees' hypocrisy. In the Old Testament, the voice of God used to come through a few select people, i.e. the prophets, before the Holy Spirit was put into each of our hearts. The Spirit of God would 'rest upon' someone for them to speak to everyone, God speaking through them. God sent his Prophets time and time again to call people to repentance, and time and time again they refused to listen. They ultimately rejected every call to repent of their sin, injustice, and corruption, and by **murdering these prophets** who had the Spirit of God resting upon them, they silenced the very ones God had sent to expose their sin. The Pharisees speak of honoring those who have been martyred, yet before they even process the words Jesus is saying, Jesus foreshadows that they will put *Him* to death in the same way: "complete what your ancestors started!" Their ancestors were responsible for silencing the voice of God in their day, and the Pharisees scoff at them saying we would never do that. *I would never do that*. Do you ever find yourself scoffing at another's sin? Saying I would never do that. Ironically, here the Pharisees are going to go on to not only murder God's messenger but God himself.

"Okay," you might be saying, "I may have some of that other stuff going on, but I wouldn't do this. I don't murder people who speak out against me and my sin."

None of us here are going around murdering anyone, but let me ask you something... When someone comes to us with a confrontation, something we are doing wrong, some way of thinking we have that may not line up with Jesus' heart, or something we have said or done that just doesn't sit right... How do we respond? Do we ignore them? Do we start avoiding them when we see them? Do we cut the conversation off before it gets to anything substantial where they might engage us on things yet again? Do we say yeah, thanks for that, mental note added... Maybe we get aggressive. We say how dare you? You can't speak to me like that. You can't assume my motivations. I can't be around you. We write passive aggressive posts and comments on social media about them. We warn everyone we know to stay away from them. They are toxic. They are unsafe.

Let me be clear: people can be unsafe. People can be toxic. But let's not diminish the reality of those situations by using that same language to describe just any interaction at all that we don't like. Let's not use that as justification for writing off things that we genuinely need to hear for our own sanctification. Don't be like the Pharisees and go



around silencing the opposition. **When we do this, we reject anything we don't want to hear and do what we alone see fit, and we reap the reward of our selfish obstinance.**

Jesus has been laying into the Pharisees in this passage. He has held nothing back and has let them know exactly what he thinks of their hearts and exactly what He thinks of their ministry. But look with me here at **verse 37**. Jesus completely changes His tone.

*37 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. 38 Look, your house is left to you desolate. 39 For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"*

Pause for a second here and think about what Jesus is saying. Jesus is expressing his deep, deep love for his people. Yes, he hates their choices. Yes, he is furious by how they have run away and taken others with them. Yet in the same breath, he weeps for his people and longs to bring them all back. Here Jesus says He wishes he could gather all the defiant, rebellious people of Israel to love, protect, and nurture them like a mother hen does with her baby chickens. THIS is the heart of God. He is set on reconciliation. He is obsessed with it. For the joy set before him, Christ endured the cross<sup>3</sup>. This joy set before Him is for God to be reunited with His people - for God to be reunited with you and with me.

The end of verse 37 proves crucial and graphic; unbelieving Israel has chosen its own fate. Jesus says, "I have longed to care for you and protect you, but you do not want me here".

Jesus has the same invitation for us here this morning. He is longing to care for you, to comfort you, and to protect you... and we have another opportunity to respond to Him this morning. For those of us who are blinded by rage, those of us feel broken and burdened by our sin, and those of us who just don't know which way is up and which way is down - God's invitation is the same:

"I see you"

"I love you"

"I long to be reunited with you"

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 12:2

[We are going to go to the tables here in a minute](#) and I want us to respond to the invitation of God to come back to Him. Maybe for you that looks like getting on your knees in worship. Maybe it looks like confessing of your sin to then be reconciled to God. Maybe it looks like asking someone in your lifegroup or on the host team to pray for you... but let's not leave this place without responding to God.

Pray with me and then we can respond to God.

Father God, we love you. We thank you for your heart for each one of us this morning. Thank you for what you have done for us on the Cross. Your word says that while we were still sinners Jesus died for us. While we were still sinners! As in before we ever obeyed you! So as we come to you God in confession, we ask you to heal our hearts. We ask that you would give us the boldness to examine our hearts thoroughly and the grace to repent and turn again to you. We ask that your spirit would well up in our hearts to bring not only conviction, but comfort and peace. Thank you for your goodness to us God. We praise you. We honor you this morning. Come and have your way. Your kingdom come, your will be done. We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.