

# The Greatest is Your Servant

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[ 0 : 00 ] In verses 1 through 12, Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.

In Titus 1, verses 7 through 11, the Apostle Paul lays down the criteria for elders. He says, In other words, the leadership of the church must hold it to be a primary responsibility, not just to hold to and teach the gospel, but to point out the dangers of false doctrine.

We live in a permissive age characterized by the intolerance of tolerance, the anything goes mentality, where the anything genuinely means anything.

No one likes to be challenged as to their belief systems or their lifestyle. This is no world for the innocence of the fat controller or fireman Sam.

As Christians, we have to tread a very fine line between not being viewed as intolerant, whilst refusing to fall into the anything goes trap. We must not sacrifice the trustworthy message of the gospel on the altar of contemporary relevance or societal acceptance.

[ 1 : 54 ] But then Jesus will say to us, sorry, the society will say to us rather, Jesus was all about love and acceptance and tolerance. Why can't you, his followers, be all about love and acceptance and tolerance?

We respond by answering that not only has the society around us misunderstood who Jesus really is, but has mistaken what love really is.

Every parent here knows that loving your child sometimes means saying no to them. The Jesus of love and tolerance and acceptance, which society presents us with, is a Jesus we don't care to know.

The love of God, the character of Jesus, and the cross on which he died has no meaning or relevance to this kind of society. Nevertheless, we must as Christians tread that line between not being viewed as intolerant while modeling the love of Jesus Christ to the world around us.

That love which at times says no, and refuted those who opposed it. We discovered such love in Matthew 23, where Jesus takes the crowds and the disciples aside and warns them about the religious authorities.

[ 3 : 16 ] In this chapter, Jesus is going to do what our society most hates. He's going to condemn the teaching, lifestyle, and worldview of the Pharisees. He's going to model what it means to refute those who oppose the trustworthy message.

But you say, what relevance is this passage to us in 21st century Glasgow? Well, there's many applications, but what I want you to take away from these three weeks where we're going to be digging into Jesus' loving refutation of the Pharisees here in Matthew 23 is at least this.

Anything, anything which threatens the supremacy of grace in the Christian life must be opposed.

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Any doctrine, worldview, or lifestyle which robs the Christian of the freedom of salvation by grace alone, in Christ alone, through faith alone, is to be utterly refuted.

The greatest threat to our faith as Christians may not come from outside the church, but from within the church. We must fight to maintain the trustworthy message of the gospel which justifies sinners and transforms them in holiness and purity.

[ 4 : 44 ] Well, these verses, verses 1 through 12, are an introduction to this chapter. A chapter which is going to go on to detail the seven woes Jesus issues against the Pharisees and concludes then with Jesus' tears over an unrepentant Jerusalem.

Bearing in mind our theme, the supremacy of grace in the Christian life, there are three stages to Jesus' argument in these verses. First, the tyranny of sayings, verses 1 through 4. Second, the tragedy of status, verses 5 through 10.

And third, the triumph of service, verses 11 through 12. If there is one area in which, as Christians, we must be intolerant of tolerance, it is in the supremacy of grace.

Salvation by grace alone. In Christ alone. Through faith alone. We must guard ourselves and our Christian friends against the legalism of false doctrine in the church.

And also the anything goes mentality of the society in which we live. First of all then, from verse 1 through 4, we have the tyranny of sayings.

[ 5 : 53 ] The tyranny of sayings. Jesus begins his final sermon by drawing the attention of the crowds and his disciples to the clear, unpleasant danger of the Pharisees, their lifestyle, their teaching, their worldview.

I want to know, why is this such a big deal to Jesus? Why can't he live and let live? Well, the first century Christian church, those Christians to whom Matthew was writing this gospel, were deeply troubled by false teachers coming in among them.

Mainly from the party of the Pharisees. Proposing a blended system of salvation to them. Including faith and grace, but also law and obedience.

A system of grace plus. Of faith and. You want to know more about this? Read the book of Galatians. Such teaching divided the early church and caused untold harm to many Christians, especially those who were ethnically Jewish.

And Jesus knew this would happen. Because the truth is, this happens in every age and generation. Human beings are default legalists.

[ 7 : 04 ] Our nature is always to believe that our works contribute to our salvation. This was true for Matthew's generation. It's true for us. Legalism presents a clear and present danger to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the supremacy of grace in the Christian life.

That grace which both justifies and sanctifies. That's why Jesus makes such a big deal about it here in Matthew 23. Because he knows just how big an issue this is going to be in the church.

And he points to the Pharisees as those who sit on the seat of Moses. Now the seat of Moses was a particular stone chair in the synagogue on which sat the teacher of the law, the scribe.

God's message to his people was proclaimed from this stone chair, the so-called seat of Moses.

The Pharisees and the scribes are claiming to be the legitimate successors of Moses, God's spokesman to the Israel of their day, even as Moses was God's spokesman to the Israel of his day.

And from this chair, the Pharisees issued their lists of do's and don'ts, the foundations of a works-based religion. Their list was made up of thousands of rabbinic applications of the Mosaic law, governing issues as to what one could do or could not do on a Jewish Sabbath, how one was to dress, or what precise form of words were acceptable to use as a vow.

[ 8 : 41 ] Take your notebook and your pen to a sermon from the Pharisees, because you're going to have a lot of writing to do. After all, the only way to keep God happy is to obey all these rules.

And you're going to find that these notebooks, which contain all the lists the Pharisees have proclaimed to you, are beginning to wear down your backpack. You can't carry them all, and certainly you can't keep them all.

Life is so empty when it's filled with false teaching from the stone chair of Moses. Commentators disagree on Jesus' tone in verses 1 through 4, but I rather think we detect a note of sarcasm in his comments.

Do everything they tell you, but do not do what they do, because they don't practice what they preach. Likewise, the sense of verse 2 is not that these Pharisees are the legitimate successors of Moses, but that they have unlawfully claimed that position for themselves.

Jesus is not pulling his punches here. The Pharisees are false teachers. They are deceiving people into thinking that obedience to their code of ethics and their laws will save them.

[ 9 : 58 ] Just do what we tell you, they seem to be saying, and God will be pleased with you. They had misread Moses, and now they are teaching a twisted works religion which placed burdens on people's shoulders they couldn't hope to carry.

Because all they preached about was what you could or could not do. That's what they're arguing with Jesus about in the previous chapter, Matthew 22, in their questions about taxation and the commandments.

We used to have a hamster called George. Maybe some of you remember him. And George had a wheel on which he used to run. And the hamster cage was upstairs in Jonathan's bedroom.

And when Catherine and I were sitting downstairs late at night, we'd hear George running in his wheel. He'd tire himself out, getting nowhere. And I'd turn to Catherine and I'd say, oh well, sweetheart, that's George in his wheel again.

And that's what the law-filled preaching of the Pharisees produced. Exhausted hamsters running in their law-shaped wheels, running hard to get close to God, but making no progress at all.

[11:08] Beware of preachers who fill you with a list of do's and don'ts, whose sermons are filled with imperatives, not indicatives. Beware of graceless preachers who entangle you with laws you cannot hope to keep.

They pretend to an authority they do not have, for the only authority any preacher has is the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ, which sets people free from their sins to serve God and the beauty of holiness and empowers them to deny themselves and carry Jesus' cross.

You don't come to church to climb into a law-shaped hamster wheel. You come to be liberated from works-based religion by being reminded that Jesus is your savior and that his grace alone is sufficient both for your justification and your sanctification.

Jesus never once said, come to me and I will exhaust the marrow from your bones with my list of do's and don'ts. He said, come to me and I will give you rest.

Beware of the tyranny of sayings of what you can and you can't do. Not only will you find great hypocrisy in the preacher's life, but you'll end up exhausted trying to please a God dreamt up in the mind of a legalistic Pharisee.

[12:30] I wonder if you have ever had the experience of watching a Christian being taken in by the graceless legalism of modern-day Pharisees.

Whatever form that legalism takes, listen carefully to what I'm going to say, whatever form that legalism takes, whether the harshness of the Christian right or the hip and trendy Christian left, whether it's the, it's sinful to be seen to drink alcohol because you're not being holy brigade, or it's sinful not to be seen to drink alcohol because you're not being missional brigade.

Whatever form that legalism takes, wherever I see it, I say to myself, ah well, sweetheart, there's George on his wheel again.

Give us a break. Only the grace of Christ, which both justifies and sanctifies, breaks the hamster's wheel and frees us from our heavy burdens.

The tyranny of sayings. Second, the tragedy of status, verses 5 through 10. The tragedy of status. Everything is done for men to see.

[13:50] They love the place of honor. One of the greatest tragedies in the history of the Christian church is that of gifted people who use the faith as a means for self-promotion and self-seeking status. They love nothing more than to be made much of.

To be called rabbi, father, teacher. They want to be a big fish in a small pool rather than a small fish in a big pool. They want to draw attention not to the glory of God but to their own.

They've got big personalities and they want to leave you with an impression of them. And so they dress different. And they act different. They speak different. They want to be considered different. They're a cut above the rest of us. They are the super privileged, the super holy, the super saintly. God really loves them. They wear religious costumes with long tassels and strange boxes on their foreheads and wrists.

Don't you dare disrespect them. They're holy men. They are leaders of the people. They love nothing more than for people to talk about them.

[14:56] Their desire for power and control and status is matched only by the oddness of their appearance, shall we say. Phylacteries were little boxes which righteous Pharisees wore on their foreheads and on their wrists containing tiny scrolls on which were written the central laws of the Torah.

When one of my children was a baby, we bought him a cloth bracelet to wear on his wrist on which had been sewn a colourful snail with a bell in it.

And every time he would shake his wrist, the bell would sound and he'd laugh. He would spend many happy hours shaking his wrist, watching the colours moving and listening to his bell.

I have his caterpillar bracelet now and use it sometimes on my day off. And these phylacteries were the Pharisees' snail bracelets, keeping them happy.

Inscribed on the roof above the Presbytery Hall in the Free Church of Scotland offices in Edinburgh are the words of Matthew 23, verse 8. You have only one master. You all are brothers.

[ 16 : 15 ] It is inscribed there to remind the ministers and elders of the Edinburgh Presbytery that their calling is not to status. There is no one of them above any other.

Rather, we serve one master, Jesus Christ, and our role and responsibility is to make much of him, to draw attention to him, to glorify him. You know, all I ever hear about in today's evangelical circles is church leadership.

Hey, we've got thousands of books about church leadership. We've got conferences about church leadership. We listen to podcasts about church leadership. Enough already. There is a form of church leadership which is Christ-exalting, but much of what passes for church leadership today strikes me as being a quest in how to manipulate people into doing what you want them to do rather than empowering people to live in the freedom of the grace of Christ that they may do what God wants them to do.

And that is no less dangerous than the road the Pharisees wanted the people of their day to go down. You can see a pattern here, can you not? You've got people who presume to sit on the seat of Moses laying down a set of rules about how you must or must not live.

They love nothing more than for other people to make a lot about them. They want to be thought of as great for their word to be treated as gospel. The, if he says it, then it must be true syndrome.

[ 17 : 39 ] And for people to think that God looks and sounds just like them. And let me tell you, legalism comes from all directions, from the hard Christian right and from the hip and trendy Christian left.

And you mustn't be surprised if you hear from this pulpit teaching which refutes it. After all, what's at stake here is the supremacy of grace. That a person is saved by grace alone, through Christ alone, in faith alone, and that grace both justifies and sanctifies.

I wanted to reflect this afternoon on what I consider to be the greatest compliment a minister has ever been paid. Ever. It was said of the late Reverend Ronald Mackay, former minister of this congregation at his funeral service.

It was said, Ronnie never stood in front of the Bible. He always stood behind it. I want you to think about that statement very carefully this afternoon.

And then ask yourself, am I standing in front of the Bible or behind it? Do I delight to be called Rabbi, teacher, father? Or whether we'd rather attention be drawn away from ourselves and toward the only true Rabbi, father, and teacher, Jesus Christ.

[ 19 : 07 ] And toward the only true God who was enthroned in the heavens and whose reign is one of grace. It is grace which saves, not status.

It's Christ who saves, not great men. It's through faith we are saved, not titles. And then lastly, in verses 11 through 12, the triumph of service, the triumph of service, the greatest among you will be your servant.

Well, if the role of an elder is to refute those who oppose sound doctrine and the trustworthy message of the gospel and Jesus models this role in his refutation of the Pharisees, then we must also ask the question, what is this sound doctrine and trustworthy message we are called to believe and to cherish and to protect?

And Jesus provides us with the answer in these verses. The greatest among you will be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled.

Whoever humbles himself will be exalted. There are few more direct definitions of the gospel than this, but only if you apply it not to an abstract individual called whoever, but to Jesus himself.

[ 20 : 27 ] Because the truth is that the greatest among all those present that day, in fact, the greatest man to have ever lived is standing before them refuting the status seeking speech sayings of the Pharisees.

Jesus is the greatest of them all, but he wore no phylactery. He did not wear the tassels of his robe long. He refused to take his place as the king of Israel and the majority, the vast, vast majority of his piety was done in secret.

He came not for status but for service. He came not to be exalted before men but to be humbled before men. He came not to sit on a golden throne but to hang on a wooden cross. The supremacy of grace, that grace which we defend with our lives rests in this.

Jesus Christ whose glory and dignity is David's son and Lord as we saw last week, though he was greater than David, though he was God himself, he humbled himself and he became our servant and he became subject to the mockery and hatred of his own people.

He became flesh and experienced all the mental and spiritual and emotional challenges of life as a human being. He gave himself as the sacrifice for our sin on the cross. In just over 48 hours from when these words were spoken, Jesus is going to be convicted by a sham trial.

[ 21 : 54 ] He's going to be tortured. He's going to be crucified. He's going to be humiliated before a world over which he reigns as Lord and King. You see, these are words both of what we might call expiation and example of Jesus as the one who bore in his body our sin on the cross and as Jesus the one who models what it means to be great in the kingdom of God.

One might imagine the aged Apostle Paul sitting in a small room meditating on what Jesus says here and going on to write his magnificent hymn in Philippians 2 about the humility of Jesus who being in very nature of God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing.

taking the very nature of a servant and being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself and became obedient to death even the death of a cross.

The greatest of all who was in very nature God Jesus who did not consider equality something to be grasped because he already had it.

He humbled himself and he took the form of a servant. How different these Pharisees who exalt themselves and play the religious card. They love to speak, they love to be heard, they love the best places at banquets and at synagogues, they love to stand in front of the Bible so you see them and not Christ.

[ 23 : 24 ] Their actions show them not to be the greatest but the least because the greatest among them willingly became the least of all. He willingly gave himself to the cruel humiliating death of the cross as the bearer of his people's sins.

These Pharisees want to be exalted here and now. They want the praise and applause of the people ringing in their ears. Don't they know that those who exalt themselves now will be humbled in the kingdom of God?

And those who humble themselves now will be exalted in the kingdom of God? That's the gospel. That's the gospel where grace reigns supreme.

That it's not by our obedience to a set of rules we are justified and made right with God. It is by Christ's self-giving humiliation ours through faith we are saved.

What we're fighting for when we're refuting those who oppose the trustworthy message of the gospel is nothing less than the glory of our Lord who having humbled himself is now seated at the right hand of God the Father in heaven and has been given a name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus every tongue should bow.

[ 24 : 36 ] Every knee should bow and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Legalists from whatever stable they emerge, the conservative right or the hip and trendy left need to return and catch up with this gospel grace.

They need to put Jesus and his grace first for it's by grace we are both justified and sanctified. It is through the grace of Christ we begin to obey the law not just on the outside like the Pharisees did but on the inside like Jesus.

But what comes before obedience and Christ likeness is his self-humbling death on the cross for us. No one in our society likes to be challenged about the way they believe or how they live.

You stood outside in St Vincent Street today and you did what a prophet from the Old Testament would do and call out Sabbath breakers you can imagine what would happen.

Let's face it we don't like being challenged and confronted about what we do either. If we're going to challenge ourselves about anything let it first and foremost be our attitude to Jesus Christ that he's the Lord who made himself nothing humbled himself on the cross to save us from our sins.

[ 25 : 58 ] And then following in the footsteps of our great servant king let's all make it our business this week. Not to aspire to status but to service.

Not to be great in the eyes of men but to be humbled before one another. Not to stand in front of the Bible but to stand behind it.

Let us pray. Lord God drive these truths home to our hearts. Drive them home. Drive them home. Drive them home. That it is not by works we are saved but entirely by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray oh Lord that you would help us to be grace driven and to be grace exhibitors, demonstrators, to be missionaries of grace because we know it's by grace we are both justified and sanctified.

[ 27 : 10 ] Lord we pray that Jesus' words would drive into our hearts and challenge us as to the supremacy of grace in our lives. Fill us oh Lord with that sense of adoration for Jesus in whose name we pray.

Amen.