

Matthew 23:25-26

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-23/matthew-2325-26/>

In His sixth woe, Jesus compares the scribes and Pharisees to a cup that is spotlessly clean on the outside but filthy and unfit for use on the inside. He admonishes them to clean the inside first so that the outside may become clean also.

The parallel account of this statement is found in Luke 11:39-40.

The sixth *woe* in Matthew 23 regards inner uncleanness. It was addressed *to you, the scribes and Pharisees*.

The scribes were religious lawyers. They meticulously searched the Law and the Tradition to create loopholes for themselves and to manufacture more and more rules to control the people. *The Pharisees* were the teachers of these religious customs and the leaders of the local synagogues. They crushed anyone who defied their authority or who failed to follow *the scribes'* rules. Together, *the scribes and Pharisees*, were an unopposable and corrupt force of religious malpractice.

Jesus called them *hypocrites*. Hypocrite comes from the Greek term for “actor.” It is someone who pretends to be one thing but is really another. It describes someone who is fake. Jesus used this term to brand *the scribes and Pharisees* as religious frauds.

The reason He called them *hypocrites* in this *woe* was because they appeared to be pure, holy, and righteous, but *inside they were full of evil*.

Jesus compared their moral behavior to a *cup* and a *dish*. He said *you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish* so that it appears to be *clean* and ready for use. *But* the *inside* of this *cup* or bowl is *full of grime, dirt, or rotten food*. *They are* filthy and unfit for use.

As God's people, and especially as the religious leaders and teachers of His law, *the scribes and Pharisees* were commanded by God: “you shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2; see also Leviticus 11:44; 11:45; 20:26). To be holy means to be set apart for special use. God wanted His people to be pure and morally *clean*, set apart from the sinfulness of the world, to accomplish His purposes. Instead of only serving self and exploiting others, God wanted them to seek the best for others, and treat them as they wanted to be treated.

The scribes and Pharisees paid extra careful attention to display the external appearance of holiness (Matthew 23:5). *The outside* of their *cup* was sparkling *clean*. Their virtue signaling made their *dish* appear spotless. But God who sees past “the outward appearance” and “looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7), saw that *the inside* of their *cup* and *dish* was *full of robbery and self-indulgence*. This hypocrisy is a hallmark of Bad Religion. They made an external show to be seen by men, but their actual intent was exploitative and self-seeking. They pretended to follow God's ways, but were actually far from them.

Jesus told the *blind Pharisee* what he needed to do to become holy and useful to God.

First clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.

The inside of the cup and of the dish represents our heart. The heart is the center of our being. It is the seat of our desire and will. It shapes our attitude and outlook of the world. The heart is where our decisions and choices are made. It is the seat of our intentions. All of our actions and words flow from its motivations,

“For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil.”
(Matthew 12:34b-35)

Our external behavior is influenced by the interior of our heart. In terms of Jesus’s metaphor, *the outside of our cup will also become clean if the inside of our cup is clean*. Instead of focusing on our behavior, we should pay closer attention to the condition of the heart that our behavior springs from (Proverbs 4:23).

Inside, the Pharisees and scribes’ heart was full of robbery and self-indulgence. Outside the cup was a pretense. Inside their cup, they envied what others had and plotted how they could steal from others to satisfy their lusts. This was why they devoured widows’ houses (Matthew 23:14).

All of our hearts, apart from Jesus, are this way. *The inside* of our dishes are dirty:

“The heart is more deceitful than all else
And is desperately sick;
Who can understand it?”
(Jeremiah 17:9)

Woe to all of us for our wicked hearts! Thanks be to God who offers and gives us a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26). In Jesus Christ we are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). We have been redeemed. May we no longer be conformed to our former lusts but become like our Holy Savior (1 Peter 1:14-15). May we walk in the holy, God-given desires of our new heart (Psalm 37:4). May we love God with all our heart (Matthew 22:37).

May *the inside* and *the outside* of our *cup* be *clean*,

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
Be acceptable in Your sight,
O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.”
(Psalm 19:14)

In his letter to the Romans, Paul makes a similar argument in defending his teaching that we are justified before God solely by God’s grace. The competing Jewish authorities who contended with Paul maintained that righteousness required an external holiness, namely circumcision and

keeping the Jewish laws, such as tithing. Paul adamantly maintained that true righteousness comes from the inside out, through faith. As Paul states:

“For in it [the gospel] *the* righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous *man* shall live by faith.’”
(Romans 1:17)

In this passage Paul makes clear that we “live” the righteousness of God when we gain acceptance through Christ by believing (“from faith”) then live in obedience to Him, believing that His ways are for our best (“to faith”). As Hebrews states, we cannot please God unless we believe that His rewards are better than the rewards of the world (Hebrews 11:6).

Paul makes clear throughout Romans and Galatians that when we make choices to follow our fleshly desires, we will reap fleshly outcomes:

“For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.”
(Galatians 6:8)

Paul makes clear that we have a choice of whom to obey. If we follow the Spirit and walk in God’s ways, our heart is clean, and we make choices that lead to our best possible life experience (the meaning here of “eternal life”). But if we follow our appetites and pleasures, those appetites become our master, resulting in the corruption of the world (James 1:14-15).

Paul follows in the teaching of Jesus, who recognizes that humans have been given the stewardship of choice. We choose who to trust, what perspective to take, and what actions to take. These are all interrelated, and all begin with choices we make in our hearts. Jesus makes clear that if we desire to actually live in the way that is for our best, we need to deal with our inner life first, for from our inner life flows our outer life:

“For as [a person] thinks within himself, so he is.”
(Proverbs 23:7).

Biblical Text

²⁵ **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. ²⁶ You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.**