

Judgment on the masters of the system

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Preacher: John Woods

[0 : 00] Welcome to this meeting of Calvary Church in Brighton which is being pre-recorded for the evening of the 7th June 2020.

This is continuing our series in Matthew and I'm very pleased to welcome John Woods as our speaker. He's the former pastor of Lansing Tabernacle in West Sussex and he'll introduce himself a little bit later.

My name is Philip Wells. I work for Calvary Church as one of the team of elders and I'm just going to introduce this. I'm going to pray and read the passage, introduce a song, John will speak and then there is a song to close.

So, first of all let me pray. Lord, thank you for the gift of salvation to us as your people.

Thank you for Jesus our Saviour, the Servant King, who in total integrity offered his life as a spotless sacrifice.

[1 : 10] Thank you for the power of that sacrifice to bring us to God. And we pray that we may learn to live as we see Jesus and seek to model our lives on his.

Please forgive our many sins for we fall short in many, many ways. But please make us more like the Lord Jesus. Please speak to us as we hear your word spoken to us.

And we pray that we may take this into our hearts with real, true effect. May we be found to be genuinely the people in whom God is at work.

So we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Our passage is Matthew chapter 23, verses 1 to 22. I'll just give you a moment to find that.

Matthew 23, starting at verse 1. And we're going to go up to verse 22. Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.

[2 : 21] So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders.

But they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to see. They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long.

They love the place of honour at the banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues.

They love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them rabbi.

But you are not to be called rabbi. For you have only one master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth father. For you have one father and he is in heaven.

Nor are you to be called teacher. For you have one teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled.

[3 : 28] And whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees. You hypocrites. You travel.

I'm sorry. You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter. Nor will you let those enter who are trying to. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees.

You hypocrites. You travel over land and sea to win a single convert. When he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are. Woe to you, blind guides.

You say, if anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing. But if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath. You blind fools.

Which is greater? The gold? Or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, if anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing.

[4 : 29] But if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath. You blind men. Which is greater? The gift? Or the altar that makes the gift sacred?

Therefore he who swears by the altar swears by it, and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it, and by the one who dwells in it.

And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne, and by the one who sits upon it. Amen.
And we thank God for his word.

And John's going to speak about this in a moment. But please can we first sing number 396,
Servant King. We were reminded that the greatest will be the servant, and this is about Jesus, the
Servant King.

When John's finished speaking, we'll have number 850, Take My Life and Let It Be Consecrated,
Lord to Thee, or whatever the modern translation is in praise.

[5 : 31] So now we're going to sing 396, and then it'll be over to John. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. any■ This is our Lord, the Son of King.

He calls us now to follow Him, to bring our life as a daily offering.

[7 : 39] I worship you, the Son of King. Come see His hands and His feet, the scars that speak of
sacrifice, and some blood scars into space.

To cruel males surrender, this is our Lord, the Son of King.

He calls us now to follow Him, to bring our life as a daily offering.

I worship you, the Son of King. So let us learn how to serve, and in our lives enthroned Him, He
shall just lead to prepare, for a new strength.

For a new strength we're serving. This is our Lord, the Son of King.

[9 : 15] He calls us now to follow Him, to bring our life as a daily offering.

I worship you, the Son of King. Welcome. I was for 22 years the pastor of Lansing Tabernacle in
West Sussex, and since the 1st of March of this year, I've been the training director of the School of
Preachers, aiming to teach preachers in the UK, in the Baltic state of Latvia, and in other parts of
the former Soviet Union.

We're looking this evening at Matthew 23, 1-22. The title is Judgment on the Masters of the System.

We would probably have needed to have been on the moon for a fortnight, not to have caught the
news story about the Downing Street Special Advisor Dominic Cummings and his journey from
London to Durham in the early days of the lockdown.

It reminds me of the opening line of Sinclair Lewis's early 20th century novel, Alma Gantry. It was
about a hypocritical preacher, an evangelist who was on the sawdust trail, preaching the gospel in a
tent.

The first line of the novel sets the tone, Alma Gantry was drunk. We all know that most people don't
like the idea of people saying one thing and then doing the other.

[10 : 55] Yet we do have to be careful when reading a chapter like this one. It's very easy to let
ourselves off the hook by seeing it as a description of someone else. Like the Sunday school
teacher who ended her lesson on the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, telling her
children, Now children, let us pray, thanking God that we're not like that dreadful Pharisee.

So looking at this passage, it might be worth saying first that we need to give credit where credit is
due. In many ways, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees were the good guys. They had not
completely sold out.

They did have good intentions. Pharisees started out with good intentions, but became corrupted by
self interest. They were a sect within Judaism between 200 BC and 100 AD.

And they sought to preserve Israel's identity by strictly adhering to purity and Sabbath laws. They
were popular amongst a great many of the population.

So on a positive note, many were guardians of authoritative teaching, committed to preserving the
word, disciplined in practice. Just as not every police officer in the US is a violent racist.

[12 : 18] We must be careful not to caricature all Pharisees. Paul said about himself in Philippians
chapter 3 from verse 4, Though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If anyone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on
the eighth day of the people of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews,
in regard to the law of Pharisee, as for zeal persecuting the church, as for righteousness based on
the law, faultless.

Although Paul will go on to say that this is not the basis by which a person can be accepted with
God and receive his mercy. There is an integrity and honesty and good intentions about his desire

to serve God as he saw it through this particular path.

Jesus says they sit in Moses's seat. Verse 2. Like a university chair, a grand place.

Some suggest that there was such a chair in the synagogues where people would sit as the authorized arbiters and authorities on all matters of the law.

[13:40] Authoritative interpreters of Moses. Torah is us. Do take them seriously, says Jesus. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you.

Verse 3. Dick Francis suggested that what Jesus is saying is follow their teaching if you must, but do not follow their example. Be careful to do what they tell you because they are passing on what's very important from the Old Testament.

But do not do what they do for they do not practice what they preach. Practices can undo the benefit of our words. Jesus is very, very keen that we not merely hear the word, but put it into practice.

That's the heart of that story at the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7 of the wise man building his house upon the rock and the foolish man building his house upon the sand. Practicing God's word is the test that we've taken seriously. Some religious people, including Christians, can overthink and overcomplicate.

[14:53] They can make what they're saying very complex so that only insiders can understand it. It seems to be designed to be difficult and there is no effort to lighten the load.

Verse 4. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. I remember once seeing a skit about this.

A number of church members entered into church. They came to the pew and they were all looking very stern and they all were carrying a chair over their shoulders.

They sat down and then a minute or two later the door behind the pulpit opened and the pastor arrived also looking very, very stern. And he too was carrying a chair over his shoulder.

And the lesson was very plain. That here was a ministry that was not seeking to preach freedom in Christ, but was communicating burdens, actually placing burdens upon people, making it harder for them rather than easier for them to receive the word of God.

[16:06] Then Jesus says that these teachers of law and Pharisees seem to be more interested in appearance than performance. Everything they do is done for people to see.

Verse 5. This week, the president of the United States stood up outside the church in Washington, posing, holding up a large black book.

One Christian described the pose as like a fish trying to ride a bicycle. The Bible is not a prop or an accessory. It is God's living word that's supposed to speak to us and change the way we think and live.

Are you the same on the inside as you are on the outside? C.S. Lewis said integrity is doing the right thing even when nobody is looking.

Living as if we are living before an audience of one. Jesus says they they confuse ostentatious display with authenticity.

[17:22] They confuse the size of their phylacteries and their tassels, the symbols from the Old Testament of spirituality with genuineness.

The phylacteries, which contained the words in Deuteronomy 6 about loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, were designed to be worn on the on the forehead and the and the wrist.

As a symbol that God's word was to shape our minds and our actions. But they confused the size of the phylactery with their obedience to God and his word.

Never mind the quality, feel the width was their approach to their spiritual expressions. But that will not do, says Jesus. And then Jesus says that they considered themselves to be superior to others, masters of the system.

Verses eight to twelve. But you are not to be called rabbi for you have one teacher and you are all brothers. Here we speak about the dynamics of power, stars of leadership and interaction.

[18:44] It is possible, isn't it, within even the Christian church to have a kind of CEO approach to leadership. The reserved parking spot, the best seats at the top table.

The concern about status, about the name that we have. Rabbi, father, pastor, minister, doctor.

One commentator said the desire to be number one, to be considered great, is the most frequently combated desire in the Gospels. There is only one number one. God is number one.

Therefore, don't call yourself rabbi. Literally, my master or the great one. This is not what you are to desire, says Jesus.

There is an alternative narrative of leadership and ministry that Jesus gives here. Verses eleven and twelve. The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

[20 : 01] And those who humble themselves will be exalted. This zeal for greatness, this desire to be number one, needs to be revised downwards into a desire for greater service to others.

Status or service. That seems to be the choice that Jesus puts before us. Either we're concerned about our status or we're concerned about serving others.

Is one or the other. Peter, who was here on this occasion, obviously took this lesson on board.

Writing to the Christians in his first letter, chapter five, verses one following.

He says to the elders among you. I appeal to you as a fellow elder, not pulling rank as an apostle, but putting himself at the same level as the local leaders. And as a witness of Christ's sufferings who will share in the glory to be revealed.

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care. Watching over them, not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be. Not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve.

[21 : 07] Not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you clothe yourselves with humility towards one another because God opposes the proud, but shows favour to the humble.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

Yes, that's the kind of leadership that Jesus wants to see within the church. Leadership that's based on humility, a humble, realistic assessment of ourselves and a humble, faithful service towards others.

J.C. Ryle begins his commentary on this chapter by saying, We're now beginning a chapter which in one respect is the most remarkable in the four gospels. It contains the last words which the Lord Jesus ever spoke within the walls of the temple.

[22 : 19] Jesus begins his public ministry with his great speech with nine blessings in Matthew chapter five. But now he ends his public ministry in his last or next to last great speech with seven woes.

We're going to look at the first three of those. Verses 12 to 13. Woe to those who are closers of doors, who block the door to the kingdom of God.

Those with false enthusiasms. You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter and you do not let others enter who are trying to do so.

You are closers of doors. What a tragic thing this is. People not working to help people get into the kingdom of heaven.

But whose life and ministry actually makes it harder for people to enter the kingdom of heaven. Of course, we see in the Acts of the Apostles that when the first advances into the Gentile world began, when Peter went to the house of Cornelius, that the leaders in Jerusalem found it very difficult to get their minds around the idea that God was opening the door to those who were not Jewish.

[23 : 49] Very, very easy for those who stand at the doorway of the church to be bouncers, keeping people out, rather than greeters, welcoming people in.

Woe to those who are closers of doors, said Jesus, and woe to those who have misdirected zeal. Sometimes it's true, isn't it, that the fanaticism of the convert seems to exceed that of the missionary.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You grow the land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are. Hypocrite. Hypocrite. A play actor. It can be a poignant question to ask many figures in the public eye, whether they be politician, pundit or preacher.

When did you sell out? When did it stop being real? Here's the problem. Everyone wants everybody else to be authentic.

[25 : 03] They want everyone to be authentic, apart from themselves. Most people do not start out to be hypocrites, said Eugene Peterson. We begin sincerely enough with good intentions.

But as it becomes easier to talk about God than engaging in the arduous process of deepening and growing in faith, we take the easier road. Outside fluency and expertise covers up inner sloth and emptiness.

Are you the same on the outside as you are on the inside?

And then thirdly, we see the woe, woe to you, blind guides. Three times the word blind is used there in verses 16 through to 22.

And to be blind involves a lack of spiritual perception. You may know the film, The Return of the Pink Panther.

[26 : 15] It's about Peter Sellers being a policeman in Paris. And he has a love-hate relationship with his chief inspector, Chief Inspector Trifuse.

On one occasion, Clouseau, who has been demoted to an officer on the beat, allows a bank robbery to take place because he's talking to a blind musician outside the bank who turns out to be the lookout for the gang who's robbing the bank.

Clouseau says to Trifuse, how can a blind man be a lookout? The inspector answers, how can an idiot become a policeman? Answer me that.

Clouseau replies, well, it's very simple. All you do is enlist and the inspector says, shut up. Shut up. Yes, it's ridiculous, the idea of a blind lookout.

And equally, it is ridiculous to have a blind guide. We know the saying. It's the blind leading the blind.

[27 : 32] Very worrying, isn't it? If someone is seeking to guide us into the future and they can't see a step in front of them.

Woe to you, blind guides, says Jesus. And one of the ways that they show that they are blind guides is they display a kind of super spirituality where they say that they are telling the truth because they are swearing on things which appear to be valuable.

If someone swears by the temple, it means nothing. But if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath. You blind fools, which is greater, the gold or the temple that makes the gold sacred.

You also say if anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing. But if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath. You blind men, which is greater, the gift of the altar or that which makes the gift sacred.

Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

[28 : 55] Which is greater? Says Jesus. The Pharisees cannot tell the difference between the weighty and the trivial.

Which is greater? This is God's world. Everything about God's world is significant. Just speak the truth.

As Jesus said elsewhere, let your yes be yes and your no be no. Resist this super spirituality, this blotness.

This blind leading of the blind. Just be authentic. Have a sense of true spiritual proportion.

It is very easy to look at a passage like this and let ourselves off the hook. What does it say to us?

This message comes with a warning.

[29 : 52] We must watch out that we do not come away from this message with a superiority complex. It's very easy to find examples of these horror stories in the contemporary religious scene.

But it might be more useful to engage in the little bit of bringing it all back home. But are you the same on the inside as on the outside?

The Bible says, It's been said that apparently a high view of scripture does not automatically result in the right use of scripture. I was interested to read the reflections of former President Barack Obama as he remembered his time teaching constitutional law at the University of Chicago. Sometimes I imagine my work to be not so different from the work of theology professors who taught across campus. For as I suspect it's true for those teaching scripture, I found that my students often felt that they knew the Constitution without having really read it.

They are accustomed to plucking out phrases they had heard and using them to bolster their immediate arguments or ignoring passages that seem to contradict their views.

[31 : 10] The Bible may be in the pulpit and may still be absent. James Smart writing in his 1970 book, *The Strange Silence of the Bible and the Church*, explores the puzzling phenomenon of a country where Bible related publications and activity was on the increase, but actual knowledge of the contents of scripture seemed to be on the decrease.

Smart writes that the voice of scripture is fallen silent in the preaching and teaching of the church and in the consciousness of Christian people. A silence that is perceptible even among those who are most insistent upon their devotion to the scriptures.

We are the people of the book. We preach biblical sermons.

We are committed to hearing and living scriptures. We are evangelical. We are committed to the pure gospel.

We are committed to believing the truth and nothing but the truth. Are you the same on the outside as you are on the inside?

[32 : 41] What will taking God and his words seriously produce in us? I suggest six commitments. The first commitment.

A commitment to speaking and doing God's word. We must never be satisfied with words alone.

The words must spring us into action. They must be lived in order to show that they are authentic.

Secondly, a commitment to be the same on the inside as we are on the outside. Not big on claims and promises, but poor on performance and delivery.

Thirdly, a commitment to resist the desire for status and control over others and to seek to humbly serve them instead.

[33 : 53] There is a lot of control freakery around in the 21st century in and outside the church. Jesus has no room for that.

He looks for those who delight to serve. Fourth, a commitment to resist the temptation to erect barriers to life and truth.

And a growing willingness to open doors to truth and life. Let it never be said that we are closing the door to truth.

Let it be said that we are opening the door. Fifth, a commitment to shaping a zeal for God in our lives that sets us and other people free.

Yes, it's important to have zeal. Jesus said, the zeal of the Lord of hosts consumes me. That's really important. It's important to be zeal.

[34 : 54] But our zeal needs to be shaped by knowledge and wisdom and love that helps us to serve the best interests of people.

Thirdly, or sixthly rather, a commitment to valuing what is valuable to the living God. Especially speaking truth faithfully.

It's not the strength of our words. It's not the boldness of our claims. It is the faithfulness of our claims that are really important.

Be authentic. Be the person that God wants you to be.

Perhaps the heart of this particular passage are in those words in verses 11 to 12 about the fact that the one who is great amongst us is the one who will serve.

[36 : 01] The truly great one within the Christian church is Jesus himself, who loved us and gave himself for us.

The son of man who did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. Who wouldn't want to give their life, their trust and their love to someone who has poured out his whole life for them.

Who has poured out his life in obedience, obedience to death, death on a cross.

That's where we see authenticity. And by God's grace, we seek to mirror it in the way we speak and live.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Take my life and let it be.

[37 : 24] All you purpose, Lord, for me. Consecrate my fleeting days.

Let them flow in ceaseless place. Take my hands and let them move.

At the impulse of your love. Take my feet and let them run.

With the news of everyone. With the news of everyone. Take my voice and let me sing.

Always, only for my King. Take my lips and let them proclaim. Take my lips and let them proclaim.

[38 : 39] All the beauty of your name. Take my silver and my gold. Take my silver and my gold.
Not a might could I withhold. Hold it. Take my light. Take my light. Hold it. Take my light. That I may
use.
Every power that you shall choose. shall choose. Take my notice and my will all your purpose to
fulfill.
Take my heart, it is your own. It shall be your royal throne.
Take my love, my Lord, my Lord, at your fetish treasure store.
[40 : 04] Take myself and I will be God's for eternity.
eternity. For eternity. For Thank you.