

Semicontinuous
Josh. 3:7–17
Ps. 107:1–7, 33–37

Complementary
Mic. 3:5–12
Ps. 43

1 Thess. 2:9–13
Matt. 23:1–12

True to Yourself

Goal for the Session

Tweens will consider Jesus' words about the Pharisees and think about what it means to live honest-to-God lives.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 23:1–12

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Patrick Gray

First-century Palestine was home to four main varieties of Judaism. Pharisaic Judaism placed a special emphasis on the interpretation and adaptation of Mosaic Law to all areas of life. The Sadducees were closely associated with activities at the temple. The Essenes comprised an austere community based in the desert at Qumran. The Zealots aimed at throwing off the Roman yoke by military means. Only the Pharisees survived the Jewish revolt that ended with the destruction of the temple in 70 C.E. Matthew is writing after 70, when the Pharisees are the primary rivals opposing his Christian community in their claim to represent fidelity to Torah. This accounts for their frequent appearance in Matthew's Gospel, as well as for the acrimony that characterizes their encounters with Jesus.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Timothy A. Beach-Verhey

It is so easy to confuse our interests with God's purposes, our power with God's sovereignty, our standing with God's glory. Whether we are referring to our individual or collective lives, human beings have a strong tendency to create false and sinful hierarchies that displace God's authority. We have a proclivity to ignore or rebel against God's kingdom in order to protect our minor fiefdoms. This is a particularly distasteful, yet common, inclination among religious people and their leaders. Pious words and orthodox convictions alone do not make a person faithful.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Earl F. Palmer

Jesus honors and even endorses the teaching concerns of the Pharisees. It is important that we recognize this. What Jesus says of them could be said of many sincere teachers of the Law and even teachers of the gospel; therefore, his challenge has a universal relevance to all who dare to teach: “Therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach (v. 3). This challenge continues to impose a test of integrity and relevance whenever we hear it.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Allen Hilton

Jesus accuses hypocrites, on one hand, of speaking but *not doing*, and on the other, of *doing* in order to receive praise. What seems a contradiction really just holds two sides of the same coin. The antidote for such hypocrisy is grace. The unearned favor of God may seem a foreign import to Matthew's demanding Gospel. Acts have consequences in Matthew, but his coin has another side. Matthew's God forgives infinitely (Matthew 18:21–35). Jesus keeps loving and loving, despite failings and blemishes. Can you feel your soul relax into the freedom of that embrace?

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Matthew 23:1–12

Focus on Your Teaching

Tweens know what hypocrisy looks like; they are quick to notice discrepancies between the words and actions of those around them. At the same time, they are starting to grapple with peer pressure, and they may feel compelled to say one thing at church and do something completely different when with friends. This session challenges tweens to consider what it means to line up their daily actions with what they say they believe. Be supportive of their struggles, welcoming their doubts and questions about their faith.

God of love, help me to support and encourage my group as they strive to put their faith into practice. Strengthen me to model authentic living in what I say and do. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ Resource Sheet 1 from October 22, supplies listed there
- ☐ *Singing the Feast, 2023–2024*; CD player
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ Color Pack 8, 19, 20, 29
- ☐ writing paper
- ☐ pens
- ☐ 10 cardboard boxes
- ☐ markers
- ☐ playground ball

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: copy of Resource Sheet 2
- ☐ option 2: small treat bags or card stock, tape, hole punch, and ribbon; wrapped candies
- ☐ option 3: writing paper, pens; digital cameras (optional)

■ LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome each tween by name. Encourage learners to tell about their week, naming any joys and concerns. Try to partner any newcomers with learners who attend regularly. If you are using option 1 in Responding, cut apart the stories on a copy of Resource Sheet 2.

Gather the group by playing or singing “God, We Sing” (Color Pack 29; track 8 on *Singing the Feast, 2023–2024*). Following the instructions on Resource Sheet 1 from October 22, set the worship table and begin your time together in prayer.

Introduce the focus scripture by asking tweens if they have ever heard the expression “actions speak louder than words.” Encourage discussion about the meaning of this saying: ✨ Do you think actions actually speak louder than words? Why or why not?

Mention how confusing it can be when someone says one thing and then does another. Invite tweens to tell brief stories of their experiences with this.

EXPLORING

Observe that the Bible passage for this session is from Matthew’s Gospel and follows the story you studied last week. In that story, Jesus was debating with the religious leaders and scholars. Now Jesus is speaking to the disciples and the crowds following him, telling about leaders whose words and actions do not match up. Invite tweens to tell what they remember about Pharisees, reminding them as necessary that the Pharisees were religious leaders who believed that people could serve God best by following the Law of Moses.

Show Color Pack 19. Explain that the Pharisees and many other Jewish people in Jesus’ day showed their devotion to God by wearing small boxes called phylacteries tied to their foreheads or arms when praying. Some Jews still do this today. Inside the phylacteries are

Jesus was a devoted Jew who followed the religious traditions set down by the Law of Moses. He observed the Sabbath, memorized the Scriptures, celebrated religious feasts, prayed regularly, and went to the synagogue for worship and teaching.

writings from the Hebrew Scriptures, including the Ten Commandments and the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4–5). They also wear prayer shawls with a tassel tied to each corner. The tassel is a reminder to follow God's ways.

Follow instructions on Resource Sheet 1 (Practice What You Preach) to dramatize Matthew 23:1–12.

After the drama, distribute Bibles, pens, and writing paper. Have tweens fold the paper in half lengthwise, and then read Matthew 23:1–12, listing things these particular Pharisees were doing on the left side of the paper. On the right side, have them list the things that these Pharisees might have been doing if they truly were following God's law. Tweens can work individually or in pairs. When everyone has finished, gather together to compare lists.

Ask:

- ✠ What were these Pharisees doing that was unhelpful?
- ✠ What did Jesus encourage his followers to do in their day-to-day living?
- ✠ In what ways was Jesus similar to these Pharisees? In what ways was Jesus different?
- ✠ When is it easy to follow Jesus' teaching? When is it hard?
- ✠ What can we do to encourage one another to live as Jesus taught?
- ✠ Who has been a good role model for you of living out Jesus' teaching in word and deed?

Show Color Pack 20 and invite tweens to describe what they see. Wonder who this person might be and what might be in the box. Ask:

- ✠ What burdens do people in our community and in our world carry?
- ✠ What actions might we take to help them carry those burdens?

Bring out ten cardboard boxes and markers. Invite tweens to cover the boxes with symbols and words that represent those things that cause burdens in people's lives. Stack the boxes in a pile at one end of the room. Provide a playground ball and challenge tweens to say one way they might take action to serve others and help alleviate some of these burdens, and then roll the ball toward the stack of boxes. Take turns doing this until the boxes are knocked down. (If they fall before everyone has had a turn, quickly restack them, so all the tweens can participate.)

EASY
PREP

RESPONDING

Mark the activities you will use:

1. **Role Plays** Jesus challenges his disciples to live out their faith in their everyday lives. Form three groups. Give each group one of the stories from Resource Sheet 2 (Difficult Situations), instructing them to read the story, look up the Bible verse, and discuss some possible responses—how might you apply Jesus' teaching to this situation? What might happen next? Have groups plan how to act out the story and bring it to some kind of conclusion. Ask each group to present its role play for the others.

If tweens express opinions about additional things your church might do to put faith into action, be sure to offer these suggestions to appropriate committees or leaders. How might these young people take action on their ideas?

God, We Sing

God, we sing with praise
to you,
Light the flame of *hope* anew;
Light this candle, light
the way,
Bring *hope* into our
hearts today.
Jesus, near us as we pray,
Let *hope* be in our hearts
today.

God, we sing with praise
to you,
Light the flame of *peace*
anew; . . .

God, we sing with praise
to you,
Light the flame of *love*
anew; . . .

God, we sing with praise
to you,
Light the flame of *joy*
anew; . . .

God, we sing with praise
to you,
Light the flame of Christ
anew;
Light this candle, light
the way,
We celebrate new life today.
Christ, be near us as we pray
And celebrate new life today.

2. **Treat Bags** Put faith into action by filling and packaging treat bags to give to those who need encouragement. Use small party favor bags or find instructions for making treat bags at bit.ly/FOWGiftBag. Discuss options for distributing the bags. They might be taken to shut-ins, donated to a women's shelter, given to organizations welcoming refugees, or sent to a children's hospital. Before donating, check with the appropriate organization to see if these bags would be welcome. Tweens may also want to take a couple of bags home to give to friends or family members who need cheering up.
3. **Scavenger Hunt** Jesus wants our actions to match our words. Send out pairs of tweens to explore the building where your church meets. Their mission is to find things that indicate your church puts God's love into action. Give each pair a paper and pen, and have them write down what signs they find. (These might include things such as: donation box for a food bank, information about outreach projects, a nursery for small children, a room where people can go for prayer, an elevator or ramp for those who find stairs hard, or welcome signs.) Afterward, gather the group and ask pairs to tell what they discovered. Option: Give each group a digital camera and have them take photos of what they find. Use these to create a bulletin board display or slide show to play before worship.

CLOSING

Gather around the worship table, and ask tweens to tell one thing they learned today about matching their beliefs and their words with their deeds.

Invite learners to place their hands around Color Pack 8 on the worship table. Offer this prayer or one of your own:

*God of love, thank you for stories that help us discover more about you
and more about living according to your loving ways. Amen.*

Lead the closing charge:

Leader: Strengthen us to live as Jesus taught—practicing what we preach.

All: Amen!

Extinguish the candle. Try to have a quick word with every tween as they leave. Thank them for coming and affirm any positive contribution they have made.

Practice What You Preach

Instructions: Form groups of three. Instruct groups to listen carefully as you read the story aloud, one section at a time. This is a paraphrase of Matthew 23:1–12. After each section, pause and say, “Begin!” Groups immediately work to arrange themselves to depict what you have just read. After 30 seconds, say, “Freeze,” and have the groups hold perfectly still for 15 seconds. Finish with the command “Relax” to indicate that they can move again. Repeat this process for each section. Encourage lively interaction and creativity. Enjoy the laughter that ensues.

1. Then Jesus spoke to his disciples and the crowd that had gathered around them. He began to teach: The Pharisees are qualified to teach the Law of Moses; follow their teaching, but do not follow their example. These religious leaders sound as if they are devoted to God, but they don’t actually live in God’s way day by day.
2. Look and see for yourself. They load people with heavy burdens that are really hard to carry and yet do not lift a finger to help.
3. See how they puff themselves up and walk with a swagger, drawing attention to their own importance.
4. Notice how they show off their devotion by having extra-long tassels on their shawls and wearing large phylacteries.
5. They insist on sitting at the head table and push others aside to get the best seats at the synagogue.
6. What do their actions say about their love for God? Do not be like them. If you want to show your devotion to God, serve others.
7. Remember if you puff yourself up, eventually you will trip and fall flat on your face.
8. But if you live out your faith and don’t try to show off, you will stand out in God’s eyes.

Difficult Situations



Gossip Gone Wild

You get to school and soon discover your friends are in an uproar. It seems that Lisa texted Bernadette that your friend Emily told the math teacher a lie about Lisa and got her into trouble. Then Bernadette forwarded the text to Amanda. Amanda messaged Tim. Tim phoned Michael. Michael texted Samantha, and Samantha told you. You find it hard to believe that Emily would do such a thing, but everyone else believes it is true and is planning a way to get back at Emily. What will you do?

Leviticus 19:16



Battling Brothers

You and your younger brother share a bedroom. Your brother likes to make elaborate models from building bricks and proudly displays them everywhere. It seems like you can't move without tripping over the things. One day you accidentally knock one over and it breaks apart into a thousand pieces. You apologize and volunteer to help rebuild it, but your brother just gets mad. Finally, in disgust you leave the room. When you come back, you find your precious collection of video games scattered on the floor. Some of them have fallen out of their cases and are scratched. Your brother denies being involved and just smirks knowingly. What will you do?

Matthew 18:21–22



The New Kid

A new girl, Fatima, is introduced to your homeroom at school. She and her family are refugees from another country. She wears clothes that don't look like yours, and even covers her hair with a headscarf. She doesn't speak English very well—her accent makes it hard to understand what she is saying. At lunchtime, Fatima sits at a table by herself. Some of the kids at your table start talking about her, looking at her and laughing. Fatima looks miserable. What will you do?

Leviticus 19:33–34