

Matthew 23:16-22

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In His fourth woe, Jesus condemns blind guides who wrongly teach others a legally justified way to lie. Using their own rationale, Jesus demonstrates how their entire thinking is backwards and wrong.

There is no apparent parallel to this teaching in the gospel accounts, but the admonition of Matthew 23:16 is similar to Jesus's teachings in Matthew 15:14 and Luke 6:39. And Jesus's teachings in 23:17-22 are similar to His teachings in Matthew 5:33-37.

The fourth *woe* in Matthew 23 regarded the legally justifying falsehood. It did not address the scribes and Pharisees by name. It was addressed to “*you, blind guides, who say...*”. This *woe* broadly applies to anyone *who* says or acts according to its folly. But the fourth *woe* was still likely flung at the Pharisees and scribes for three reasons.

1. Surrounding Context

Jesus has been discussing the Bad Religion of the scribes and Pharisees during the preceding chapter (Matthew 23:1-15) and He continues to do so for much of the rest of this chapter (Matthew 23:23-36).

2. “Blind Guides”

Jesus said *woe to you, blind guides*. He previously used the label *blind guides* to describe the Pharisees at least once before (Matthew 15:14). Combining the surrounding context and this label, Jesus describes the scribes and Pharisees as *blind guides* in the very next *woe* (Matthew 23:24).

3. The Hyper-Legalistic Behavior

The type of legal gymnastics that Jesus denounces in this passage smacks of the scribes' lawyerly tricks of justifying breaking their promises while holding everyone else to keep theirs.

Guides who are *blind* are helpless, not to mention dangerous! *Blind guides* think and claim to know where they are going, and others may follow them, but they do not know where they are leading people. They are *fools*.

These *blind guides* led others in how to be more clever in their deceit. They claimed to know the right way to lie without committing the sin of lying. This of course is nonsense, which is why Jesus called them *fools*. If *you* violate the commandment, “You shall not... deal falsely, nor lie to one another” (Leviticus 19:11), *you* commit the sin of lying and are guilty of doing so. And *you* are a liar—no matter how you might have convinced yourself otherwise. *Whoever* behaves this way is a liar, even if they were assured by *blind guides* that they were being upright.

The way these *blind guides* misled people into lying was through a form of phony oath-making. To swear *by* something was to put yourself at risk of loss if you broke your promise. In this case, the risk was before God. The Old Testament made clear that an oath or vow made but not kept would incur God's judgement. An example is from Ecclesiastes:

“When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for *He takes* no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.”
(Ecclesiastes 5:4-5)

The *blind guides* assured their followers that *whoever swears by the temple*, was not obligated to keep their promises when they did so. Oaths sworn *by the temple* meant *nothing*—these promises did not need to be honored. And they taught that there was no religious harm in breaking these *temple-sworn* promises.

But whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated to keep their word. Thus, these *blind guides* taught their followers how to lie and supposedly get away with it, all the while binding other people to their promises.

Of course, this was not actually true. This practice of promise-making was foolish and phony, which is why Jesus taught His disciples on the Sermon on the Mount, “But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil” (Matthew 5:37). Jesus taught His disciples to be trustworthy and honest, while *the Pharisees* taught their disciples how to make vows without actually intending to honor them.

In this fourth *woe*, Jesus exposed this charade.

Even in their twisted logic, their system was ridiculous. And Jesus exposed their con with a rhetorical question, *Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold?* The answer is that *the temple* is greater than the gold adorning it. And the implication was that even if there was some legitimacy to the phony oath-making practice of swearing by things (which there wasn't), then these blind guides still had it backwards. It should have been *the gold-sworn* oaths that were breakable, not *God's holy temple*. Of course, it is best to have the integrity to tell the truth, and not have a need to swear *by* things at all.

This same confused pattern was taught by the blind guides regarding the objects of *the altar* and its *offering*:

Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated. 'You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering?

Jesus said, *whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it*. In other words, if *you swear by the altar, you also swear by the offering upon it, and you swear to whom the altar and offering belong—God*. Therefore, *you are obligated* to keep your word. In saying this, Jesus unraveled the twisted logic of *the Pharisees* by which they justified making false oaths.

He continued, *And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it.* In other words, if you swear by the temple, you also swear by Him who lives within it—God. Therefore, you are obligated to keep your word. In each case, Jesus uses logical construction to demonstrate that *the Pharisees'* reasoning is false, even if their premise is accepted.

Jesus added a third example of how the *blind guides'* confused logic should apply: *And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.* Again, the logic bears out that if you make a promise, no matter what you swear by or do not swear by—you are obligated to keep it. Don't be a fool. God commands you to be a truth teller.

Woe to any fool who advises otherwise.

Biblical Text

¹⁶“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.’ ¹⁷ You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? ¹⁸ And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.’ ¹⁹ You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? ²⁰ Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. ²¹ And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. ²² And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it.