

# Gospel of Matthew

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## ***Suggested responses to questions about Matthew 23:1-39***

**Note:** Be sure to respond to all the questions yourself before reading the suggested responses in order to make the most of this study.

1. Jesus has come to Jerusalem in part to deliver a “covenant lawsuit” to descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel. His actions are rooted in the teaching of the Torah and in the behavior of the prophets. He reminds the corrupt authorities in Jerusalem of Leviticus 26:18-24, in which God promises to chastise the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel if they fail to keep their covenant with God: “And if in spite of this you will not hearken to me, then I will chastise you again sevenfold for your sins, and I will break the pride of your power. . . . Then if you walk contrary to me, and will not hearken to me, I will bring more plagues upon you, sevenfold as many as your sins. . . . And if by this discipline you are not turned to me, but walk contrary to me, then I also will walk contrary to you, and I myself will smite you sevenfold for your sins.” Jesus deliberately summarizes his covenant lawsuit against the authorities at Jerusalem with seven woes to invoke in the ears and minds of his Jewish listeners the sevenfold curses of the covenant in Leviticus.
2. In Matthew 23:3, Jesus instructs his disciples to obey the scribes and Pharisees, whose teachings are based on the law—even though the majority of these religious leaders are themselves corrupt. He specifically says: “[S]o practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice.”
3. Hebrews 12:9 teaches: “Besides this, we have had earthly fathers to discipline us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?” In 1 Corinthians 4:15-16, St. Paul claims to be a spiritual father to the Corinthians: “For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel,” and he goes on to urge Christians to imitate him. In the Old Testament, Judges 17:10 and Judges 18:19 both liken the role of the Levitical priesthood to fatherhood.
4. In Matthew 23:13, Jesus’ repeated use of the phrase “woe to you” recalls Old Testament pronouncements of judgment. Isaiah 5:8-23 lists a series of woes to befall members of the house of Israel and men of Judah, who are accused of failing to respond in righteousness to God’s love. Ezekiel 24:6-11 describes the woes to befall Jerusalem as a result of all the blood shed within the city. Habakkuk 2:6-20 also lists a series of woes to befall Judah for not failing to heed God’s commands.
5. “Hypocrites,” derived from the Greek word that refers to stage actors wearing masks, is a fitting term for Jesus to call the scribes and Pharisees, most of whom make only an outward show of piety while hiding their corrupt nature behind a mask of devout behavior. In the twenty-third chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus uses the words “hypocrites” and

### **Matthew Lesson 23 Suggested Responses**

“hypocrisy” a total of seven times, reinforcing the theme of covenant lawsuit that runs throughout the chapter. Other strong language used by Jesus to describe the Jewish religious leaders includes—children “of hell” in Matthew 23:15, “blind guides” in Matthew 23:16, “blind fools” in Matthew 23:17, “whitewashed tombs” in Matthew 23:27, and “serpents” and “brood of vipers” in Matthew 23:33.

6. In Matthew 23:15, Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees makes their proselytes twice the children of hell as themselves. This happens because the religious leaders shut the kingdom of heaven against men, neither entering themselves nor allowing those who would enter to go in.
7. In Matthew 5:34-37, Jesus teaches: “But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.” James 5:12 echoes Jesus’ words: “But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no, that you may not fall under condemnation.” Paragraph 2153 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that “every oath involves a reference to God and that God’s presence and his truth must be honored in all speech. Discretion in calling upon God is allied with a respectful awareness of his presence, which all our assertions either witness to or mock.”
8. Leviticus 27:30 teaches: “All the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD’S; it is holy to the LORD.” Deuteronomy 14:22 instructs the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel: “You shall tithe all the yield of your seed, which comes forth from the field year by year.” Mint, dill, and cumin are relatively insignificant herbs used to flavor food, and Jesus is pointing out that the scribes and Pharisees are diligent in following minor points of the law while neglecting more important aspects of it. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus spells out what three specific weightier matters of the law the religious leaders have been neglecting—“justice and mercy and faith.”
9. Numbers 19:11-22 describes the seven-day long washing and sprinkling procedure required to restore cleanliness once a person has come into contact with a dead body. By likening the scribes and Pharisees to whitewashed tombs, Jesus is drawing attention to the fact that these religious leaders’ appearances fail to match what’s in their hearts. This is similar to calling them hypocrites, because a hypocrite is an actor whose true appearance is hidden behind a mask.
10. Old Testament texts that portray God as a winged bird protecting the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel include Deuteronomy 32:11-12: “Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the LORD alone did lead [Jacob], and there was no foreign god with him.” Many of the Psalms refer to God as a source of shelter and protection, and Psalm 91:4 describes how the person who trusts in God will find refuge “under his wings.”

*Responses to the Questions for Reflection will vary.*