

Message.

Authentic faith is built on humble service and covenant community rather than religious performance or political power. When religious practice prioritizes appearance and tradition over genuine care, it creates a dangerous divide that misrepresents the character of God. True obedience requires dropping the masks of hypocrisy to actively lift the burdens of others, moving beyond selective comfort into sacrificial proximity. Because Jesus redefined greatness by taking the lowest place, the church is called to be a collaborative force for good rather than a competing source of entertainment. Ultimately, the Gospel frees people from the weight of earning their status, replacing the exhaustion of religious performance with the grace-led work of loving their neighbors.

Prayer.

Father God,

You are the Lord Most High. And yet, You lowered Yourself to a criminal's death. You served people in the lowest way to restore Your creation. Guide me to follow Your lead and live out my faith in service and love to others.

Amen.

Scripture.

Matthew 23:1-12

Engage.

The Seat of Authority (vv. 2–3): Jesus acknowledges that the scribes and Pharisees sit in "Moses' seat." Why is it possible to have the correct information about God's Word while completely lacking His heart? How do we guard against being "hearers only"?

The Burden of Legalism (v. 4): Contrast this verse with Matthew 11:28–30. When we interact with those outside the faith, do they experience our "religion" as a heavy pack they have to carry, or as an invitation to find rest in Jesus?

Motivations of the Heart (v. 5): The text says they do all their deeds "to be seen by others." If your service and prayer life were completely invisible to everyone except God, would your motivation to do them change?

The Trap of Titles (vv. 6–10): Jesus warns against seeking honors like the best seats or lofty titles. In our modern context, how does the pursuit of "influence" or "platform" mirror the very things Jesus is rebuking here?

The Upside-Down Kingdom (vv. 11–12): Jesus explicitly defines greatness as service. Based on these verses, is it possible to be "great" in the eyes of the world but "least" in the Kingdom of Heaven? What does that look like in daily life?

The Consequence of Pride (v. 12): Jesus promises that "whoever exalts himself will be humbled." Can you identify a time when God used a moment of humility or failure to actually bring you closer to His love?

Dropping the Mask: Looking at the contrast between the "performers" in the text and the "servant" Jesus calls us to be, where is the Holy Spirit prompting you to stop "pretending" and start practicing honest, sacrificial love this week?

This week's goal is to move from "following rules to look good" to "loving people because of Jesus". Start each devotion time by reading Matthew 23:1-12.

Day 1. The "Clean Cup" Test

The Big Idea: It's what is on the inside that counts.

- **Real-Life Example:** Imagine you have a beautiful, shiny water bottle on the outside, but inside, it's filled with old, moldy juice from last summer. Would you want to drink out of it? The Pharisees were like that water bottle—they looked perfect on the outside, but they didn't have love on the inside.
- **Object Lesson:** Take a clear glass of water. Stir in some dirt or mud. Then, try to "clean" it by just wiping the outside of the glass with a cloth.
- **Discussion Question:** Why is it easier to *look* like a good Christian (by sitting still in church or saying the right words) than it is to actually *be* loving to your people when no one is watching?
- **Activity:** "Heart Check." Draw a large heart on a piece of paper. On the outside, write things people see (clothes, sports, grades). On the inside, write things only God sees (kindness, secret prayers, feelings). Pray together and ask God to make the "inside" match the "outside."

Day 2. The Weight-Lifter

The Big Idea: Love helps carry the load; it doesn't add to it.

- **Real-Life Example:** Imagine your mom or dad is carrying ten heavy grocery bags. Instead of helping, you stand there and say, "You missed a bag! And you're holding those wrong!" That's what the religious leaders did. They told people all the rules they were breaking but never offered to help them.
- **Object Lesson:** Have your child hold out their arms. Start piling heavy books or pillows onto their arms one by one. Ask them how it feels. Then, have everyone else in the family step in and take the weight off their arms.
- **Discussion Question:** In Matthew 23:4, Jesus says the leaders "tie up heavy burdens." In our house, how can we be "burden lifters" instead of "burden givers"?
- **Activity:** "Secret Service." This week, everyone in the family has to find one "chore" or "burden" that belongs to someone else and do it for them in secret (like making a sibling's bed or clearing a plate).

Day 3. The Upside-Down Trophy

The Big Idea: In God's Kingdom, the servant is the winner.

- **Real-Life Example:** Usually, the "greatest" person is the one with the most followers, the most points, or the coolest toys. But Jesus says the "greatest" person is the one who helps everyone else. It's like a race where the person who stops to help the runner who fell down is the actual winner.
- **Object Lesson:** Find a toy crown or a trophy. Turn it upside down. Explain that Jesus "flipped" the world's rules. To go "up" in God's eyes, we have to bow "down" to serve others.
- **Discussion Question:** Who is someone at school or in our neighborhood who usually gets ignored? How could we "serve" them this week to show them they are important to God?
- **Activity:** The "traditional" activity would be to wash each other's feet, but that doesn't always hit heavy in our culture today. Consider an internet search looking for "feet washing" services and discuss them. Challenge each other to choose one to act upon.