

Religious Hypocrites

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on February the 8th 1998.

The preacher is Dr. Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Religious Hypocrites and is from Matthew chapter 23 verses 1 to 39.

Almighty God, we pray that your word will be written in our heart and bear much fruit to your glory. Amen. It is not often that Jesus speaks as scathingly as he does in the reading that we've heard today from Matthew 23.

It shatters the popular caricature of him as somebody meek and mild and gentle who would never say a harsh word against anyone, anywhere, anytime.

These are words that are full of castigation and indeed condemnation to the Pharisees and scribes of Jesus' day. And yet, as we'll see at the end, words that are completed by compassion and moving love.

[1 : 27] These are Jesus' final words spoken in public. His final recorded words, at least, in public. The remaining words of the Gospels are words to his disciples.

Words in private. Words at his trial. And though this chapter is mainly addressed, it seems, to the Pharisees and the scribes, the leaders of Jesus' day, the religious people, nonetheless the chapter is a warning to all followers of Jesus Christ, to the crowds in general.

They are the ones who heard these words and they are a warning to the crowds at large. The Pharisees were the religiously dominant people of Jesus' day.

Influential, powerful. The ones who set many of the rules and regulations for how people were to behave in Judaism. They were very devout, very religious people.

And it is those people whom Jesus castigates here. He begins his words, it seems, almost by giving them a ringing endorsement. Very different from what we find in the later part of the chapter.

[2 : 39] So verse 2, and you may like to follow the passages we go through on page 804. Verse 2 says, The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, therefore do whatever they teach you and follow it.

And that looks to be a ringing endorsement of them, of their function and of how they executed that function. They sat on Moses' seat, possibly a literal seat in the synagogue that, like a pulpit, was reserved for the teacher in the synagogue.

It may just mean, metaphorically, those who continue the teaching of Moses' law from the Old Testament. But Jesus' words are not a ringing endorsement.

They're actually full of biting irony and sarcasm. He goes on to complete verse 3 by saying, But do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

They teach one thing, but they do another. But Jesus is not also saying here that their teaching is right, but their actions are wrong. Because he makes it very clear throughout this chapter that not only are their actions wrong, but so too is their teaching as well.

[3 : 55] It seems Jesus is mocking them for not fulfilling their task to be teachers of the scriptures to the Jewish people. So he goes on to say in verse 4 that they tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others.

But they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. This is a reference to the nature of their teaching. They were supposed to be leading people in the ways of God.

But rather what they were doing was imposing heavy burdens on the Jews of their day. It's a far cry from Jesus' words about the gospel.

Jesus says, The gospel you see is liberating. What Jesus Christ is on about is about freedom to follow God.

The ability to follow him through what Jesus himself accomplishes for us. But the Pharisees, the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day were the opposite. Imposing heavy burdens of regulations and rules that were unable to be kept.

[5 : 12] For that, Jesus chastises them in his strongest words in the gospels. But more than that, the Pharisees were full of self-importance.

So Jesus says from verse 5, They do all their deeds to be seen by others. Theirs is not a heartfelt or private faith. It's a public parade of piety.

They make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. It's not talking about haircuts.

Phylacteries were little boxes in which were inscribed words from the book of Exodus and two passages from the book of Deuteronomy.

And Jews in Jesus' day, as indeed some in our own day, had little boxes strapped to their foreheads or around their arms with those verses in them. The idea came from Deuteronomy 6 which said, Bind these words on your forehead, on your arms and on your house doors and so on. Jews, some Jews took them literally. I don't think originally they were intended to be taken literally. But it was alright to wear phylacteries. The point of Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees is that by making their phylacteries broad, that is big and wide straps, they were showing off their religiosity.

[6 : 36] It's like somebody carrying an enormous Bible under their arm. Not just a normal Bible but a big one to show off. I've got a big Bible sort of thing. Parading their piety before others.

Boasting about how religious they were. Their fringes being long refers to the prayer shawls that Jews would wear. Originally a cloak but then it became a shawl that they put around their shoulders, as indeed some Jews still have today.

They would have fringes or tassels on the end. They functioned a bit like rosary beads. People would finger them to remember different prayers and so on. Now Jesus is not telling them off for wearing the fringes or the shawls.

But rather he's telling them off for having their fringes long. That is showing off about their public religion. What else do they do?

They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogue. Probably the best seats were reserved for the Pharisees, the leaders, the scribes and so on.

[7 : 35] They love to be seen by people in the right places and so on. They love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them rabbi.

A title that was perhaps unfairly applied to them. They weren't rabbis, they were scribes and Pharisees. Trying to claim a title above their office or station. They love people to greet them, maybe bow down to them and so on in the marketplaces and in the streets.

These are people who loved honorary titles and so on. They love the prestige and the adulation of the Jews at large. It's surprising how modern Jesus' words are, aren't they?

When you think of much of modern church life within the Anglican church but probably other denominations as well, one wonders whether Jesus would really have said exactly the same thing today.

Anglicans and others who walk around in ostentatious robes and vestments. Those who have bishops' thrones set up in the most important places or whatever.

[8 : 43] Those who love titles. I remember once when the former bishop of Ballarat came to Ridley Chapel when I was a student there. He loved to be called my lord bishop.

He should have lived in the medieval times it seemed to me. And he liked his clergy to kiss his ring. Can you believe it? And that was only ten years ago. But in our own church and denomination we have most reverend, very reverend, highly reverend, a bit reverend, not all that reverend.

And there are those who insist on being called father and so on. All these titles of honour and sometimes it seems to me that people love to receive them and be called in such ways.

Jesus has no time for such pomp and show. No time for such status seeking or self-importance. He goes on to say in verses 8 to 10, But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher. Referring to himself. Claiming authority over and against the Pharisees. Jesus' authority has been questioned in the previous chapter by the Pharisees and other religious leaders.

[9 : 57] And now he's staking the claim for being the one teacher. And indeed the Messiah. I wonder whether that verse has been cut out of many high church Bibles.

It seems to me that Jesus is saying very explicitly that we ought not to have those sorts of honorary titles in our church. Paul called himself the father of the Corinthians.

But not so much as an honorary title, But referring to his function as being the one who preached the gospel to them and they responded for the first time with faith. Jesus is prohibiting those who call themselves father and other honorary titles for their own self-respect and self-importance. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah, alluding to himself. This is not to say that spiritual leadership does not deserve respect. It does. But real spiritual leadership, Jesus goes on to tell us, is not marked by self-importance and status-seeking. It's marked rather by humble service.

[11 : 15] The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves, that is the Pharisees and those like them, will be humbled. And all who humble themselves will be exalted.

And he means by that on the final day of judgment. Humble servants is what Christian leadership and spiritual leadership is to be like. Jesus, of course, was the example par excellence of that. The one who, though he had all glory, humbled himself even to death on the cross. And we are to be like that. There is always for all of us, and not least leaders, the temptation to self-importance. To think oneself more significant than one really is. To claim a status that is not ours. And all those temptations must be resisted.

And in thinking through this sermon, it's made me think again of how important it is to avoid falling into those temptations as a Christian leader. Jesus continues with seven woes against these Pharisees.

[12 : 29] You may think he's already said some harsh words. It gets harsher. And in these seven woes, there are three pairs and a final one. Three pairs of things that go together, illustrating the same point.

Jesus began his public teaching by issuing forth blessings. What are called the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. Blessed is he, blessed is that person, and so on. But now he finishes his public teaching by giving woes or curses on the Jewish leadership of his day.

The first two come in verses 13 and 15. But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven.

For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

The legalism of the Pharisees was notorious. And it's well known even today. To call somebody a Pharisee is to say that they're being legalistic. These were people who heaped up rules and regulations, far beyond the Old Testament, for Jews to follow.

[13 : 42] They were meant to be those who taught people the way to heaven. But by giving things that were outside their own scriptures and distorting what was within, they were not leading people to heaven, they were keeping people out.

And Jesus condemns them for that. He says not only they are barring people from heaven, but they are children of hell, and they are leading others into that same place. Their zeal for conversion may be commendable.

Jesus is not telling them off for being zealous and earnest, for crossing over the seas and land to find and make one convert. He's not telling them off for doing that. He's telling them off for what they're converting them to.

For zeal without the gospel is deadly. It's not harmless. It is lethal. It is leading people to hell, not heaven. And yet again, Jesus' words seem so contemporary when we think of the leadership of God's people in our world today.

False teaching abounds, even in Christian guises. There are plenty of preachers who preach of Jesus other than the Jesus who's in the Bible, the Jesus who really lived and died and rose again.

[14 : 48] And there are plenty who preach salvation other than the salvation that the Bible reveals, the salvation which comes through Jesus' death on the cross alone. Jesus does not mince his words here.

Those who preach such other than the Bible says are children of hell and leading others thereto. Let us be very careful.

The next two woes deal with the issue about distorting values.

The first one's a bit of a puzzle for us at first. It deals with oath-taking. Jesus says in verse 16, Woe to you who say, Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.

What's this about? In Jesus' day, many Jews would refrain from using the name of God for fear of taking the Lord's name in vain. So when they took an oath to underline the significance of what they're saying or make it a pledge or promise, they would often use things like heaven or the temple or the altar in the temple or the gold on the altar in the temple and so on.

[16:43] Now what Jesus is going against here is not so much oath-taking in general, though he has very cautious words about that in other places. Rather, it seems the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day would make oaths by different bits and paraphernalia in the temple, but then try and find their oaths as being not binding because they only made an oath by the altar or the gold or something else.

They were sort of playing off bits of the temple and so on against each other so that they could make a promise but then break it and get away with breaking it. That is, they were confusing values of honesty and falsehood or deceit.

And they were doing that by confusing and failing to see that the paraphernalia within the temple was significant because it was belonging to God. So Jesus goes on to say in verse 19, For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?

Whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the sanctuary swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.

You see, he's saying that all oaths in the end derive back to God. So they're binding. So he's telling off the Pharisees and Jewish leaders for taking oaths but breaking them or trying to pretend that their oath was not as important as some other oath or that their oath was more important than some other oath.

[18:08] Jesus is saying in effect here, if you make an oath, keep it. Keep your word. These Pharisees were unreliable and not to be believed.

And the distorted values is even clearer in the next woe, verses 23 and 24. You tithe mint, dill and cumin, common and garden herbs in effect, but have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and faith.

It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. Jesus is not condemning meticulous tithing here. That is a tenth of everything given to God's service each year.

And yes, the Old Testament prescribes tithes for all of God's people to give a tenth of their harvest of animals and crops, etc, etc. And these Pharisees are obviously being very meticulous, making sure they gave exactly a tenth of every little bit that they had, even the herbs of the garden.

Jesus is not telling them off for that. But they are so meticulous and so caught up and preoccupied with the petty detail and trivia that they've failed to see the most significant things, justice, mercy and faith.

[19:22] Their values are distorted. The peripheral have become central in their thinking. The petty have become essential for them. And Jesus is directing them to where the heart of their religion must be.

Justice, mercy and faith. The issues of the gospel in effect. He goes on to show the ludicrous nature of the Pharisees' position by giving a little joke or wordplay in verse 24.

Therefore, you blind guides, you strain out a gnat, that is a tiny mosquito or something like that, but swallow a camel. Well, you can't swallow a camel.

Try and picture it. It's a ludicrous position, isn't it? But that's what he's saying the Pharisees are like. They're so caught up with the fine detail of something like a gnat in their religious rules that they fail to see what's staring them in their face, the most important things.

It's actually a wordplay because the words gnat and camel. Similar sounding words. Well, again, this preoccupation with the petty rather than the central is just as contemporary today, surely.

[20:34] So often the modern church is preoccupied with ecclesiastical bureaucracy rather than with the gospel. The petty things rather than the central things. In some churches there is more debate and argument over the colour of the choir robes than whether there's a concern about whether the choir members are Christians or not.

For some there's a great concern about the pageantry of Easter services, but who gives a hoot whether anyone believes the resurrection or not? In some churches the debates are over the length of sermons, but not whether the sermons are full of truth or not.

In some churches there's a great fuss made about bowing to the altar, but nobody cares whether anyone believes in the deity of Christ or not. In some churches there are processions of Bibles, but nobody cares whether anyone believes it or disobeys it.

In some churches people are more fussed about cleaning the carpet and brass than cleaning their lives before God. Sometimes I wonder whether the diocese is more concerned about us as a parish paying our assessment and taxes each year and filling in the right forms in triplicate and duplicate with all the church warden signatures, etc., than whether we actually preach the gospel or not. I fear Jesus would say harsh words about the modern church. He says here, and his words are timeless, keep the gospel things central.

[22 : 00] The other things, yes, do them. He's not saying dismiss them, but keep your sense of priorities. What the church and God's people are on about is the proclamation and living of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That is our foremost concern. And if we move that to the centre and put other things in the centre, we, like the Pharisees, would have lost the plot. The third pair of woes from verse 25 onwards deals with insides and outsides.

Jesus says you are hypocrites, for you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they're full of greed and self-indulgence. He's not talking about doing the dishes after the evening meal.

He's talking about their lives. The Pharisees were people who put on a parade, a show of their religiosity. They were worried about cleaning up the outside, so that people thought that they were honourable and respectable and religious, people to be looked up to.

But Jesus says you're not worried about the insides. The insides of your life are full of immorality, self-indulgence and greed, he says here. Get your insides right, as Jesus says in other places in the Gospels, for it's what's in your heart that matters.

[23 : 16] Get your heart right, and it'll flow out to the outsides. But don't paper over or veneer a Christian respectability. Get your heart right.

That's what counts before God. The second woe on this theme, verse 27 and 28, says it in a different way. You are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.

So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you're full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Tombs in Jesus' day were often decorated, sometimes quite ornately, but unclean bodies, corpses were unclean for Jews to touch.

Jesus said on the outside the tombs look beautiful, but the corpses inside are unclean, according to Jewish law, and the Pharisees' lives were like that. They're hypocrites.

Their lives are a facade, a veneer of righteousness and respectability. It's easy, of course, to look respectable, isn't it?

[24 : 27] It's easy to look as though we're right, we do the right thing, we come to church, we sit in the right pew, we kneel at the right times, we sing lustily and so on, we say the nice sort of pleasantries and so on. But what about in secret?

What are the thoughts of our hearts, the desires of our hearts during the week? What are the things that motivate us, urge us during the week? Sadly, we often hear of stories of somebody who, to all intents and purposes, looks and sounds and acts, at least in public, very Christian.

And then you find behind the veneer adultery, immorality, gambling, lust, deceit, dishonesty, violence, abuse, whatever.

We may fool others, but we cannot fool God. For God knows our thoughts and sees our hearts.

And though we do not know the hearts of those around us, and though we can hide them from each other, we cannot from God. Jesus says the internal clean-up job is far more important than external respectability.

[25 : 41] The final woe is from verse 29. In Jesus' day, great efforts were made to commemorate the tombs of the ancient prophets, wise men, and great leaders of God's people.

Ornate tombs were built by people like Herod the Great and the Pharisees and religious leaders went along with that. And even though the bodies and bones of those great prophets and so on were probably not in those tombs, they became monuments of the great prophets and wise people of the past.

Jesus says to the Pharisees who've been part of this building program, you are fools because you kid yourself that you are the spiritual heirs of those prophets and wise people.

for that's how the Pharisees viewed themselves. They thought that if they'd lived in the prophets' day, they wouldn't have put the prophets to death, but they would have upheld the words of the prophets.

Jesus says, in effect, think again. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, and you say, if we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.

[27 : 01] But the reality is their spiritual heirs is not of the prophets, but of those who killed the prophets. And in a few days' time, they'll be part, they'll be instrumental in putting Jesus himself to death, thus demonstrating that they continue in the line not of the prophets, but of the killers of the prophets, and it's Jesus who continues in the line of the prophets and wise people of God.

The Pharisees are out to kill Jesus. Verse 31, Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. It goes on to talk, then, about the blood of the righteous prophets and wise men and sages and so on coming upon the Pharisees from Abel to Zechariah, conveniently in English from A to Z, but it, in effect, was the beginning and end of the Hebrew Bible.

In Genesis chapter 4, the first death, Abel killed innocently by his brother Cain. And Abel's blood for vengeance cried out. And then at the end of the Hebrew Bible, their last book was two chronicles. For us, our Old Testaments are in a different order. And there, the last one slain was a man called Zechariah. Again, his blood cried out for vengeance. And Jesus is saying from beginning to end of the Old Testaments, you've been against the people of God, and now the blood of all those righteous will be upon you.

[28 : 26] But in effect, Jesus is also predicting that they will put him to death and his followers after him as well. These woes expose the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

Just like in the Phantom of the Opera, when the mask is ripped off the phantom, so too Jesus rips off the mask of their veneer of respectability and religious piety. It's a religious sham, a facade, pretense.

It's an act. That's what the ancient Greek word hypocrisy meant, to act or pretend. They've burdened the gospel with legalism and with ritual. They've distorted their values, they've confused the trivial with the fundamental.

They've paraded their public piety and ignored internal immorality. They've sought status, not service. They've exalted self and not Jesus. And their true colours are revealed here at the end in their attitude to Jesus, whom they're about to send to his death.

And just like Satan, the deceptive serpent of the Garden of Eden at the beginning of the Bible, these too are like serpents. Jesus says to them in verse 33, you snakes, you brood of vipers, how can you escape being sentenced to hell?

[29 : 49] We may think Jesus' words ought to end there. But they end with three more verses which are a striking contrast. Words of warm passion, reminding us that any criticism we make of people ought to be accompanied by love.

Without love, criticism is ungodly. Jesus laments his people, his city with real grief and real sorrow. They've been unwilling to come to him and trust in him, led astray by these deceiving leaders. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, he says, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings? And you are not willing. See, your house, that is the temple, not God's house anymore, but yours.

God's disowned it. Jesus is about to leave it for the last time. Symbolic of God leaving his own temple, just like Ezekiel had had a vision in the Old Testament.

[31 : 03] See, your house is left to you desolate. Oh, it still stood grandly. It was another 40 years before it would be destroyed by the Romans. But that's not significant.

The significant thing is that God's left it as a mark of judgment against the Jewish leadership. for I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

And that's a reference to judgment day when Jesus returns to judge this world. This whole chapter is a warning to us, to those in Christian leadership of any sort, to beware falsehood, status seeking, self-glory, to be aware of hypocrisy for such a condemned to hell.

But to all of us, not just in Christian or spiritual leadership, to make sure our faith stems from our heart, to make sure that we're not playing religious games when we come to church and are part of church.

That what we do here reflects what goes on in our hearts Monday to Saturday as well. A warning to us to make sure that central in our church life, in our individual life, is the gospel and gospel concerns.

[32 : 25] Not to confuse the peripheral or petty with the things that are central and fundamental.

For Jesus, when he comes and the world acclaims him at last, will judge the thoughts of our hearts and expose them for what they are.

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