

Introduction

Matthew Henry, the great Puritan Bible commentator made the following statement about a certain kind of preacher. He said, "When in the pulpit, [they] preach . . . so well that it is a pity they should ever come out; but when out of the pulpit, [they] live . . . so ill that it is a pity they should ever come in." He was describing the sad reality of those preachers whose speech and lives are at odds. They are bold and compelling in their proclamation. But their behavior and lifestyle shows nothing of what they say. They preach two conflicting sermons. One is spoken with words; a very different message is communicated by their example. Jesus said a similar thing about the Pharisees of his day. He asserted that while people should listen to what they say, they were not a model to mimic, not an example to duplicate. Let's turn to Matthew 23 and see what he was saying and how it relates to you and me.

[Read Text and Pray]

The Pharisees had emerged among the Jews as the most influential of religious leaders in the day of Jesus. The Sadducees largely facilitated the operation of the Temple, but by and large they did not influence the people on a day-to-day basis. The Pharisees were more like a fraternal order or a fellowship group. They began during the intertestamental period as an association of like-minded Jews who were greatly concerned for the impact Greek culture had brought upon the Jews. They wanted to see a revival of devotion to the law of God. So they committed themselves to following it meticulously and urging others to do the same. The Pharisees maintained a high regard from the Jewish masses. To be a Pharisee invited honor from among the Jews. Therefore, this group exerted great influence. Frequently it was a Pharisee who would be instructing in the synagogues. There in the front was a stone seat upon which the rabbis would sit as they taught. This is the seat of Moses to which Jesus refers here. From that seat the Pharisees would preach and teach the law. And in that they correctly instructed God's law through Moses, Jesus says that the people should observe and do what they heard.

Over the years, however, what was perhaps a well-intentioned beginning devolved into an order that missed the law it intended to teach and was characterized by self-serving arrogance and pride. As those most familiar with the scriptures, they should have been among the first to clearly recognize Jesus as Messiah, but their appreciation for the law of Moses had been poisoned by their own sinfulness. The Pharisees show that meticulous law-keeping will not get you into favor with God.

The Pharisees also demonstrate that not all leaders are good. They were dangerous. Despite the respect they possessed, they were not helping the people into the kingdom of heaven but rather shutting the kingdom in people's faces. So Jesus issued a warning to the people about the Pharisees. He pointed out markers of the deficiencies among the them. These are aspects of the Pharisees no one should imitate, and those in leadership roles need to be particularly careful.

The main point of this text, then, is to warn us against replicating these destructive Pharisaic characteristics in our lives. Jesus urges those gathered around to pay attention to what the Pharisees say but to not do the works that they do. He then proceeds to specify four of these works.

I. Preaching What They DO NOT Practice.

A. We all get a little bit testy when we are told by someone in authority what we ought to do and how we ought to behave while the very ones telling us do not do what they are telling us. A little over a year ago as the holidays were approaching, authorities were exhorting people not to gather in groups. One of the strongest such voices was the governor of California. He infamously was urging folks not to get together, but meanwhile attended a birthday party with a dozen friends.

Jesus indicted the Pharisees for this very same kind of thing. They were prescribing behavior that they themselves did not practice. They had a way of paying meticulous attention to some parts of the law but ignored others. Jesus says of them in verses 23-24, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness." They preached it but they did not do it. The failure to do what they prescribed was not merely a source of irritation; it was evidence of a lack of integrity. If a law or principle is right, it is right for everyone. If it is wrong, it is wrong for everyone including the teacher.

B. If you preach or teach, why? Why do you do it? Why did the Pharisees do it? Why were they perfectly willing to preach and teach laws they were not willing to obey? There are two things I can think of—arrogance and control. The Pharisees thought they were better than everyone else and the standard that applied to everyone else did not apply to them. Resulting from this point of view, what the Pharisees taught was not so much a matter of moral principle as it was a means of domination and control. They clearly enjoyed the level of honor and corresponding authority and prestige to which they had been elevated and they wanted to keep it.

C. For whatever reason we may be tempted to not live according to what we preach, brothers and sisters, Jesus tells us this is not the way it ought to be. Those who preach and teach, those who lead, those who profess demonstrate their sincerity and integrity by their deeds. One's practice demonstrates the genuineness or the invalidity of one's profession.

It is demonstrated by Paul's counsel to Timothy. The apostle counseled the young pastor to serve Christ well by conscientiously and faithfully imparting the truth to those under his care. And then he added this: "Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers AN EXAMPLE in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity." Pastors, elders, deacons, fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters. We are ALL leaders in a way of speaking; we all exert influence over one another. We are all to encourage and exhort one another. We are instructed by Jesus to do so with INTEGRITY, to be those who do what we say everyone ought to do. Those in leadership are to lead by example. When Paul tells Timothy, "let no one despise you for your youth," he is not saying get out there and defend yourself; don't let anyone put you down. No. That is not what he is saying! He IS saying that the way to keep anyone from looking down on his youth is by his godly example. If you live what you preach and teach, you engender a willingness and desire in others to follow you as you lead. If you sit around telling others what they ought to do but exemplifying otherwise, you provoke them to despise you.

D. Jesus is creator and king of the universe. If anyone has the right to tell us what to do, it is he. And yet he himself has never commanded of us anything that he has not first done and set before us an example. Without exception Jesus practices what he proclaims. Peter affirms it in his first epistle. He is instructing servants to be subject even to their masters who are unjust. He says in chapter 2 that it is a gracious thing if when you do good and suffer for it you endure because we have been called to this, "because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps." Specifically, says Peter, "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return, when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." Jesus is the great contrast to the Pharisees. His example always reinforced his message. And by this example, we are shown the beauty and effectiveness and godliness of practicing what you preach.

Not practicing what you preach is the first mark of the Pharisees we are not to replicate. Here is a second mark:

II. Burdening Others with What They Will Not Carry.

A. Jesus said of the Pharisees, "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger." In other words, the Pharisees are not willing to put forth even the slightest exertion to ease the burdens they place upon others.

B. The use of this image would have painted a graphic picture in the minds of the crowd gathered around. Supplies were distributed in the ancient world by use of beasts of burden. Donkeys and camels were carefully outfitted to transport goods. To get the most out of each trip, the animals were packed carefully so that the load was balanced and the animals were not loaded beyond their ability. So there was an element of compassion in the hearts of the merchants even if it was demanded by their goal of efficiency.

C. Jesus declares it was not so with the Pharisees. They did not care nor were they sensitive to the load they were requiring people to carry. They were insensitive to the weight of the law and the impossibility of keeping even the true commands of God, not to mention the commands which had been added through the years by the rabbis. They had placed impossible burdens upon the backs of people without even a thought to the effect upon them and without lifting a finger to help.

D. Such is the law of God. It is meant to be a heavy weight which reveals to human beings our sin and our inability to bear its burden on our own. However, such knowledge and conviction was not meant to lead to complete hopelessness. Throughout the Old Testament divine forgiveness is there for those who will repent and believe. Moreover, Jesus is unlike the Pharisees. They would not lift even a compassionate finger to ease the strain, but Jesus was willing to give his own life to relieve the burden of trying to keep the law. To those feeling the weight of the burden of the law upon their backs, Jesus calls out: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Jesus lightens the load of the law by bearing its burden for our sins. He accomplished it on the cross. Colossians 2:13-14 is where Paul vividly articulates Christ's work: "And you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of the flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." As Isaiah wrote, "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned—every one—to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." As Jesus points to the Pharisees as ruthless, unsympathetic, and uncaring, he is indirectly calling the crowds to himself, the Savior who cares so much that not only did he lift a finger, he gave his life so the burden could be lifted from the backs of those who will turn away from their hard-hearted hostility toward God and his law and will REST by faith in his dear Son, the Lord Jesus.

E. Likewise, good leaders are sensitive to those they lead. They know the needs experienced by the people they lead and the burdens that weigh them down. Here I think of Peter's directive to

husbands when he said, “husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor.” Effective leaders among God’s people—and remember, I am not just speaking to elders and deacons; we are all leaders in some way—effective leaders among God’s people are sensitive and compassionate to one another. We follow Christ’s example as we lay down our lives for the brethren and serve one another whether in times of hardship or in the midst of a sin struggle. Our counsel to one another must sometimes be direct and frank, but it should all be given with compassion and a longing for one another to know the rest we have in Jesus.

We come next to a third mark of the Pharisees not to replicate in our lives.

III. Performing to be Noticed.

A. Jesus indicates that the Pharisees do “all their works . . . to be seen by men.” He specifies that they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.” The Pharisees were show-offs. Here is another sign of a false teacher—self-exaltation. Leaders who are all about themselves are not about God. And the Pharisees were not really about God. They showed the fruit of their selfishness in their resistance to Jesus.

Phylacteries—do you know what those are? “They make their phylacteries broad.” Well, in Deuteronomy 6 and 11, the Lord gave the great command to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might. And he instructed the people to keep his words on their heart. He said, “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes.” Phylacteries were leather boxes containing written commands of the Lord which were strapped to the forehead or to the arm. The Pharisees took the Lord very literally in this case, and yet they made their phylacteries SO BIG that no one could miss them. As to the fringes, Jesus is speaking of tassels that were prescribed in the book of Numbers to be attached to the hem of their garments intended to remind them to obey God’s law. Instead of being a reminder to themselves, the Pharisees seemingly competed with one another to see whose tassels would be the most obvious. They followed the directions of the Lord but not for the purpose God gave the directions. It was not to make a loud statement of how devout they were, but that is just what they did. Rather than remind themselves, they were seeking to be recognized by others.

The devotion of the Pharisees was not to truly seek the face of God but the applause of the masses. They loved the recognition they received from society, but truly they did not love God.

B. Motives matter to God. Why do you do what you do? Why do you pray? Why do you read the Bible? Why do you show up at 10:15 on Sunday morning? Why do you abstain from anger and stealing and immorality? Is it because you want people to think highly of you? To be impressed by you? To admire what a good person you are? Do you avoid sin because you can’t stand the thought of others finding out? God tests the heart and he cares why you do what you do. The Pharisees did what they did to be noticed by other humans. They were driven by the fear of man rather than by the fear of God. They performed to please man rather than God. It is a sure indicator of ungodliness when you flaunt your signs of righteousness as performances for human applause. When self is the center, God is absent. Some godly things we do can’t help but be seen, but being seen must not be why we do it. Many godly things we do can go without ever being seen; we should be content with it being that way. God sees. He knows. And he knows the depths of our hearts.

C. Many things Jesus did were out in the open in public. But he did not do them for the glory of man. He said of himself I only do what pleases my Father (John 8:29). And his Father was pleased. He said at his baptism and at his transfiguration, "This is my son in whom I am well pleased." Jesus certainly did not go to the cross for the applause of man. He went there as one who was despised and rejected. The world did not applaud but scoffed and laughed. Here is a test of hypocrisy: are you willing to do the things which the world can't help but see and will scoff? And are you willing to keep quiet about the things you do in serving the Lord when he is the only one who will see?

Finally, we come to the fourth mark of the Pharisees which Christ's disciples are not to duplicate:

IV. Exulting in Worldly Recognition.

A. The Pharisees loved public recognition. They loved the place of honor at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and being called rabbi. These matters fed their egos; they exuded pride. The Pharisees loved being served. They were lacking humility. It blew their cover before Christ. Beware if those who would lead you who are fueled by self-aggrandizement and carnal recognition. And beware of being fueled in that way. It is not the way of Christ and it is not the way of his disciples. God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Now it is apparent that Jesus was not banning the office of teacher or elder or earthly father in a family when he says we should call no man rabbi or teacher or father. The offices of teacher, pastor, elder, deacon, and the role of father is recognized later in the New Testament. What Jesus was no doubt proscribing was an unhealthy investment of pride in those titles. We must all remember that no matter what role in which we serve, the only thing that makes anyone worthy of anything good is the blood of Jesus Christ. The title or designation that should drive us all is this—SERVANT. That is what we are called to be no matter what role we fill—SERVANT. That is the way the Apostle Paul looked at himself. If you think of yourself as a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, you will think rightly.

B. Jesus himself did not make much of himself while here in the flesh. But think of it: here is the one who is preeminent over all as creator and Lord. However, Jesus did not stay in villages where he was not wanted. He did not waltz into banquets and seize the seat of honor as though he deserved it, although he did. When he was born, it was not in a big fancy hospital. Even when he entered Jerusalem, he came in humility not in glory. He came as a king but also as a servant. And serve he did. He was obedient; he suffered; he was ridiculed; he was betrayed; he was denied; and he was crucified. He was despised and not esteemed. He was considered to be stricken and smitten by God. Thankfully in the coming age, he will receive the glory of which he is truly worthy. It is because he humbled himself and was numbered with the transgressors and bore their sin.

Conclusion – A Promise to Ground Us

Verse 12 is a fitting conclusion to everything we have studied in the rest of the chapter this morning. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. It is true of us. To be lifted up into reconciliation with God, we must humble ourselves and confess our sin. God will not despise a broken and contrite spirit. But an arrogant and prideful one, he will not abide. And what is true with God is true with each other. If you want to be lifted up into good relations with others, you must humble yourself. If you desire to be a good leader, an effective influence for good, you must humble yourself. Be not in it for the recognition you receive. If you do it for the recognition, the carnal recognition is all you will get. If it is for God's glory, then you don't mind if you are thanked or not; you hardly notice if anyone else applauds or not.

Jesus himself does not exalt himself but is exalted by the Father. It is the Father who exalts him and gives him the name that is above every other name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And this glorifies God.

Prayer

Benediction

Jesus did not come to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom. Even his teaching was an act of serving us. He is the consummate leader. He is worthy of listening to AND following. Let us follow him and follow his example. May the Lord give us the grace to do so.