

JESUS: The Greatest Life of All

STUDY ELEVEN

The Gathering Storm

Selected Scriptures

When it seems like no one is standing for the truth, stand alone and stand strong. Jesus is our model.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

You don't have to be a meteorologist to know the signs of an approaching storm. Dark clouds billow on the horizon. Flags waving lazily in the breeze droop and then turn the opposite direction, flapping wildly. Electricity charges the air as flashes of lightning dance in the distance.

A storm is coming.

Those near Jesus could sense a gathering storm of trouble when they saw Jesus clash with powerful religious leaders. On one occasion, Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath in front of a group of scrutinizing Pharisees. Jesus' act of mercy on the Sabbath violated their religious code and threatened their position of power. Their faces clouded with judgment. Their eyes flashed. They wasted no time in scheming Jesus' death.

At once the Pharisees went away and met with the supporters of Herod to plot how to kill Jesus.
(Mark 3:6)

There was no doubt about it. A storm was coming . . . just as Jesus foresaw.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

No one likes conflict, but sometimes it is unavoidable when we stand against wrong. Pray for courage as you study Jesus' confrontations with the religious leaders.

Father, I need Your wisdom in responding to those who are doing wrong or who unfairly oppose me. Jesus is my model and guide. Fill me with His courage, words of wisdom, and discerning insight. In His name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Jesus was well-aware that His message would stir things up. “Don’t imagine that I came to bring peace on the earth! I came not to bring peace, but a sword,” Jesus said (Matthew 10:34). This sword of conflict would even divide families. Quoting the prophet Micah, Jesus continued,

*‘I have come to set a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.
Your enemies will be right in your household.’ (10:35–36)*

Didn’t Jesus offer a way to peace through Him? Yes, but His enemies fought against Him. They were envious of His following and, in their pride, hated Him for exposing their sin. They ridiculed His messianic claims (*Luke 5:20–21*) and condemned His miracles as satanic magic shows (*Matthew 12:24*).

Jesus could have compromised His message to “keep the peace,” but true peace can only be won by overcoming evil, not by making a truce with it. So conflict was inevitable, and Jesus expected it. It was part of His messianic mission to save the world from sin.



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Observation: The Issues Jesus Stood Against

Thunderheads gathered around Jesus each time He confronted the religious leaders. What exactly did Jesus stand against? Let's *observe* a few biblical passages to discover the main issues.

Jesus Stood against Man-Made Religion—Matthew 15:1–12

A delegation of Pharisees and scribes came from Jerusalem to evaluate Jesus and His followers. What ceremonial violation did they point out, according to [Matthew 15:1–2](#)?

Some of God's laws required handwashing before certain ceremonies ([Exodus 30:17–21](#)), but there was no biblical law demanding handwashing before every meal. Which biblical law did the Pharisees break and how, according to [15:4–6](#)?



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What rebuke from Isaiah did Jesus apply to the Pharisees in *Matthew 15:7–11*?

How did the disciples respond to Jesus in *15:12*? What fear do their words express?

Talk about courageous. Jesus stood ramrod straight, looked into the eyes of His enemies and called them what they were. The Pharisees were offended, and they never forgot it. The storm was gathering. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Jesus Stood against Hypocrisy—Matthew 23:1–33

Jesus also confronted the Pharisees' hypocrisy. Of what did Jesus accuse the Pharisees *Matthew 23:1–12*?



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In the style of a prophet, Jesus then pronounced seven “woes” against these religious charlatans.¹ Briefly summarize each charge in the chart below.

Jesus’ Seven Woes of Matthew 23:13–33	
Verses	Summary
23:13	
23:15	
23:16–22	
23:23–24	
23:25–26	
23:27–28	
23:29–33	

The Pharisees couldn’t stand such exposure. Their hatred of Jesus knew no bounds, but Jesus didn’t back off. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Jesus Stood against Greed—Luke 19:45–48; John 2:14–15

While Jesus gave a tongue-lashing to the hypocritical Pharisees, for the greedy priests who ran a racket in the temple, Jesus gave a lashing of a different sort. How did Jesus stir things up in the temple, according to *Luke 19:45–46 and John 2:14–15*?



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What was the response from the religious leaders in *Luke 19:47–48*?

Stand and be counted at your school, in your neighborhood—anywhere issues are discussed and nobody is standing for the truth. Stand alone and stand strong.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Lessons Learned from Jesus' Example

Looking at biblical passages through the lens of *interpretation* clarifies the meaning. First, let's consider the issue of the Pharisees' *control*.

Ceremonies, such as handwashing, came from a large body of oral teachings on the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. These rabbinic traditions were later written down and compiled into the Mishnah (A.D. 135–200). Initially, the rabbis intended them to be safeguards against breaking God's law. In Jesus' day, however, some rabbis believed these traditions carried as much authority as Scripture, and the Pharisees used them to control the people.

Why do you think Jesus spoke against these man-made traditions? What was the spiritual harm in them?



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Second is the sin of *hypocrisy*. Saying one thing and doing another is one aspect of hypocrisy. The Pharisees “don’t practice what they teach,” Jesus said (23:3). Another is putting on a false show of piety, as the Pharisees also did (23:5–7). What sin fuels hypocrisy and what was Jesus’ antidote, according to [Matthew 23:8–12](#)?

Third is the problem of *greed*. Review Jesus’ cleansing of the temple in [Luke 19:45–46](#). What spiritual damage were the priests and merchants at the temple causing? What abuses were worth Jesus getting so angry about?

Control, hypocrisy, and greed—three insidious invaders that can corrupt leaders and steal the hearts of God’s people. What makes them so deadly in our culture and our churches?

There’s a war on. Opposition is lurking. Spiritual assaults are ready. Don’t be lulled to sleep by good times. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Correlation: A Prophet's Warning

Jesus often took the role of a prophet in His ministry. When He asked His disciples who the people thought He was, they said that some people mistook Him for “Elijah . . . Jeremiah or one of the other prophets” (Matthew 16:14).

Jesus’ “woes” against the Pharisees sounded like Jeremiah’s “woe” against the corrupt leaders of his day. What did Jeremiah say to false shepherds in *Jeremiah 23:1–6*? How did Jeremiah foretell Jesus’ coming?

We’re not prophets, but when we stand up to the control, hypocrisy, and greed of false leaders in our day, we speak the words of Christ in a world that needs His freedom and hope. It’s a cause worth fighting for.



Application: Four Concluding Guidelines

As followers of Christ, how do we exhibit His courage in confronting wrong? Here are four guidelines worthy of applying.

First, *remembering our mission helps us navigate through the storm. This will keep you focused.* What mission has God given you? How can staying focused on that mission help you in a current conflict?



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Second, *encountering evil often requires sword-like confrontation. This helps you stay alert.* Is the Lord revealing an issue requiring confrontation that, perhaps, you've been overlooking?

Third, *being bold when there's a principle worth fighting for is worth the risk. This will keep you courageous.* You probably can identify with the disciples' fear when Jesus stood up to the powerful Pharisees. Have you been avoiding a problem because it's too risky to address it? If so, ask the Lord to give you guidance through the Holy Spirit to know what to say, when to speak up, and how to speak in love.

Fourth, *speaking up for what is right is no guarantee you'll win or be respected. This will keep you realistic.* Jesus' confrontations eventually led Him to the cross. He won the victory in the end, however, and we are on His winning side. What can help steady you if or when you suffer loss for standing for what is right?



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Jesus said that the world will hate us because it hated Him, and yet, Jesus also taught us to view the world's curses through the lens of God's blessing.

“God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven.” (Matthew 5:11–12)

Are storm clouds gathering around you because of your stand for Christ? Take courage and keep your eyes on the ray of hope shining through the darkness—the joy of God's blessing.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, I hear the voice of Your Spirit through the life of Christ encouraging me to stand for Your truth when others are speaking falsehoods. I don't always know what to say, but I trust the Holy Spirit to give me the words in the moment and to help me endure the consequences I may face. Lord, give me grace in the moment and courage to navigate the storm. In Jesus' name, amen.

ENDNOTE

1. Some Bible versions include [Matthew 23:14](#) as an eighth woe, but this verse appears only in later Greek manuscripts, so most Bible translations don't include it.

