

## THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

### Lesson 77, Chapter 23 Continued 2

Because I had the great privilege of being raised in a Christian household from my earliest age, my family and I spent every Sunday in Church. Child Psychologists and most parents (especially moms) can verify that even when a child isn't paying the best attention, it is quite astounding how much they hear and store away, often subconsciously. During Church services, even while I was coloring some masterpiece upon the Church program, using a hymnal for a suitable table, as the Preacher spoke I, too, absorbed things that just became part of my understanding of Christianity without even knowing it was occurring. During that era when the Church still talked about sin, one of those things that took root within me was: a sin, is a sin, is a sin. Any sin, no matter how trivial, is an offense to God and so (in that respect) there is little difference between stealthily sliding a nickel off my father's dresser to buy a candy bar than there is in brazen armed robbery of a bank. And while this thought probably kept me from not escalating my childhood criminal career into pilfering dimes, as it turns out learning God's Torah reveals that this nearly unconscious belief I had of all sins being equal in God's eyes, wasn't entirely true.

Because the New Testament assumes that we already have the knowledge and wisdom of the Torah as our foundation for understanding, then when we read about Yeshua's many encounters with His fellow Jews and His numerous confrontations with the Jewish religious authorities it is within the principles of the Torah and that broad Jewish cultural context of understanding that we must comprehend His words. So as we continue today in Matthew chapter 23 and Jesus is pronouncing 7 "woes" upon the Synagogue leadership (Pharisees) we'll do it by adding in more instruction about what His words would have meant in the cultural background of His 1st century Jewish listeners... who knew of nothing but

the instruction of the Old Testament (since that is all that existed in Christ's era)... because that is exactly the intended meaning that we are to absorb and act upon even though we must adapt that to apply in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 23.

### **RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 23:23 - end**

This begins what is called the 4<sup>th</sup> woe; it is the 4<sup>th</sup> of 7. As a reminder, in our last meeting I likened the meaning of "woe" to the word "plague", while not intending to suggest that the meaning of those 2 words are the same, but rather only to paint a better word picture in our minds. The Baal Shem Tov Hebrew version of Matthew begins with ***Oy lachem***, which has a meaning that sort of combines the words pain and a rarely used Hebrew word meaning war. It is more than a strong indictment of the Pharisee leadership, it is a severe divine judgment pronounced upon them that I think was meant to call to mind the plagues of judgment that God sent upon Egypt many centuries earlier. I also imagine that on the ***Remez*** level (the "hint" level) of interpretation the Jewish leaders and the listening crowds were not meant to miss the connection that just as the plagues were delivered upon Egypt to affect the leadership (the Pharaoh) in such a way as to cause the release of God's people from their burdensome bondage that they might go and properly worship Him, so it is that Christ is pronouncing a "plague" upon the Pharisee leadership that they might release God's people from their burdensome Traditions that were keeping them away from proper worship of Him. And, therefore in a certain sense, I think Yeshua is implying a similarity between what the Pharisee leadership were doing to the Jewish people, to what Pharaoh did to all Israel.

Yeshua says that the Scribes and the Pharisees pay their tithes of mint, dill, and cumin. While the requirement to tithe upon the produce of the land is contained in the Law of Moses, the reality is that mint, dill, and cumin are spices and were not classified as "food" or "produce of the field" per se. Rather it had become another Tradition that even the spices that grew (some of them wild and not through cultivation, although some were expensive to purchase) were to be tithed upon. Since tithing is a subject that I very infrequently talk about, we'll take just a few moments to do so. And I must say in advance, it is perhaps the topic that gets some Christians most visibly perturbed because we so badly don't want to hear it or obey it.

Most produce of the field was tithed at the rate of one-tenth.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Leviticus 27:30** *"All the tenth given from the land, whether from planted seed or fruit from trees, belongs to ADONAI; it is holy to ADONAI.*

However, such giving and gifts (*korban* in Hebrew) were not as straightforward as this statement in Leviticus 27 makes it seem. There were different rates for different kinds of produce (or animals) and for different times; but never less than one-tenth. We won't get into that today, but if you are really interested you can learn about it in the TorahClass.com lessons on the Book of Leviticus. Over time as Hebrew society evolved and fewer people were rural farmers, and more were city dwelling merchants and tradesmen, and as they scattered at far distances from the Temple that made regular sacrifices and offerings impossible, then the standards and means of "tithing" also evolved. Thus a general standard of 10% of either the actual harvest or the value of the harvest or of whatever one's labors and business produced was to be given to the Temple. The concept of money (coins) as being "frozen labor" that could be given instead of produce or animals was created (a very good way to look at it, to my estimation). Although some of that tithe became diverted to the Synagogue, it was not in any official way that is known nor that the Temple would have sanctioned. Thus tithing is a word that combines the idea of biblically mandated giving with the rate of giving at a minimum of 10%; it was the standard in Yeshua's time, and it has carried over to Christianity from as far back as it can be traced.

So, yes, you and I have a biblically mandated (an Old and New Testament mandated) instruction to give at least 10% of our increase. But to whom or to what do we give? That question is not so easily (or honestly) answered. The mandate was certainly not, in Bible times, meant to be taken as "any religious organization". And, yet, because there is no Temple to give to today (nor has there been for nearly 2000 years), and because the body of God worshippers has grown exponentially, is present in the farthest reaches of our planet, and the organizations that were created to lead God's people... both Church and Synagogue... have evolved, then while the concept of tithing lives on, the exact application of it has had to evolve as well. To my way of thinking, tithing 10% of our increase (our incomes) to a specific or to various Believing organizations properly represents the spirit of the Law of tithing.

I have spoken much to you over the years about the Synagogue in ancient times. One of the several things I said was that the Synagogue can nowhere be found in

the Bible as a God-ordained religious organization. Rather, biblically the Temple and its activities were not just the center but the only authorized place of Israelite religious leadership, ritual, and communal meeting. The Synagogue concept was born out of necessity; the conditions necessitating it essentially caused by human sin. It was created by the Jews that were hauled off to Babylon. The Temple had been destroyed, the Priesthood disbanded, and so the Jews had all means of proper worship and ritual... and especially of sacrificing to atone for their sins... ended. This was a direct and intended punishment from God, and He used a foreign nation and foreign king to deliver this judgment. Thus we can read in Daniel that Daniel instituted the practice of praying 3 times per day towards Jerusalem.

Then we read of the disheartened exiles meeting together. And out of this the Synagogue system was eventually born; it was an alternative means of having communal worship and prayer. Yet, it was an entirely manmade organization, not ruled by Levite Priests but instead by laymen... in Christ's day it was Pharisees and Scribes. It has fascinated me that by the time we get to the New Testament era, the Synagogue had become the unquestioned center of Jewish communal worship, prayer, and learning. Although no sacrificing occurred at the Synagogue, it played a prominent role in everyday Jewish life... religious and otherwise. Yeshua was raised under the Synagogue system because that was at the core of Jewish culture. Never do we find any New Testament writer nor Yeshua Himself ever speaking against the Synagogue system as something that ought not to exist (even though the Temple was back and operating under Levite Priests), nor was the Synagogue portrayed as being against God's will.

I tell you this to say that we must look upon the Church similarly. The Church, as an organized institution, is not God-mandated. In fact, it is not an off-shoot of the God-ordained Temple but rather is modeled after the manmade Synagogue system. Biblically speaking the Body of Christ is people... not buildings nor even organizations or institutions. Thus some Christians say that when going strictly by the letter of the biblical Law, they have no obligation to give to the Church because the Church as defined today is merely an institutional organization that has infrastructure that the leadership seeks to be supported. I would agree; except that Jesus taught us to look beyond the letter of the Law and to the spirit of it. So what I am about to say to you is my opinion and interpretation, however I have no doubts about it. We are to support the organizations that serve the Body of Christ. That might mean the local fellowship you attend, or an online one that you follow, or some good Believers' based organizations that do God's work on

earth. I also think that first and foremost, if you regularly attend a local fellowship, that is your first and most important point of tithing because as you must be aware, it is quite costly to operate a fellowship organization and structure in modern times... especially in the West. Choosing not to tithe at all is absolutely a sin; tithing is not optional.

The most often used Bible quote for this (because it is simple, unequivocal and straightforward) comes from the Prophet Malachi.

**<sup>CJB</sup> Malachi 3:7-10 <sup>7</sup> Since the days of your forefathers you have turned from my laws and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot. "But you ask, 'In respect to what are we supposed to return?' <sup>8</sup> Can a person rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, 'How have we robbed you?' In tenths and voluntary contributions. <sup>9</sup> A curse is on you, on your whole nation, because you rob me. <sup>10</sup> Bring the whole tenth into the storehouse, so that there will be food in my house, and put me to the test," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot. "See if I won't open for you the floodgates of heaven and pour out for you a blessing far beyond your needs.**

Because I'm not in the habit of sugar-coating things, here's the bottom line: if you want to try to find a way around this command... be my guest. Many of you do. Oh, I have to pay for my child's college. Oh, I have to get my car fixed. Oh, but I really need a vacation. Do I pay on the gross or net of my paycheck? Since I don't know, I'll put it off. I'll start tithing when I get a better paying job. I can't tell you the same dozen or so reasons (thought to be good justifications) that I hear so often for not tithing. The duty to tithe is not because I tell you, but because God tells you. And, the consequences for not tithing are yours to bear; and you are promised by God that you will bear them. But it also negatively affects the body and fellowship you are part of and the many things that could (and should) have been done in Christ's name to show His love and mercy to so many who need it. There; that's your tithing sermon for this year.

So, after acknowledging that the Pharisees are punctilious about tithing, even to the point of tithing on spices they acquire to flavor their food, Jesus then throws down the hammer. He says but you have neglected the weightier matters of the Torah... namely...justice, mercy, and trust. Other versions say "weightier matters of the Law". And then they say justice, mercy, and faith (or faithfulness), and others replace mercy with kindness. What are the weightier matters of the Law?

Does that mean the harder and more difficult things? And what law is being referred to? Jewish law (**Halakhah**) or the Law of Moses?

So should they NOT have tithed mint, dill and cumin and instead done these weightier things? No, says Christ, they indeed should have done them without neglecting the others. That is, they should have done justice, mercy, and trust in addition to tithing. It's not an either/or scenario... it's both.

But wait: I thought tithing on spices was Jewish Tradition while performing justice, mercy and trust was Torah based? The reality is that Christ is not telling them that their Tradition on this matter is a bad thing. It's only that when they point to that as their demonstration of righteousness, instead of doing justice, mercy, and trust, that's where the problem comes in to play. I have little doubt that Yeshua is drawing upon Hosea for His indictment against them.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Hosea 6:4-7** <sup>4</sup> *"Efrayim, what should I do to you? Y'hudah, what should I do to you? For your 'faithful love' is like a morning cloud, like dew that disappears quickly.* <sup>5</sup> *This is why I have cut them to pieces by the prophets, slaughtered them with the words from my mouth- the judgment on you shines out like light.* <sup>6</sup> *For what I desire is mercy, not sacrifices, knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.* <sup>7</sup> *"But they, just like men, have broken the covenant, they have been faithless in dealing with me.*

Look: Tradition is fine so far it goes... Church or Synagogue. But Tradition can never be holy because it is man contrived and not God-ordained. Traditions can be enjoyable, or beneficial, and perfectly fine with God when they operate within the spirit of the Law of Moses. It's when Tradition, doctrine, and custom twist, turn, or effectively replace God's commandments that the trouble begins. And that is what Yeshua is accusing the Pharisees of.

So what did the idea of "weightier things" mean to Jesus and to His listeners? Such a debate was not new to the Hebrew faith, and continued well beyond His time. In the Targum Herios Beracot, we read: ***"In the words of the Law there are some things light, and some things heavy, or weighty; but those weighty things they omitted, and regarded those there light. Yes, they had no foundation in the law at all; and no wonder since in the place last cited, they say that the words of the Scribes are all of them weighty, and the sayings of the Elders are weightier than the words of the Prophets".***

While this quote is from much later Judaism, nonetheless this is precisely what Yeshua was damning the Pharisees and Scribes for doing. They made their own rules and Traditions more weighty, in general, than even the words of the biblical Prophets. Further, they omitted what was truly weighty for their own thoughts on matters. So another way of saying it, within the context that both Jesus and this Rabbi meant it, is that biblical Law had been overridden by the edicts of other Rabbis. It was reprehensible and it was grievous sin. This is why Yeshua issued a woe (a painful and severe judgment) against these leaders.

As to that weightier matter of justice, mercy and faithfulness or trust, a good place to start is the Prophet Micah who mirrors much of the sentiments expressed in Malachi.

**CJB Micah 6:6-8** <sup>6</sup> *"With what can I come before ADONAI to bow down before God on high? Should I come before him with burnt offerings? with calves in their first year?"* <sup>7</sup> *Would ADONAI take delight in thousands of rams with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Could I give my firstborn to pay for my crimes, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"* <sup>8</sup> *Human being, you have already been told what is good, what ADONAI demands of you- no more than to act justly, love grace and walk in purity with your God.*

Part of the reason I wanted to use this passage is to show you how grace and love was always part of what God expects of mankind... not just the Israelites... but it is also something that institutional Christianity has for centuries claimed was a new innovation that only began with Jesus. That is, the old God... Yehoveh... was all about blood shed, retribution, and anger. That, my friends, is an 1800-year-old slander that is without biblical basis and it was devised to put a wall of separation between Jews and Christians. Also notice how Micah says that all God demands of humanity (Hebrew and gentile) is to act justly, love grace, and walk in purity. So, by the logic applied to a famous and most-quoted section of the New Testament, then here we have Micah abolishing the Law in favor of justice, love, grace and walking in purity with God.

I'm going to read to you a lengthy section of the Book of Acts that will immediately be familiar to you, but I want you to consider it in light of what Yeshua has said, and what Micah has said, what are the weightier matters of the Law, and what God wants of us all.

**CJB Acts 15:7-20** <sup>7</sup> *After lengthy debate, Kefa got up and said to them,*

***"Brothers, you yourselves know that a good while back, God chose me from among you to be the one by whose mouth the Goyim should hear the message of the Good News and come to trust. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, bore them witness by giving the Ruach HaKodesh to them, just as he did to us; <sup>9</sup> that is, he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their heart by trust. <sup>10</sup> So why are you putting God to the test now by placing a yoke on the neck of the talmidim which neither our fathers nor we have had the strength to bear? <sup>11</sup> No, it is through the love and kindness of the Lord Yeshua that we trust and are delivered- and it's the same with them." <sup>12</sup> Then the whole assembly kept still as they listened to Bar-Nabba and Sha'ul tell what signs and miracles God had done through them among the Gentiles. <sup>13</sup> Ya'akov broke the silence to reply. "Brothers," he said, "hear what I have to say. <sup>14</sup> Shim'on has told in detail what God did when he first began to show his concern for taking from among the Goyim a people to bear his name. <sup>15</sup> And the words of the Prophets are in complete harmony with this for it is written, <sup>16</sup> "'After this, I will return; and I will rebuild the fallen tent of David. I will rebuild its ruins, I will restore it, <sup>17</sup> so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, that is, all the Goyim who have been called by my name," <sup>18</sup> says ADONAI, who is doing these things.' All this has been known for ages. <sup>19</sup> "Therefore, my opinion is that we should not put obstacles in the way of the Goyim who are turning to God. <sup>20</sup> Instead, we should write them a letter telling them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from fornication, from what is strangled and from blood.***

Can you see the similarity of thought and principle here? Just as Micah was in no way abolishing the Law for either Hebrew or gentile, neither was Christ's brother James when he spoke of the things that Gentile Believers ought to do and not do. Rather, both scenarios and both men were instructing in the weightier matters of the Law that had to be observed, and pushing the lighter matters to the background but only as a relative measurement: not doing away with the one while replacing it with the other. What did Christ say about that?

***CJB Matthew 23:23 ...These are the things you should have attended to- without neglecting the others!***

This is the mindset with which we are to approach obeying God: obey the Torah, obey the Prophets, and obey God's Son, Yeshua. Not one or the other: all. Yet the reality is that we'll always be faced with choices in this world when we must



put the weightier ahead of the lighter without neglecting either. Nor should we pretend that the weightier has replaced the lighter. Justice, mercy, and faithfulness are relationship terms. They apply to our relationships with God and with people. But how do we know what justice is? What mercy is? What faithfulness is... in the God's eyes? We study, first, the Torah and the Prophets to find out.

Yeshua sums up in verse 24 what the Synagogue leaders' condition is in His estimation. They are blind guides. They think they are leading others but in fact they don't know where they're going. They strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

While this is an illustration of a tiny creature versus a large creature, there's also other elements at play here. First, both are creatures deemed by the Law of Moses as prohibited to eat (not kosher). Second, when the text speaks of straining out a gnat, it is envisioning the common process of straining wine through a fine cloth prior to it being put into containers. The straining was to remove things like grape seeds, dirt, debris and of course insects before it was put into containers. The mental picture Yeshua painted was as though a camel had fallen into the wine vat, but the Pharisees didn't bother to strain it out... they went right ahead and swallowed it. Now obviously this was meant as metaphor and it was simply another way of Christ demonstrating the weightier versus lighter principle, and not getting the two mixed up, to get His point across. Verse 25 moves us to woe #5.

Once again Jesus says that the Pharisees pay attention to the less important while neglecting the more important. More metaphor is used: Christ isn't talking about actual cups and plates. This isn't about performing proper ritual law (that Jesus perfectly upholds). Rather this is about external ritual cleanness that ignores the more important internal state of a person. This continues Yeshua's theme of hypocrisy; the intentional outward appearance of righteousness while inside being full of wickedness and deceit. Just so we don't wander off and begin to apply willy-nilly what Jesus said, this is entirely aimed at leadership. It's not that hypocrisy doesn't occur at every level of human social order; but this entire chapter is pointedly directed to leadership because of the effect leaders in a position of power and authority have. They can ruin not only themselves, but many others as well.

While politics seems to be never ending talk over coffee or a dinner table, as important as politics are to our earthly well-being our spiritual well-being is far

more important and often directly tied to what we see and learn from our spiritual leaders. Not because spiritual leaders have the power to determine our condition before God, but they can influence it for the better or worse. They can convince us of lies to believe in that can trap us in the very spiritual bondage that Christ came to free us from. Political beliefs can nowhere be found in Christ's teachings; only spiritual beliefs. Bottom line: be very cautious whom you choose to learn your spiritual beliefs from. Should it turn out that they prove themselves clean on the outside but wicked on the inside, run from them and render everything you ever heard from them as suspect. Bibles are cheap and easily available in the West and almost everywhere else. All you have to do is to invest your time to read the truth for yourself. Measure your chosen teachers against God's Word and if doesn't line up... find another teacher.

The same point is more or less made in the 6<sup>th</sup> woe that begins verse 27. Yeshua employs the metaphor of whitewashed tombs to describe the false pretense of the Synagogue leadership. I cannot say it often enough: Jesus is in no way indicting **all** Scribes and Pharisees as a class of leaders: only the ones before Him and the ones like them. Nor is He indicting Israel. This has nothing to do with Israel or even the common Jews in general. Likely the "whitewashed" is referring to plaster being added to some tombs as an ornamental feature... to make them more beautiful. During this period the Jews for some reason became quite interested in creating beautiful tombs for the bones of the ancient Prophets, long dead and gone, as monuments (could it have been out of a sense of collective guilt?) In fact, one of the most outstanding examples of this lay below the City of David, in Jerusalem: Zechariah's Tomb, which can be visited to this day. It is known to have been built during this period of time and very probably was already built by Yeshua's day. I point this out because of what we'll encounter after a few more verses. After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 A.D., when the Priesthood was again disbanded, and a few years later the Rabbis became the new and undisputed leaders of the Hebrew faith (when Judaism could finally be said to be the name of the Jewish religion), revered Rabbis often were placed into expensive and ornate burial chambers upon their death. Sometimes the ornamentation can be shocking to see.

In a fascinating place in Israel called Beit She'arim are some tombs housing the remains of wealthy and influential Rabbis that can be visited today; I've taken several tour groups there. Much can be learned from the visit. Indeed plaster (whitewash) was used on the tomb walls, and the individual sepulchers many of the residents lay in were amazingly adorned and made out of expensive

materials. In fact some were ornamented with recognizable pagan symbols that reveals the direction Judaism had already begun to drift. So the metaphor Yeshua was using of whitewashed (white plastered) tombs, was not hyperbole; it was something that was already happening.

Woes 4, 5 and 6 are sort of summed up and their meaning made abundantly clear in case there was any doubt. Yeshua says:

<sup>CJB</sup> **Matthew 23:28** <sup>28</sup> *Likewise, you appear to people from the outside to be good and honest, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and far from Torah.*

So to be certain that the Pharisees and the crowd didn't confuse His metaphors in place of the actual subjects of His ire, there can be no doubt remaining. It is instructional to see this verse in other Bible versions. The KJV says that the Pharisees are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. The NAB says they are full of hypocrisy and evil doing. The word that all of these versions is translating is **anomia**: it means without law. Lawless. Certainly a person that is lawless must also be full of iniquity, but by saying iniquity or evil doing it circumvents the literal meaning: not following the Law of Moses. Or, close enough is the CJB of saying "far from Torah". Lawless or lawlessness is the most literal translation, and when used in the Bible it always meant only one thing: disobeying the Law of Moses. Iniquity or evil doing leaves open the question of the cause of the iniquity or evil doing, or what the standard is for determining it. I'll leave it to you to decide the motives of Christian translators that chose to obscure the meaning of this rather straightforward Greek word that is attempting to communicate a well understood Hebrew thought and concept.

Then in verse 29 is woe #7. Yeshua says that it was their fathers who killed those Prophets for whom they had recently been making these fine tombs (which was but another act of hypocrisy). Of course the Pharisees say that had they been alive at that time, they never would have participated in such a thing. Right. In fact in simply denying what they would have willingly done, it is only a further evidence of the true evil nature of their inward selves. Hypocrisy can be hidden for a long time; but not forever.

"Go ahead and finish what your fathers started". Yeshua is saying He knows full well how this is all going to end. Their fathers (meaning the ancestors of the Pharisees) are to be blamed for killing the Prophets, something which Jesus is

likening Himself to. And while the term "killing" is used in the English Bible versions, in reality these Prophets weren't killed, they were murdered. I must say, this feels a little like Christ is baiting these Jewish religious leaders into murdering Him.

This brings up a thorny issue that Cranfield and Davies at least touch on, and I think it is worthwhile for us to confront. There is a heavy implication, here, that God stores up His wrath and then at some breaking point He lets fly with devastating results. This has led to a doctrine within Christianity that more or less says that God's wrath in the End Times will only come when God has become sufficiently fed-up with Israel's disobedience and faithlessness towards Him. Interestingly, Judaism teaches that God's wrath will only fall when He has exhausted His patience with the Gentile world. Now, while it seems to be biblically true that God will use some measure of evil within both Israel and the world in general to decide when to finally act in full divine vengeance, our current passage remains as not about Israel (or gentiles) but about the Jewish religious leaders. Thus Christ says:

<sup>CJB</sup> **Matthew 23:33** <sup>33</sup> ***"You snakes! Sons of snakes! How can you escape being condemned to Gei-Hinnom?"***

Wow. I sure don't want to be on the wrong side of matters when standing before Yeshua on Judgment Day. Those words alone are enough to melt us where we stand. So what can only be implied here is that these leaders are already judged; there is no escape or hope for them. Enough is enough. God's had it with them. They are hereby judged as irredeemable. Yes, dear friends, there does come a time when God can make a decision to let us rot in our sins without the possibility of atonement. And the instant of our death isn't necessarily that moment when all is decided. I don't know where that line is or when the moment comes, and it is not a one size fits all matter. So my advice is to not come near enough to that line to have to worry about it. Or to try to time when you finally give up your wicked ways and the sins you enjoy best, to follow Jesus (like the way some try to time the stock market). Trust Christ now! Obey the Father now! And the rest will work out fine.

Being condemned to Gei-Hinnom was a Hebrew expression. It meant to be judged to the garbage dump where the fires never stopped burning in order to destroy the disgusting things that were in it. It was considered as about the worst thing that could happen to someone upon death. I'd say around half of the

English translations that I checked used the word Hell instead of Gei-Hinnom; the word Hell is not present. Hell is a Christian concept of what this statement is thought to represent. Sometimes while we will find the Greek word Hades used in the New Testament (Hades is the Greek underworld of the dead), it isn't used here. Gehenna is the word used so again Yeshua is not only using the vernacular of the day, He is also using something that was present and known in His day. He was, after all, in Jerusalem at the moment, where Gei-Hinnom (the Valley of Hinnom) and the famous (and smelly) always-burning garbage dump in it was located.

We've now completed the "woes" section of Matthew 23. This chapter has been all about the theological disputes Yeshua is having with the Synagogue authorities; or more accurately, about Him arguing against Jewish **Halakhah** that these authorities foisted upon the people; something that had gone much too far. What long ago began as reasonable customs and good traditions borne out of trying to be fully obedient to the Law of Moses had become an Article of Corrections and Additions formulated by the Jewish Sages and religious leaders. Naturally this was not how the **Halakhah** was characterized by the leaders, rather it was said to merely be a proper interpretation of God's Word. And, by the way, much of their interpretation was quite correct.

The Traditions Yeshua was arguing against would become even more formalized as the centuries passed, and those who formulated those Traditions would soon gain absolute control over the entire Hebrew religious system; it remains so to this day.

We'll finish up chapter 23 next time.