

Through the Bible in 24 Months, Teacher's Guide



WEEK 23 OF 104

They Say and Do Not

THIS WEEK'S READINGS	
General Old Testament	Deuteronomy 1-5
Wisdom Literature	Proverbs 26
Gospels	Matthew 23
General New Testament	Acts 25:13-26:32

TEACHING AIM AND ORIENTATION

Your aim this week is to close the distance between knowing and doing. Four readings converge on one point. Israel at Kadesh heard God perfectly and would not move. The sluggard of Proverbs 26 can explain his situation better than seven wise men. The scribes and Pharisees taught the truth from Moses' seat and lived as a warning. And a king who believed the prophets stopped at almost. Nobody in these chapters fails for lack of information, and that should unsettle a class that has been reading the Bible for twenty-two weeks.

Doctrinally, several things need saying plainly. Deuteronomy 4:2 establishes the principle of biblical authority: nothing added, nothing taken away, a principle repeated in Matthew 15:9 and Revelation 22:18-19. The Sabbath of Deuteronomy 5 was given to Israel as a covenant sign and is not binding on Christians, and the Lord's Day is not a Christian Sabbath. Matthew 23:23 must not be used to bind tithing, since Jesus spoke under a covenant that was fulfilled and removed at the cross. Matthew 23:39 is not a promise of a future national restoration of Israel; it closes a judgment on that generation, fulfilled within forty years. And Acts 26:18 gives you the finest short description of conversion in Acts, which deserves to be connected to how the New Testament says forgiveness is actually received.

Formationally, the thread is the cost of the last step. Kadesh was one day's obedience away from the land. The Pharisees were one act of honesty away from the kingdom they were guarding the door of. Agrippa was one sentence away from being what Paul was. Put this to your class and let it be quiet afterward: finish the sentence in your own mind, "I would obey God fully in this area except that it would cost me," and then decide whether the thing you named is worth what Agrippa paid for it.

SUGGESTED PLAN FOR THE TWO SESSIONS

First session: Take up Matthew 23. Read the whole chapter aloud before you comment on any of it, and warn the class at the start that it is a mirror, not a window. Spend the last ten minutes on verses 37 through 39 so the class hears the grief and does not leave with only the anger.

Second session: Take up Acts 25:13-26:32. Center the hour on the commission in 26:16-18 and on Agrippa's "almost." It is a natural week to make a plain, unhurried statement of what the New Testament says a person must do to be saved, and to be ready for a response.

The other two readings: Ask the class to read Deuteronomy 1-5 in two sittings, chapters 1 through 3 as history and 4 through 5 as sermon, and to mark Deuteronomy 4:2 and 4:9. Proverbs 26 is easily read in five minutes and worth a week of thought; suggest they take verses 20 through 22 into their workplaces.

Remember What You Heard

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Deuteronomy means second law, and that is what it is: not a new code but the old one preached. Israel is camped in the plains of Moab. Everyone who refused the land at Kadesh is dead, the land is a river crossing away, and Moses has about a month to live. So he preaches. Chapters 1 through 3 are history, told with a purpose, walking the new generation through the appointing of leaders, the sending of the spies, the refusal, the wasted years, the nations God told them to leave alone, and the two kings He gave them.

The history is not neutral. Moses keeps stopping to make a point. At Kadesh God had said, go up and possess, do not fear; the people said, let us send men, and then would not go. The next day they decided to go up without God and were beaten like bees drive a man. And Moses tells them, plainly, that his own exclusion from the land is bound up with them, that he asked God to relent and was told to stop asking and instead to charge Joshua and strengthen him.

Chapters 4 and 5 turn from story to sermon. Now therefore hear, and do. Do not add to the word, do not take from it. Take heed to yourself, keep your soul diligently, teach your children. You saw no form at Horeb, only heard a voice, so do not make an image of anything. The Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God, and also a merciful God who will not forsake you if you seek Him with all your heart. Then Moses recites the Ten Commandments and adds the ache of 5:29, God wishing His people had such a heart in them.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Deuteronomy consists of sermons Moses preached in the eleventh month of the fortieth year (1:3), just before his death and Israel's crossing.
- The audience is the generation born in the wilderness. Moses can say "your eyes have seen" of Sinai in 5:3–4 because they are the covenant people, standing in their fathers' place, even though most were children or unborn at Horeb.
- The book is structured much like ancient covenant documents of the period: historical prologue, stipulations, blessings and curses, witnesses. That shape is why the history comes first.
- Jesus quoted Deuteronomy three times in the temptation (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10), all from chapters 6 and 8, which are next week's reading.
- The Sabbath command in 5:12–15 is grounded in the deliverance from Egypt rather than in creation as in Exodus 20:11. It was given to Israel as a covenant sign (Exodus 31:16–17) and is nowhere bound on Christians.
- Deuteronomy 4:2 and 12:32 are the classic statements of the principle of biblical authority, repeated at the very end of the canon in Revelation 22:18–19.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Moses opens his final address by reminding a new generation exactly how their parents failed at Kadesh (1:19–46), and he does not soften a word of it. Why begin a book of instruction with a family failure, and what does honest remembering do for a people who are about to receive everything they were promised?*

Because a people who forget their own history repeat it, and because the new generation had grown up hearing an edited version. Moses tells the story straight: God said go up and do not fear, and you would not. Then he adds a detail worth lingering on, from 1:26–28, that they murmured in their tents and said the Lord hated them and

brought them out to destroy them. That is what unbelief always says in private. Honest remembering turns a family failure into a warning rather than a legend.

Push this toward the class's own families and congregations. Most of us tell a cleaned-up version of our past, which robs the next generation of the one thing they most need, the knowledge that God is faithful even to people who failed. Paul says these things were written for our admonition (1 Corinthians 10:11). Ask what an honest, appropriate telling of one hard chapter would sound like to a son, a daughter, or a young Christian, and what it would protect them from.

Question 2. *Deuteronomy 4:2 forbids adding to God's word or taking from it. Where does adding usually come from, and where does subtracting usually come from, and which of the two do people who genuinely love God tend to do more often?*

Adding usually comes from sincerity. Somebody wants to be safer than God required, or wants an answer where God gave none, or finds the plain word too simple and improves it. Subtracting usually comes from discomfort. Somebody finds a command inconvenient, or unpopular, or hard to explain, and quietly lets it fall out of use. Both end at the same place, a religion shaped by men, which is exactly what Jesus condemns in Matthew 15:8–9.

Then answer the second half honestly. People who love God are often more prone to adding, because adding feels like zeal. Every human tradition that has ever burdened the Lord's people started with somebody who meant well. Ask the class how a congregation can tell the difference between a matter of judgment, where liberty and love apply, and a matter of God's authority, where nothing may be added or taken away. Colossians 3:17 gives the standard: whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Question 3. *In 3:23–27 Moses pleads to be allowed to cross the Jordan, and God says, "Let it suffice you; speak no more to Me of this matter." How does a person keep serving God wholeheartedly after He has clearly said no to something you wanted very much?*

Notice what Moses does not do. He does not sulk, stop preaching, or lower his estimate of God. He asks, God answers no, and Moses spends his last weeks writing this book, blessing these tribes, and strengthening the man who will get to do what he wanted to do. Deuteronomy itself is the evidence that a man can serve wholeheartedly on the far side of a refused request. Paul asked three times for a thorn to be removed and got a different answer and went back to work (2 Corinthians 12:7–10).

Be pastoral here. Somebody in the room has prayed for a marriage that ended, a child who has not come home, a healing that did not come. The honest answer is not that God will eventually give in, and it is not that the request was wrong to make. It is that God told Moses to go up the mountain and look at the land, and He showed him all of it, and centuries later Moses stood in that land talking with Jesus (Matthew 17:3). Ask the class what they have quietly stopped doing for God since the day they got an answer they did not want.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Read through chapter 4 and count how many times the phrase "the Lord your God" appears. What is Moses pressing into them with that repetition, and how does it change the tone of the commands?*

The phrase occurs well over a dozen times in chapter 4 alone, and the pronoun is the point. Not a god, not the God, but the Lord your God, the one who took you for Himself, who spoke out of the fire, who brought you out of Egypt. Moses is not handing them a legal code from a distant authority; he is reminding them that every command comes from someone who is already theirs. It changes the tone of obedience from compliance to loyalty, which is exactly what Deuteronomy is trying to produce.

2. *Deuteronomy 4:9 tells them to keep their souls diligently, not to forget what their eyes saw, and to teach it to their children and grandchildren. List what they were specifically to remember, and then name one thing God has done in your family that your grandchildren will never know unless you tell them.*

They were to remember the day they stood before the Lord at Horeb, the fire, the darkness, the voice out of the midst of the fire, and the fact that they saw no form. In other words, they were to remember a direct encounter with the living God and its specific content. Answers about your own family will vary; look for concrete stories rather than

sentiments, a prayer answered, a hard year survived, a decision made in faith, a grandparent's conversion. These things are lost in one generation if nobody deliberately tells them.

3. *Compare the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5:6–21 with Exodus 20:1–17. Note every difference you find, especially the reason given for the Sabbath in 5:15, and explain what that change emphasizes for this generation.*

The wording is nearly identical. The most significant difference is the Sabbath. Exodus grounds it in creation, that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and rested; Deuteronomy grounds it in redemption, remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord brought you out. For a generation that never wore Egyptian chains, Moses stresses that their rest is the gift of a God who freed them. Smaller differences include the addition of the ox and donkey and of "that your male and female servant may rest as well as you."

4. *Read Deuteronomy 4:15–19 and then Romans 1:21–25. Why does God tie the prohibition of images to the fact that Israel saw no form at Horeb, and in what ways do people still reshape God into something more manageable?*

Because they had nothing to copy. They heard a voice and saw only fire, so any image they made would have to come out of their own imagination, which means it would be a god of their own design. That is precisely Paul's argument in Romans 1, that men changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image and worshiped the creature rather than the Creator. People still do it without carving anything: a god who agrees with all our politics, who never judges anyone we like, who wants mainly for us to be comfortable. Any god who never contradicts you is one you made.

5. *In 5:29 God says, "Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments." Name the one command you consistently intend to keep and consistently do not, and decide what has to change this week for the intention to become a habit.*

Answers will vary. Look for the gap between intention and habit, which is usually a matter of structure rather than sincerity. Daily Bible reading that has no fixed time. Prayer with a spouse that everyone wants and nobody starts. An apology that keeps waiting for the right moment. Ask what specific change makes it automatic: a time, a place, a partner, a reminder, a rearranged evening. God's ache in 5:29 is not for better feelings but for a heart that keeps His commandments always.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The Sabbath: state plainly that it was given to Israel as a sign of that covenant (Exodus 31:16–17; Deuteronomy 5:15) and that it is not binding on Christians (Colossians 2:14–17; Romans 14:5–6). Christians assemble on the first day of the week following the apostolic pattern (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2), and the Lord's Day is not a Christian Sabbath.
- The Ten Commandments were part of a covenant made at Horeb with Israel, and that covenant has been fulfilled and taken away in Christ (Hebrews 8:6–13; 2 Corinthians 3:7–11). Nine of the ten are restated as part of Christ's law, and we keep them on that authority, not on the authority of Sinai.
- Deuteronomy 4:2 is the right place to teach the principle of authority in religion, but keep it positive and textual. Let the class see the principle in Nadab and Abihu, in Matthew 15:9, and in Revelation 22:18–19 rather than in a list of grievances.
- Moses' exclusion is mentioned three times in these chapters. Do not let a class conclude that God is unfair or that Moses was lost. Numbers 20:12 gives the reason, and Matthew 17:3 gives the outcome.

Fools, Sluggards, and Meddlers

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 26 is organized by subject, which is unusual for Proverbs. Verses 1 through 12 are about the fool, verses 13 through 16 about the sluggard, and verses 17 through 28 about the man who causes trouble with his mouth. The writer does not define these people; he draws them, and the drawings are merciless. Honor for a fool is as out of place as snow in summer. A fool with a proverb in his mouth is like a lame man's legs, hanging useless. Sending a message by a fool is like cutting off your own feet.

The famous pair is verses 4 and 5, which have been called a contradiction for three thousand years and are nothing of the kind. Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you become like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes. Both are true; each names its own risk. Wisdom is knowing which danger is in front of you at the moment, and the chapter deliberately sets them side by side so that nobody applies either one mechanically.

The last section is about words that wound. The meddler grabs a dog by the ears. The prankster shoots firebrands and arrows and says he was joking. The talebearer feeds a fire, and his words are swallowed like a delicacy and lodge deep. The flatterer coats a worthless pot with silver dross. Verse 28 ends it: a lying tongue hates those it crushes, and a flattering mouth works ruin. In this chapter, more damage is done by talk than by anything else.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Chapter 26 is part of the Hezekiah collection (25:1), a set of Solomon's proverbs preserved by later scribes.
- Hebrew wisdom uses "fool" for a person of settled moral resistance, not low intelligence. He is not uninformed; he is unteachable.
- Verses 4 and 5 are an intentional pair, placed together so the reader will see that wisdom requires discernment rather than a rule.
- Peter quotes verse 11 in 2 Peter 2:22, applying it to those who have known the way of righteousness and turned back from it.
- Verse 23 pictures pottery glazed with silver dross, a cheap coating over cheap clay. It is the ancient equivalent of a thin veneer.
- As always, treat these as general principles about how life usually runs, not as guarantees about how any particular person will turn out.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Verses 4 and 5 give what look like opposite instructions about answering a fool. Work out how both can be true at once, and describe a real situation where each of them would be the right move.*

Both are true because they address two different dangers, and the second half of each verse tells you which. Verse 4 warns of the danger to you: argue with a fool on his terms, adopt his tone, his exaggeration, his personal attacks, and you become what he is. Verse 5 warns of the danger to him and to those listening: leave folly entirely unanswered and he walks away confirmed in his own eyes, and so does everybody watching. Jesus did both. He refused to answer Herod a word (Luke 23:9) and He answered the Pharisees with a question that dismantled them (Matthew 21:24–27).

Get the class to work out the practical markers. If answering would only feed the argument, if the other party wants a fight rather than the truth, if the setting guarantees heat and no light, verse 4 applies; keep quiet. If silence would leave error standing where others will be hurt by it, or would let someone conclude he has won,

verse 5 applies; answer, but on your terms, not his. Then ask about the places where we pretend it is verse 5 when the truth is that we simply want the last word.

Question 2. *Verses 20 through 22 say that where there is no wood the fire goes out, and that a talebearer's words go down into the innermost parts. Why do we remember gossip so easily and forget good reports so fast, and what does verse 20 identify as the thing that actually stops a fire?*

Because gossip flatters the hearer. Verse 22 says the words of a talebearer are like tasty morsels; they go down into the innermost parts of the belly. Information about someone else's failure makes us feel informed, included, and comparatively decent, all at once, and things that feed pride are easy to remember. A good report about someone else offers none of those benefits, so it slides off.

Verse 20 puts the responsibility somewhere uncomfortable: where there is no wood, the fire goes out, and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases. The fire does not die because someone makes peace; it dies because someone stops supplying fuel. Ask the class what supplying fuel looks like in a congregation: forwarding a message, asking a question in order to be told, saying "I only mention it so you can pray about it." Then give them the alternative from Ephesians 4:29, only what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. A Christian can end a fire by saying one sentence: I would rather not talk about him when he is not here.

Question 3. *The sluggard in 26:13–16 always has a reason, and verse 16 says he considers himself wiser than seven men who can give a sensible answer. Where do we do our most creative excuse-making, and who in your life is actually allowed to challenge it?*

Notice that the sluggard's excuses are not lazy; they are imaginative. There is a lion in the road, a lion in the streets. He turns on his bed like a door on its hinges, going through a great deal of motion and getting nowhere. He buries his hand in the dish and it wearies him to bring it back to his mouth. And verse 16 gives the diagnosis: he is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly. He has thought about it more than anyone, and that is the problem.

Ask where the class does its best excuse-making, and expect honest answers like evangelism, family devotion, physical health, finances, or reconciling with someone. Then go after the second question, which is the more valuable one. Who is permitted to say to you, that is not a reason, that is an excuse? A man with nobody in that role will believe himself indefinitely. Proverbs 27:17 and Hebrews 3:13 both assume that someone else has access to us, and this week is a good time to ask each person to name that someone.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List every comparison used for the fool in verses 1 through 12. Put them side by side and describe the single picture of foolishness that emerges.*

The comparisons include snow in summer and rain in harvest for honor given to a fool, a wandering sparrow or swallow for a causeless curse, a whip and a bridle for the rod of correction, the legs of the lame for a proverb in a fool's mouth, a stone bound in a sling for giving him honor, a thorn in a drunkard's hand for the same proverb, an archer wounding everyone at random for the man who hires a fool, and a dog returning to his vomit for a fool repeating his folly. Together they picture someone whose actions are useless, dangerous to himself, dangerous to bystanders, and endlessly repeated.

2. *Verse 12 says there is more hope for a fool than for a man wise in his own eyes. Read Romans 12:16 and 1 Corinthians 3:18–20, and explain why self-conceit is a worse condition than ordinary foolishness.*

Because the fool can still be taught, and the man wise in his own eyes cannot. Folly is a condition; conceit is a locked door. Romans 12:16 says not to be wise in your own opinion, and 1 Corinthians 3:18 says if anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. The man who knows he does not know can learn from anyone. The man who believes he has already arrived interprets every correction as the other person's misunderstanding, and Proverbs regards his case as nearly hopeless.

3. *Proverbs 26:18–19 describes a man who wounds his neighbor and then says he was only joking. Think of the last time humor was used to say something true and cruel. Who was hurt, and what should have been said instead?*

Answers will vary; expect discomfort. The proverb pictures a madman flinging firebrands and arrows, and then the excuse, “I was only joking.” Humor is the most deniable weapon there is, which is exactly why it is used. The right response is not to abolish humor but to stop using it as a delivery system for contempt. The honest thing to say afterward is not “you are too sensitive” but “that was not a joke, that was something I meant, and I am sorry.”

4. *Read 26:23–28 and trace the portrait of the man with burning lips and a wicked heart. Count how many disguises he uses, and note what verse 27 says finally happens to him.*

He uses at least four: fervent lips over a wicked heart like silver dross on a clay pot, disguised speech that conceals deceit within, a gracious voice that should not be believed because there are seven abominations in his heart, and a hatred covered by deception. Verse 26 says his wickedness will be revealed before the whole assembly, and verse 27 adds the general principle: whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and he who rolls a stone will have it roll back on him. God has built consequences into the structure of the world, and deceit eventually collapses inward.

5. *Verse 20 says that where there is no wood the fire goes out. Identify one conversation, group message, or habit through which you have been supplying the wood, and decide exactly how you will stop before next Sunday.*

Answers will vary. Look for a specific channel rather than a general resolve to gossip less: a particular group message, a standing lunch conversation, a phone call after every business meeting, a habit of asking for details that are not ours. Encourage one clear decision, such as leaving a conversation, saying one honest sentence, or going directly to the person being discussed. Verse 20 promises that the fire actually goes out when the wood stops.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- The word “fool” in Proverbs is a moral category. Be careful that the class does not walk out labeling people, especially since Jesus warns about calling a brother a fool in anger (Matthew 5:22).
- Verses 4 and 5 are not a contradiction, and somebody will have heard that they are. Take two minutes to show why, because the same objection is made against other passages.
- Keep the sluggard material from turning into a class discussion about other people’s work ethic. The proverb is a mirror.
- Remember the genre: these are general observations, not prophecies about how a particular lazy or deceitful person will end.

They Say and Do Not

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

Chapter 23 follows immediately on the silencing of chapter 22. Nobody dares ask Him anything more, so Jesus speaks without interruption, and He speaks to the multitudes and to His disciples about the men in front of them. He begins fairly: the scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat, so do what they tell you from the law. Then the indictment begins. They bind heavy burdens and will not move them with a finger. They do their works to be seen, widening phylacteries and lengthening the borders of their garments, loving the best seats and public greetings and titles.

The seven woes follow, and each is a specific charge, not a general insult. They shut the kingdom of heaven against men, neither entering nor allowing others to. They devour widows' houses under a pretense of long prayers. They cross sea and land to make one convert and make him twice the son of hell they are. They invent a system of oath-taking that lets a man look honest while lying. They tithe garden herbs and omit judgment, mercy, and faith. They clean the outside of the cup while the inside is full of extortion. They are whitewashed tombs, and they build monuments to prophets while behaving exactly like the men who killed them.

Then, without any transition, the voice breaks. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" That last clause is the theology of the whole chapter. Not that God could not, but that they would not. Your house is left to you desolate. Within forty years the temple was rubble, and Jesus is already weeping over it.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- This is Tuesday of the last week, spoken publicly in the temple, and it is the final public address of Jesus recorded by Matthew before the Olivet Discourse.
- "Moses' seat" refers to the recognized teaching authority of those who read and expounded the law in the synagogue. The Law of Moses was still in force; it was taken away at the cross (Colossians 2:14; Ephesians 2:14–16).
- Phylacteries were small boxes containing Scripture worn on the arm and forehead, based on Deuteronomy 6:8. The complaint is not the practice but the display.
- Tithing mint, anise, and cumin was a scrupulous extension of the law to garden herbs. Jesus does not condemn their tithing; He condemns their omission of weightier duties, and He says it under the covenant still in force at that moment.
- The woes are covenant language. Israel's prophets pronounced woes on a people in breach of covenant, and Jesus stands squarely in that line.
- Matthew 23:35–36 and 23:38 look forward to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, which is the subject of the discourse that begins in the very next verse.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Jesus tells the crowd to do what the scribes and Pharisees say and not what they do (23:2–3). How can a man's teaching be right while his life is a warning, and what does that mean both for how we listen to teachers and for how we live as ones?*

Because truth is not validated by the person who carries it. The scribes read Moses aloud, and what Moses said was true no matter who read it. Paul makes the same point in Philippians 1:15–18, where some preached Christ from envy and Paul says the message still did good. That should relieve a class of the notion that a teacher must

be flawless before he can be heard, and it should relieve a teacher of the notion that he must be flawless before he can teach.

But turn the coin over, because that is where the weight falls. Jesus is not commending these men; He is saying that their lives disqualify them as examples while their text remains true. James 3:1 warns that teachers receive stricter judgment, and Paul tells Timothy to take heed to himself and to the doctrine, in that order (1 Timothy 4:16). Ask the class who is watching them, and whether anyone following their life rather than their words would end up where they want to be.

Question 2. *In 23:23 Jesus says they carefully tithed mint, anise, and cumin while omitting justice, mercy, and faith, and that they should have done the one without leaving the other undone. Which duties do we count most carefully, and which are we most likely to leave undone?*

They counted what could be counted. A man can weigh out a tenth of his mint and know exactly where he stands, and he can do it in public. Justice, mercy, and faith cannot be weighed, cannot be displayed, and are never finished. That is precisely why they get omitted. Notice that Jesus does not tell them to stop tithing the herbs; He says these you ought to have done without leaving the other undone. Scrupulousness is not the sin. Selective scrupulousness is.

Bring it home with specifics that fit your congregation. We count attendance, contribution, and the order of the service, all of which matter. Do we count whether the widow was visited, whether the new family was invited to a table, whether a dispute in the pews got settled, whether anyone was treated unfairly and nobody said anything? Ask each person to name one weightier matter he has been omitting while keeping the countable things perfectly. Micah 6:8 is the Old Testament version of this verse and is worth reading aloud.

Question 3. *This chapter is safest read as a mirror rather than a window. Work through the seven woes slowly, and name the one that comes closest to home for people like us, who love the Scriptures and attend faithfully.*

Let the class do the work, and stay out of the way while they do it. The woes that usually land are the fifth and the sixth. The fifth, counting the small things while omitting justice, mercy, and faith, describes anyone who has ever been doctrinally precise and personally unkind. The sixth, cleaning the outside of the cup, describes anyone whose reputation in the building is better than his life at home. The first also deserves attention: shutting the kingdom of heaven against men. A congregation can do that by making obedience to the gospel complicated, or by being so cold that a seeker never gets close enough to hear.

Guard two things as you teach. First, do not let the hour become a sport of naming other religious groups; Jesus aimed this at people who had the right Scriptures. Second, do not let anyone leave thinking that the cure for hypocrisy is to lower the standard. The cure is in verse 26, cleanse the inside, and in verses 11 and 12, the greatest among you shall be your servant. Ask for one concrete act of unseen service this week, something nobody will know about.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *List the seven woes in order, and write a short phrase naming the specific sin condemned in each one.*

One, 23:13, they shut up the kingdom of heaven, neither going in nor letting others in. Two, 23:14, devouring widows' houses while making long prayers. Three, 23:15, crossing land and sea to make a convert and making him worse than themselves. Four, 23:16–22, a system of oaths that made deception look honest. Five, 23:23–24, meticulous tithing with justice, mercy, and faith omitted. Six, 23:25–26, cleaning the outside of the cup while the inside is full of extortion and self-indulgence. Seven, 23:27–32, whitewashed tombs who honor dead prophets and behave like the men who killed them.

2. *Read 23:8–12 carefully. What is Jesus forbidding when He says to call no man your father on the earth, and what is He plainly not forbidding? Compare 1 Corinthians 4:15, Ephesians 6:1–2, and Acts 7:2.*

He is forbidding religious titles that claim a spiritual authority or paternity belonging to God alone, the habit He has just described of men loving to be called Rabbi in the marketplace. He is not forbidding the ordinary word for a parent, since He Himself quotes “honor your father and mother” (Matthew 15:4), nor ordinary respectful address,

since Stephen says “men and brethren and fathers” in Acts 7:2, nor the affectionate sense in which Paul says he became a father to the Corinthians through the gospel (1 Corinthians 4:15). The target is a religious class elevated above the brotherhood. Verses 8 through 12 say we are all brethren, and greatness is measured in service.

3. Trace the word “blind” through 23:16, 17, 19, 24, and 26. What does the repetition tell you about the effect hypocrisy has on the person practicing it?

Blind guides, blind Pharisees, fools and blind, blind men straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel, and blind Pharisee who should cleanse the inside first. The repetition says that hypocrisy is not merely a lie told to others; it eventually blinds the one who tells it. The man who performs righteousness long enough stops being able to see himself, which is why these men could tithe herbs and devour a widow’s house in the same week without noticing the contradiction. That is the frightening part of the chapter, and it is why the woes end in weeping rather than in a shrug.

4. Verses 37 through 39 end the chapter with grief rather than anger. Read them beside Luke 19:41–44 and Ezekiel 18:32, and describe the heart behind the woes.

Behind the woes is a heart that would have gathered them like a hen gathers her chicks. Luke 19:41 says He wept over the city when He saw it. Ezekiel 18:32 says God has no pleasure in the death of one who dies, so turn and live. The severity is real and it is not contradicted by the grief; it is explained by it. Only someone who loves a city is undone by its ruin. Note also the phrase that carries the responsibility: “you were not willing.” God did not withhold the gathering. They refused it.

5. Verse 26 says to cleanse first the inside of the cup and dish, so that the outside may be clean also. Name the one area of your life you have been managing from the outside, and take one specific step this week toward cleaning it from the inside.

Answers will vary and this one should be asked quietly. Look for areas where reputation and reality have drifted apart: what is watched or read alone, how a spouse is spoken to at home, what is done with money, what is said about people afterward. The specific step is the point. Confession to God, a conversation with one trusted person, a filter or a change of routine, a standing appointment with someone who will ask. Verse 26 promises that when the inside is dealt with, the outside takes care of itself.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Matthew 23:9 has been used both to forbid the ordinary word father and to justify religious titles. Teach the balance: no man wears a title claiming spiritual fatherhood or mastery over the brotherhood (23:8–12), and the ordinary respectful and family uses of the word are plainly acceptable in Scripture.
- Do not use 23:23 to bind tithing on Christians. Jesus spoke while the Law of Moses was still in force. Christian giving is purposed, proportionate, regular, and cheerful (1 Corinthians 16:1–2; 2 Corinthians 8:12; 9:6–7).
- Matthew 23:39 is sometimes claimed as a promise of a future national conversion of Israel and an earthly kingdom. It says nothing of the kind. In context it closes a pronouncement of judgment on that generation and its house, fulfilled in A.D. 70. Salvation for Jew and Gentile alike is in the one body of Christ (Romans 11:23; Ephesians 2:14–16).
- Guard the tone. This chapter is easily used as a weapon against other religious groups or against members a teacher finds irritating. Jesus spoke it with tears, and He aimed it at people who had the Scriptures and knew them.

Almost Persuaded

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

The setting is almost theatrical. Agrippa II, the last of the Herods, arrives with his sister Bernice on a courtesy visit to the new governor. Festus, stuck with a prisoner he cannot charge, explains the problem in a wonderfully revealing sentence: the dispute is about their own religion, and about a certain Jesus who was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. That is the whole controversy in one line, and a Roman administrator states it without realizing what he has said. The next day they come with great pomp, and a man in chains is brought in to entertain them.

Paul's defense is the most polished speech in Acts. He compliments Agrippa honestly rather than flatteringly, states his upbringing as a Pharisee, and frames the entire case as the hope of the promise made by God to the fathers. Then he asks the question that hangs over the room: why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead? He describes his fury against the name of Jesus, the noon light brighter than the sun, the voice in Hebrew, and the goads he had been kicking against. And he gives the commission in full, which is the richest summary of what the gospel does anywhere in the book.

Then the room reacts. Festus, who has heard about prophets and resurrection and light to the Gentiles, breaks in with the verdict of every sophisticated man who has no category for this: you are insane, Paul, your great learning is driving you mad. Paul answers with perfect composure, appeals to Agrippa's knowledge of public events, and then turns on him: King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe. Agrippa deflects with a phrase that has haunted readers ever since, and Paul answers with the most generous sentence in Acts, that he would to God all who heard him were as he was, except for the chains.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

- Herod Agrippa II was the son of the Agrippa who died in Acts 12 and the great-grandson of Herod the Great. Rome had given him authority over the temple and the appointment of the high priest, which is why Paul says he is expert in Jewish customs.
- Bernice was Agrippa's sister, and their relationship was the subject of open scandal in Rome. Luke mentions her presence without comment.
- Festus needed a formal charge to accompany a prisoner appealing to the emperor, and had none. That administrative problem is why this hearing happens at all.
- "It is hard for you to kick against the goads" is a proverb drawn from an ox kicking the pointed stick used to drive it. It appears only in this third account.
- This is the third telling of Paul's conversion in Acts, shaped for a royal and largely Gentile audience, and it is the only one containing the full commission.
- Paul's appeal to Caesar could not be withdrawn (26:32), which is how a hearing that clears him still ends with him on a ship to Rome.

NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Question 1. *Paul tells his conversion a third time, and this time he includes the commission he was given (26:16–18). Read those verses slowly. What is the gospel said to accomplish for people, and how much of that list have you actually experienced?*

Take verse 18 apart phrase by phrase, because it is a complete description of conversion. To open their eyes. To turn them from darkness to light. To turn them from the power of Satan to God. That they may receive forgiveness of sins. And an inheritance among those who are sanctified. By faith in Me. Every one of those is spoken of

Gentiles, which means it is spoken of most of your class. Paul later tells the Colossians the same thing in different words, that God delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:13–14).

Then ask the honest personal question and do not rush it. How much of that list is your actual experience? Many faithful members have received forgiveness and have never quite believed it. Others have moved out of darkness and are still living as though they were renting there. Tie the receiving of forgiveness to the way the New Testament describes it happening: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, being baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27). If someone in the room realizes he has never done that, be ready.

Question 2. *Festus interrupts loudly that Paul is out of his mind, and Paul answers that he speaks words of truth and reason, adding that this thing was not done in a corner (26:24–26). How do you answer someone who assumes faith is for people who cannot think clearly?*

Notice Paul's two moves, because both are useful. First he refuses the insult calmly: I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. No defensiveness, no sarcasm, and an honorific for the man who just called him crazy. Second, he appeals to public, checkable fact: the king knows these things, for this thing was not done in a corner. Christianity is not a private experience that must be taken on the speaker's word. It rests on events that happened in public, before hostile witnesses, in a known city, at a known time (1 Corinthians 15:3–8).

Give the class something to do with this. When someone treats faith as intellectual weakness, do not argue about intelligence; move to evidence. The resurrection is a historical claim. The manuscripts, the empty tomb, the transformation of cowards into martyrs, the existence of the church on the very ground where the claim could most easily have been disproved, all of it is in the public record. And keep Paul's tone: 1 Peter 3:15 says with meekness and fear. Ask each person to name one honest question a friend has raised and to commit to finding out the answer rather than dodging it.

Question 3. *Agrippa says, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." What keeps a man who knows the prophets, and knows the facts, from taking the last step, and what is the "almost" in your own life right now?*

Almost is the most dangerous word in the chapter. Agrippa believed the prophets, knew the events, could not deny the reasoning, and stopped. Why? Look at who was in the room. His sister, the governor, the commanders, and the prominent men of the city. Becoming a Christian would cost him his position, his arrangement with Rome, his relationship with Bernice, and his dignity in front of every person watching. John 12:42–43 describes the same disease exactly: they believed, but they would not confess Him, for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.

Now bring it to the class, slowly. Almost is not a category God recognizes. Felix had a convenient season that never came; Agrippa had an almost that never became an altogether. And the tragedy is that almost feels like progress. Ask each person to finish this sentence honestly and privately: I would obey God fully in this area except that it would cost me _____. Then read Paul's answer in verse 29 aloud and let it sit. A prisoner in chains told a king he wanted him to have what he had. He had nothing but Christ and he knew it was everything.

NOTES ON THE EXTENDED QUESTIONS

1. *Compare the three accounts of Paul's conversion in Acts 9, 22, and 26. Make a short list of what appears only in this third telling, and consider why Paul included those things before a king.*

Unique to Acts 26 are the phrase "it is hard for you to kick against the goads," the statement that the voice spoke in the Hebrew language, the fact that all of them fell to the ground, and above all the full commission of verses 16 through 18, which Acts 9 and 22 summarize much more briefly. Paul also emphasizes his Pharisaic upbringing, the hope of the promise to the fathers, and his obedience in preaching first at Damascus and Jerusalem, then Judea, then the Gentiles. Before a king who claimed expertise in Jewish matters, Paul frames the gospel as the fulfillment of Israel's own hope, not as a foreign novelty.

2. Write out the commission of Acts 26:18 in its separate parts. Then read Colossians 1:13–14 and 1 Peter 2:9 and note where the same ideas show up in language for all Christians.

The parts are these: to open their eyes; to turn them from darkness to light; to turn them from the power of Satan to God; that they may receive forgiveness of sins; that they may receive an inheritance among those who are sanctified; by faith in Christ. Colossians 1:13–14 uses the same movement, delivered from the power of darkness and conveyed into the kingdom of the Son, in whom we have redemption and forgiveness. First Peter 2:9 says we were called out of darkness into His marvelous light and are now a people for His own possession. What was said to the Gentiles of Paul's generation is said of every Christian.

3. Paul says in 26:20 that he preached that men should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. Read Luke 3:8–14 and 2 Corinthians 7:10–11, and describe what repentance looks like when it is genuine.

Real repentance changes what a person does with his hands. John the Baptist told the crowds to share a coat, told tax collectors to collect no more than was appointed, and told soldiers to stop intimidating people and to be content with their wages. Paul told Corinth that godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation and then listed its fruit: diligence, clearing of oneself, indignation, fear, vehement desire, zeal, vindication. Repentance is not remorse and it is not an apology; it is a change of mind that shows up as a change of conduct, which is exactly what Paul means by works befitting repentance.

4. Trace Agrippa's part in the scene from 26:1 through 26:32. Note how his tone changes, and explain what his final private verdict about Paul reveals about the case against him.

He begins as a curious host, granting Paul permission to speak. He listens through a long speech without interrupting, unlike Festus. He deflects Paul's direct question with a half-humorous, half-uncomfortable "you almost persuade me." He rises, ends the audience, and then privately tells Festus that this man is doing nothing worthy of death or chains, and might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar. His verdict is the third official declaration of Paul's innocence in this section of Acts, and Luke records it to show his readers that the gospel had committed no crime against Rome.

5. Paul said, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." You have no vision; you have the completed word of God, which is better (2 Peter 1:19). Name the most recent thing Scripture asked of you that you have not done, and do it this week.

Answers will vary, and the wording of the question is deliberate. Paul had a vision and obeyed it; we have something better and more complete, a written revelation that thoroughly equips us for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:19). Listen for a specific, already-known obligation: a person to forgive, a sin to abandon, a confession to make, a service to begin, an obedience to the gospel that has been postponed. The point of the question is that nobody in the room is waiting on more light.

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Paul's vision is unique to an apostle (1 Corinthians 15:8; Acts 26:16). Say plainly that nobody today should expect or seek a vision, and that God now speaks through the completed Scriptures (Hebrews 1:1–2; 1 Corinthians 13:8–10).
- "Almost persuaded" is a natural invitation text, and it should be used. But do not let the response be a feeling, a raised hand, or a prayer. Show what the New Testament actually tells a convicted person to do (Acts 2:37–38; 22:16; Romans 10:9–10 with Acts 8:35–38).
- Acts 26:18 says the inheritance comes "by faith in Me." Be careful not to leave the impression of faith alone; the same book shows what that faith does (Acts 2:41; 8:12; 16:31–33; 18:8). Faith that receives is obedient faith (James 2:24; Galatians 5:6).
- Herod Agrippa and Bernice: the historical background is sordid. Mention it only as far as it explains what obedience would have cost him, and keep the class out of the details.

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