

# Matthew 23:1-15

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[0:00] Good morning. For those of you I've not met, my name is Dave, I'm one of Shoreline's pastors. And I invite you, as we continue our sermon series in the book of Matthew, to turn with me to Matthew chapter 23.

In high school, many of us read *The Catcher in the Rye*. And even more of you pretended to have read it.

Now, the hero, well, he's not really a hero, and he's not really an anti-hero, because heroes and anti-heroes, they do stuff. The point of view character in *The Catcher in the Rye* is Holden Caulfield. Now, Holden doesn't know a lot, certainly less than he thinks he knows, but he does know one thing. And even if you faked the book report on *Catcher in the Rye*, you probably know, Holden Caulfield hates phonies, right?

He hates them. And I think that Holden Caulfield is America's mascot. In more ways than one, actually, but for today's purposes, he is America's mascot in that we hate phonies.

[1:25] Now, we don't use that term much, but if you're looking for it, that ethos is everywhere, right? Buzzwords like transparency, right?

Flood everything from relationship advice to business journals, right? Authenticity is now a firmly entrenched marketing jargon, right?

We sniff out everything that is fake and that is phony. And these days, we have unprecedented access to politicians' lives. And so we know when they're tweeting about supporting the little guy from their Bel Air mansion, right?

And then we, that gives us pause to wonder. America hates phonies. We hold this instinctual disgust towards those who do not practice what they preach.

That is to say, we hate hypocrisy. And one of the great charges our culture aims at the church is what? That Christians are all hypocrites.

[2:30] And perhaps we are. Let's see. But if your friend or your family member or someone says something like that, well, what an opportunity it is.

Or if you today aren't a Christian and you're here and wondering if all these church people are just hypocrites. Well, let me tell you.

As much as America hates phonies, the Lord burns against hypocrisy even more. Much more.

We don't like it because it's, you know, slimy and off-putting and false. He hates hypocrisy for much deeper reasons.

Reasons he's going to show to us today in Matthew 23. So if someone tells you that they hate phonies, and that Christians are phonies, well, you can say, let me introduce you to someone.

[3:33] Someone who feels exactly the same way, just much more so.

Believes that much more fervently. And then open your Bible to Matthew 23 and introduce them to Jesus Christ, who says, Matthew 23, woe to you hypocrites, phonies.

And then invite them to follow him. We are not in the business of converting people to a denomination. Or to this congregation.

Or to a label like evangelical or something else like that. We aren't trying to get people to check a box or walk an aisle or pray a prayer. We haven't been entrusted. We've been entrusted with what the apostles called the ministry of reconciliation.

That is, our aim is to convert people to Christ himself. Don't follow me, follow him. Don't follow us, follow him.

We show Christ as worthy. Christ as wonderful. Christ as the pearl of great price. And as we're about to see, that's actually the problem with the hypocrites.

[4:43] They think religion is a means to some other end. God. They're in church looking for something other than God. Maybe you're here today for some other reason too.

Maybe you're here to make someone else happy. Or for your reputation or to make connections or something that's not Christ. Whatever brought you here today, I have something better to offer you. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of the living God. But that's not what the religious leaders in the first century confronting Jesus were after.

This week we'll see the first part of their hypocrisy. They think religion is their ticket to accolades, to an increased reputation.

That is, it feeds their pride. And Jesus is going to give the strongest warning possible against hypocrisy. Americans, we hate hypocrisy because it's disingenuous.

[5:50] It's sleazy. It rubs us the wrong way. But we're about to see that God hates hypocrisy much more than we do. And he has provided four hypocrites at the same time.

And it is beautiful. So let's pray to him and then let's look to his word to find out what he has to say. Oh Lord our God. Our Father in heaven.

Will you by your spirit and through your word show us your Son? And may he look to us more radiant and more brilliant and more worthy than our own pride.

We ask this in his name. Amen. We've come to Matthew chapter 23 and just a bit of context for that. Christ has come into Jerusalem for the last week of his earthly ministry. He arrived in Matthew chapter 21. We call it the triumphal entry. He rode into the city as a king and the crowds hailed him as one.

[7:05] And he rode into the temple courts as if he was the boss there. And the religious leaders did not want him there. They did not want this king threatening the stability of their organization.

And so there's a series in Matthew 22 of debates back and forth. And Jesus trances them. And Matthew 22 ends with, And no one was able to answer him a word.

Nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. And then Matthew 23 verse 1, Jesus turns away from the religious leaders, the hypocrites, And said to the crowds and to his disciples, The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat.

So do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but they do not practice. Now, he's going to go on, when we get there in verse 13, To say, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites.

And when we read verses like this, And verses like that, We, if we are not careful, We're going to think that this passage is for those people.

[8:27] The someone else people. The people out there. I'm not waving at this half of the room in particular. Sorry. We're going to think that this is for the Pharisees, The hypocrites, the phonies out there somewhere else.

But if we look at who he's addressing, verse 1, It's his own disciples. And the crowds that followed him.

Right? And what does he tell them? Verse 3, You should not follow their example. If we're reading this, As if it's something for other people, Not for ourselves, We are the Pharisees.

Right? Verse 3, They preach, but they don't practice. If it's for someone else, Then suddenly we are the Pharisees all at once. Right? That Pharisaic attitude is just that.

Thinking that submitting to the word of God is for other people. So when he gets to verse 13, And says, Woe to the scribes and the Pharisees. Yes, he's pronouncing a judgment on them.

[9:33] But he's also warning his own followers, You and me, That we will be tempted to walk in their ways.

Because Christ followers can swiftly be led astray by our remaining sin. Right? Into exactly the same errors. And Jesus is concerned that you and I are not hypocrites.

So what is the warning that he gives us? What we're looking at today is part of a larger whole. Today we're only looking at Matthew 23, 1-15. Chapter 23 contains the whole teaching.

We'll look at it, Lord willing, over three weeks, including today. Verses 1-12 is something of an introduction. And then the body of the discourse, verses 13-36, contains seven pronouncements of woe on the scribes and the Pharisees.

And then Jesus concludes, verses 37-39, with a lament. And that tells us something of the tone with which he gives the whole.

[10:42] All of chapter 23, we should read with this in the back of our minds. Verse 37, See, Christ does not gleefully judge his enemies.

Right? He laments it. He doesn't relish this opportunity. Our Lord is slow to anger and quick and steadfast love. But now is the time.

The time to pronounce the judgment, the warning. That judgment serves as a warning to all who would hear. So let us hear his words. Verse 2 says, The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat.

So do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. Now when he says they sit in Moses' seat, that is, the scribes, who were largely affiliated with the Pharisee party, held teaching positions in the religious life of Israel.

And when they taught what was with accord with the scriptures, with Moses, God's people ought to follow their teaching. Now we see that same principle at work in the New Testament, in the New Covenant community.

[12:06] See, in Philippians chapter 1, the apostle Paul is imprisoned. And some people, seeing that leadership vacuum, say, Hey, I'm going to step in there and be the big guy now.

And in his absence, they begin preaching. And even though they are selfish in their motives, Paul is still glad that the gospel is being preached. He says in Philippians 1, They proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

And then he says, What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed. And in that I rejoice. So false teachers can actually say true things.

And so in that same spirit, Christ commands his disciples and the crowds to follow teaching that accords with scripture. But at the end of verse 3, he says, Do not follow after their way of life.

Why? Verse 4, their hypocrisy. They follow a different law than they teach. He says, They tie heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with a finger.

[13:22] We have already, if you've been with us through this series in Matthew, we've already seen this in action. We've already seen this in action. So, for example, if you look back to Matthew chapter 12, the Lord has commanded Israel to observe the Sabbath.

That is, not work on the Sabbath day, Saturday. But because the Pharisees practice a lifeless religion, devoid of an inner renewal, lacking the Holy Spirit, they can't really actually follow that rule. So they create a whole catalog of rules and regulations around that simple command. Right? The Mishnah, that's what it's called, is a written catalog of all of their rules on top of the scriptures, and it's longer than the Old Testament.

And so their Sabbath regulations, God simply says, you will rest, do no work. They write a whole series of regulations about how far you can walk before it becomes work.

How large a load you can carry before it becomes work. Whether or not you can light a fire on the Sabbath, you can't. The list goes on and on and on.

[14:43] And in chapter 12, the Pharisees confront Jesus about one of their rules. as the disciples are picking and eating little heads of grain on the Sabbath as they walk along.

Now, the Lord commanded his people to rest on the Sabbath. Does an endless series of rules and regulations and additional commands sound like rest to you?

When all the cadets return from the MLK retreat, ask them if all the Chase Hall regulations, do you lejure in those? I suspect you will find that the answer is no.

Then why do all this? Well, one reason that we're going to come back to is that the religion is dead. Without an inward renewal, without the Holy Spirit, they don't follow God in spirit and in truth.

And so what they need to do is add a ton of other rules on top of it. But when you do that, you get to say about yourself, look, I'm following God's law and all these other laws.

[15:51] Look at me. And so it can feed right into your pride, right? You can say, I have over-fulfilled God's law. I'm holier than God requires.

You can make yourself stand out, right? Which is exactly what we see in verses 5 through 7. Jesus continues. He says, Before we look at some of the details there, in all of this, who is their audience in their worship?

Who is the audience that they're worshipping for? It's other people. Right? They do all their deeds to be seen by others. In true worship, who is the audience?

God alone. In all of their deeds here, who is honored? Right? It's to be seen by others to honor themselves.

The worshiper is honored in their hearts. In true worship, who is honored? God. And God alone. If I sing songs of praise, if I do good deeds, if I attend religious services, all for my reputation.

[17:41] Well, what are songs of praise for? They're not for me. This is hypocrisy, born of pride, and it is poison.

Now, you might not be familiar with phylacteries and tassels, so here's what's going on. The phylacteries come from Deuteronomy 6. After the Lord gives the great commandment, the Shema, hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might. He says that these are to be bound to us on our doorposts and on our foreheads.

And the Pharisees actually took that literally and put, they called them phylacteries, headbands with a little leather pouch that had this commandment literally on a tiny parchment in it.

We're not completely certain if that command in Deuteronomy 6 was meant to be taken that literally, but they did take it literally and what they were doing was making them not tiny parchments but big ones so they had like a box on the front of their head and it's this ostentatious sort of worship.

[18:51] Like, look at me with my scriptures bigger than yours. And the same thing with the fringes.

The fringes comes from Numbers chapter 15 where the Lord said to Moses that, tell them, the people of Israel to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner and here's the reason why.

It shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the Lord to do them. To do them.

Not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes which you are inclined to whore after. And so, the phylactery is there to remember the Shema to love the Lord your God but they're using it in service of loving themselves and their own reputations.

And the fringes are there to remind them of God's law to do it. And he says they're not. They're not obeying it. Don't follow after their works. And so, both the phylacteres and the fringes were symbols reminding the person wearing them about God.

[20:08] But the Pharisees had turned these and turned them around and used them to have other people remind about how pious I am.

their obedience was not towards God. Their obedience was in front of other people for themselves to make themselves look good for their own reputation.

And friends, as we said at the outset, this is the heart of hypocrisy doing lots of biblical things while ignoring the God whose Bible it is, doing biblical things to look good in front of church people. They're acting like holy men, not for God's sake, not for God and holiness, but for the sake of prestige and respect among them.

in verse 8, Jesus reminds us again that this is not for the people out there somewhere.

[21:15] He's talking to his own disciples and to the crowds who might choose to follow him. He's talking to people like the people in this room. He says, but you, right, you, not those people out there, you, are not to be called rabbi for you have one teacher.

He's thinking now especially about the greetings and the titles that he just talked about that the Pharisees sought after.

You are not to be called rabbi for you have one teacher and you are all brothers. And call no man on your father on earth for you have one father who is in heaven.

Neither be called instructors for you have one instructor, the Christ. And so friends, let this warning both confront you and comfort you.

Let it confront you first. Don't come to church or to community group or put on a show in front of your neighbors about your Christianity to make a show of your own holiness so that it confront you like that.

[22:37] But let it also comfort you because you do not feel like you have to come here and put on a show of your own holiness.

Right? Let this release you from a burden you may feel you have to carry. The Lord specifically here says don't do that.

Right? The holiest Christian isn't the one who can convince everyone else that they've got it all together. Right? The holiest Christian is perhaps the one who repents the most.

The one who is quickest to confession. Now Christ is our righteousness so that doesn't make us more holy. You get it. And so friends let's remember the gospel in this.

Right? I'm not a Christian because I've got it all together. We do not come to him with our sufficiency. I'm a Christian because I need rescue. Because I need a savior.

[23:40] And in Christ Jesus God has graciously given us the only savior there is. You can't enter the kingdom but by humility crying out for a savior.

The cross is the sure and certain testimony that we don't got it. That we can't save ourselves. That we need a savior. So leveraging my obedience for my own reputation stands against and opposes every line of the scriptures.

Now what of this business here of titles call no one rabbi or teacher. Are we not allowed to use position titles for the people who are in those positions?

I'm confused now. I don't think that's what Jesus is getting at here. I don't think that way because he doesn't eliminate the legitimate titles of the Mosaic covenant.

[24:47] The covenant that is in effect before he goes to the cross. He doesn't say call no one priest. He doesn't say call no one high priest. Those are legitimate offices in the Mosaic administration, the Mosaic covenant.

what he does exclude are the man-made honorific titles like rabbi. Rabbi was not an office prescribed in the Old Testament.

The title comes from the Hebrew root word rab, which means great. So what they're saying rabbi means great one. This is a tradition that started around the time of Christ we think.

That people began applying it to teachers of the Hebrew scriptures as an honorific title. So it amounted to walking in a church and be like, hey grandma, do your pastor. Compare that with the position titles that the Lord has ordained in the church.

Pastor means shepherd. Shepherds are not glamorous. They are peasants who live outside the city gates and stink like sheep.

[26:01] diakonos, from which we get the church office deacon is simply the Greek word servant. That's not glamorous. In fact, when Jesus says in verse 11, the greatest among you shall be your servant, the Greek reads the greatest among you should be your diakonos.

And so the offices of the church, pastor and deacon, are not glamorous positions for building a reputation. religion. Their roles of servants, not positions of power.

That's because, verse 8, they don't elevate anybody over being a brother and sister in Christ. Right at the foot of the cross, together.

So I think you may safely call someone a pastor or a deacon, pastors, pastors, and deacons, deacons. Though someone who demands the title, that's probably a red flag. But please don't call me the very reverend Dave Moser, something like that.

And I'm happy to report that I have not had to correct anybody here on that. Yet. Perhaps. The idea then, in verses 8 through 12, is this.

[27:21] Don't posture yourself to receive accolades. praise. Don't heap up praises to other people in flattery. Our praise ought to be directed at God.

The positions that people hold in the church don't negate the fact that we are simply brothers and sisters in Christ. Now Jesus shifts gears.

with this introduction complete, having distinguished between the heart of the Pharisee and the heart that the Holy Spirit develops in Christians, he pronounces seven woes on the Pharisees, seven judgments.

Today, we're going to look at the first two, which are tightly connected to the pride that we have just seen in verses 1 through 12. The first thing that we might observe is that Jesus has already told the Pharisees about this a long time ago, back in the Sermon on the Mount.

He said, when you do this, when you practice your religion for your own reputation, what you get is all you get.

[28:41] He says, Matthew 6, beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

If you and I, if we practice our religion for the applause of men, whatever recognition we get in that moment, that's all we get on the positive side.

But, if that is our heart, there's also a negative side, verse 13. But, woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces, for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in.

The person who practices Christianity for their own reputation, for their own pride, is not a true worshiper of God, and does not enter the kingdom of heaven.

[30:05] Holden Caulfield hates phonies. Americans hate phonies. But, how much do we actually hate them? Right, enough to complain about it, enough perhaps not to do business with them, unless it's a really cool gadget, and then we kind of overlook it, right?

But, how much does God hate hypocrisy? He bars the gates of heaven. The fires of his judgment in hell await hypocrisy.

Now, isn't that overkill? I mean, we're all hypocrites a little, right? remember what we saw in verses five through seven? Their obedience wasn't towards God, which is quite an insult, considering that they're doing it in God's temple.

It was a show towards other people, for themselves, for their own reputation. Now, not only is that stupid, when you think about it, but it also, it mocks God.

And this is why we've said from the beginning that God hates hypocrites more than we do. He hates hypocrisy much more than we do. To us, hypocrisy just smells phony.

[31:26] Doesn't do real damage. To God, however, it mocks him, uses him, demeans him. Think of it this way.

Imagine a young man asks a young lady out to dinner on a date. It goes well. They have more dates. Those go well. They introduce each other to each other's families.

And one night, at a fancy restaurant, he drops to one knee and asks for a hand in marriage. The whole restaurant breaks out into applause when she says yes.

But, the next day, he won't return her call. Or the next day, the next. Eventually, she shows up at his door and says, what's going on?

Demands to know why he won't talk to her and he says, oh, I didn't do all that for us. I did all that so that other people would think I'm a romantic.

[32:33] I did it for the applause at the restaurant. I'm not actually interested in marriage vows or you really. In fact, I'm already working on another girl. I have a fancier restaurant picked out for her.

People are going to think I'm even more romantic. See you later. That's what it's like using the things of God to impress the sons of men.

if our religion is a show to other people, we are proposing in public in order to be seen as great romantics.

If our religious observance is in order to look pious before other people, that's exactly what we're doing. That man mocked and demeaned that young woman and used her.

Cynically, selfishly, shamefully. How would she feel? She would rightly be appalled and wounded and angry.

[33:40] A great injustice was done to her. Someone was mocked, someone was used. And religion that is a show for other people mocks God in just the same way.

Hypocrisy isn't just a matter of personal integrity. It's not private. Hypocrisy uses God himself for my own ends. Uses him.

Hypocrisy mocks God, slanders him. Religious hypocrisy, whores, the Lord Almighty. How great then is our offense against God when we do it?

God He who formed the stars, who predates the foundations of the earth, He who made us for Himself.

How great is the sin of flipping it and cynically using Him for our own meager reputation, our own fame.

[34:46] it is immeasurable. Which is why the pronouncement of woe is, verse 13, you don't enter the kingdom of heaven.

Verse 15, you are sons of hell. Which if you look at John chapter 8, Jesus has already warned them about.

Now, what can we say to all this? First, let it confront us.

Let it keep us from practicing our righteousness in order to be seen, as Christ has said. And second, let it comfort us.

We need not come and perform for other people. let us heed His warning and respond to it as He would call us to.

[35:49] See, last week, Jesus had shut down the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the scribes and the chief priests. The chapter ends in verse 46, they were not able to answer Him a word.

What they needed to say was not to come out with some new wisdom, some new way to trip Him up and show themselves wise.

What they needed to say was what the crowds had already said when Jesus came to the city. 21 verse 9, Hosanna to the Son of David.

That is, save us, Son of David. When confronted with these woes, if we look at them and say, oh, we need to clean up our act so that we're acceptable to God, that's exactly, again, what the Pharisees thought, right?

What we need, what these woes show us that we need is a Savior. And here He is, warning us away from the path of damnation.

[36:59] And the entrance into it is in verse 11. Humility is the way. It is both the way to salvation and the way to obedience.

It's the way to salvation because only the humble call out for a Savior. The proud Pharisee says, I've got this. It's only the humble who can heed the warning into obedience, right?

It is humility that keeps us from thinking that this is a message for the people out there. humility that keeps us from using God Almighty for our reputation because humility means I stop caring about my reputation.

It's humility that keeps us from caring more about how other people evaluate us. And it is humility that keeps us from thinking that this attitude of humility is our own doing.

Right? Because humility can turn back to pride quite quickly. Look how humble I am. Amazing. Read the screw tape letters if you haven't. It is God who humbles us.

[38:12] Right? It is God who has shown us in his word our great need. It was God who showed us at the cross that it was necessary that we have a Savior so that hypocrites like us can go free.

Friends, I pray that this passage does just that, humbles us, that it drives our souls far from hypocrisy.

And I pray that it makes us stand in awe of Christ, who is our righteousness. Because where Holden Caulfield condemns phonies and leaves it at that, Jesus Christ rescues them by his blood. Let's pray. Lord, thank you for this warning. Thank you that you've given it to us so that we can find true worship not in proclaiming ourselves, but proclaiming your glory and your mercy and your grace.

Lord, will you do what you've set out to do in this passage, that is, humble our hearts, and draw us to you, that we might stand in awe of your glory and your grace.

[39:59] Thank you, Lord, that even though our hypocrisy is incredibly vile before you, you've graciously warned us away from it, and you have graciously shed your blood for hypocrites.

Lord, will that prompt us to worship and to more humility to the glory of your name. Pray that all in Jesus Christ. Amen.