



## **The Condemnation of Religious Hypocrisy**

*Series: Matthew: The King and His Kingdom*

Matthew 23:1-12

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Beloved, as we begin looking this morning at the last public sermon of Jesus' ministry in Matthew 23, it may come as a surprise that His last words to the mixed multitude that heard Him preach was not an exposition of the gospel of the Kingdom, not a further description of the principles of life in the Kingdom, but the central theme is message of condemnation of false teachers and religious hypocrites – the Pharisees. It shows us a side of Jesus that many of us are unfamiliar with in our timid and politically correct age. So before we get into this text, I want to say

### A Word About Jesus and His Preaching

Quite honestly, modern preachers have sold us a bill of goods when it comes to the character of our Lord. Today, Jesus is often presented as all love and gentleness, all mildness and civility. He is always sweet, always nice, like a modern-day Gandhi. We have this impression that Jesus was thoroughly indoctrinated in political correctness and for that reason His words often fall with weightlessness, even upon our ears. But that is not Christ, not the Jesus of the Scriptures. He is both capable of astonishing grace and mercy to the broken, but He is also remarkably fierce and severe with the hypocrite and false teacher – especially so with those who would lead His people astray.

This chapter is filled with strong, thunderous denunciations of the Pharisees. It's a scathing, hammering condemnation of their religious hypocrisy. Jesus gives them no leeway. He does not soften his words or attempt to be gentle at all. Jesus is hardly civil or agreeable with the Pharisees. This text is absent the kind of gentle appeals and contemporary dialoging with religious error that is so in vogue in our age, even among so called evangelicals. He had no problem calling a false teacher a false teacher, no problem engaging them boldly and directly,

even holding them up for public ridicule, if necessary. He didn't "tone it down" or "seek common ground." There was no giving of quarter to enemies of the gospel, no "agreeing to disagree." This is no milquetoast, limp-wristed, effeminate Jesus of our modern vacillating and decidedly emasculated culture. He is bold, confrontive, and deadly serious. This text reveals a side of Jesus that many of us are uncomfortable with and certainly a Jesus, the true Christ, who is not a product of this sissified age of tolerance, dialogue, and soft words. As much as the words of Christ should convict us, His very character and the way that He dealt with deliberate doctrinal error ought to serve as a rebuke to how lightly we often think of religious error, how weakly we defend truth, and how we often commend the very people He condemned and condemn the people He commends.

I completely concur with Charles Spurgeon when He said: Brethren, the Savior's character has all goodness in all perfection; he is full of grace and truth. Some men, nowadays, talk of him as if he were simply incarnate benevolence. It is not so. No lip ever spoke with such thundering indignation against sin as the lips of the Messiah.

"He is like a refiner's fire, and like fuller's soap. His fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor." While in tenderness he prays for his tempted disciple, that his faith may not fail, yet with awful sternness he winnows the heap, and drives away the chaff into unquenchable fire.

We speak of Christ as being meek and lowly in spirit, and so he was. A bruised reed he did not break, and the smoking flax he did not quench; but his meekness was balanced by his courage, and by the boldness with which he denounced hypocrisy. "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; ye fools and blind, ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?"

These are not the words of the milksop some authors represent Christ to have been.

He is a man—a thorough man—throughout—a God-like man—gentle as a woman, but yet stern as a warrior in the midst of the day of battle. The character is balanced; as much of one virtue as of another. As in Deity every attribute is full orb'd; justice never eclipses mercy, nor mercy justice, nor justice faithfulness; so in the character of Christ you have all the excellent things. How true his words ring.

As we set the stage for Christ's final sermon, we have to realize that Jesus is coming to the close of a very long Wednesday. It began with Jesus returning to Jerusalem from Bethany and on His way, cursing a fig tree and condemning fruitless religion. Then as He arrived at the temple and began to preach to the people gathered there, there was the first of several confrontations that day, the questioning of His authority by the chief priests and elders. Instead of answering them directly, instead Jesus told three parables in a row – three parables that exposed their wicked hearts and condemned their vain professions of being God's people while rejecting His Son. They countered back with three attempts to trap Jesus in His words and to discredit Him and instead were themselves humiliated and exposed as pretenders. And rather than leaving them alone, Jesus instead pulls no punches as He denounces these false shepherds, these wolves in sheep's clothing and fully and finally condemns them in their hypocrisy.

He does it for three reasons. He does it for the sake of His people, that they will have their eyes fully opened to the truth about these men and so that they might reject them and their damning doctrines and heresies, in favor of His disciples who will be true shepherds of God's flock. He does it to warn His disciples to faithfulness, as Paul did Timothy, that they would "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." (1 Timothy 4:16, ESV) And last, it was His last word to these false teachers that they might repent unto eternal life. So in this introduction to His last sermon, before He turns His words on the Pharisees and pronounces the seven woes upon their heads, He speaks to the multitude and to His disciples and describes for them the

Anatomy of a Religious Hypocrite (v. 1-7) Now certainly, this is in no way a complete list, an exhaustive compilation of the characteristics of the religious hypocrite, it is quite enough for us to consider this morning. Here's the truth, wherever true religion, wherever true Christianity is found, there will always be found alongside of it a counterfeit, a subtle fake, a false religion of human creation complete with her false prophets and it's religious hypocrites. And we see that in the Pharisees. The first thing we need to see is that

They are usurpers of authority...Start in verse 1: "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat," (Matthew 23:1-2, ESV)

What does Jesus mean by this? Well, Moses was the Law-giver. He was the spokesman for God. What God gave him to say to the people, he faithfully preached to them, instructing them in the ways of God, revealing to the people the will and the character and the nature of God. He never preached from his own wisdom or imagination but instead spoke as a man under authority, as God would have him speak. So to sit on Moses' seat was to take the place of being an authoritative spokesman for God.

But there were a couple of problems with this. First, the way that Jesus says this indicates that scribes and Pharisees took it upon themselves to put themselves in the place of Moses, in the place of mediator and revealer of God, His will and His word. On their own volition, they took on a role and place that was not theirs to take. They seated themselves. Moreover, rather than serving God and His people through the ministry of the Word of God, faithfully preaching the God who revealed Himself to Moses and the prophets, they instead put themselves in authority over the Word of God and in so doing, usurped God's authority over His people. They took this place of authority and preached things in the name of God that were not the truth of God. They preached their traditions, the imaginations of their depraved minds, their own standards of righteousness; they spoke for God, they claimed, and spoke damnable lies. They usurped God's rule over the people and replaced it with their own.

Man and women of their ilk are multiplied in this day. There are false teachers, false prophets in abundance today. They preach heresies, falsehoods, their supposed visions and dreams, just like the Pharisees. Peter speaks of them saying: "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep." (2 Peter 2:1–3, ESV) They are "ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ." (Jude 4, ESV) Of their kind, God said through Jeremiah: "I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal? Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? declares the Lord. Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces? Therefore, behold, I am

against the prophets, declares the Lord, who steal my words from one another. Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the Lord, who use their tongues and declare, 'declares the Lord.' Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the Lord, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them. So they do not profit this people at all, declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 23:25–32, ESV) The usurping spirit of the Pharisees is alive and well in our own age. And ironically enough, in the words of Shai Linne in his song "False Teachers", calling out that Pharisaical spirit only leads to be being called a Pharisee yourself. He says: There's nothing left for me to do except to speak to you in the spirit of Jude 3 and 2 Peter 2. And I know that some would label me a Pharisee, because today the only heresy is saying that there's heresy. And it all begins with hijacking the authority of God.

That is always what a religious hypocrite must do. It is the first thing that a religious hypocrite must do; usurp God's authority over his life. It is foundational to hypocrisy that one places himself as the authority over God's Word, challenging the authority of God and usurping the right of God to command his life. This spirit is alive and well in even us when we make the Word of God, the authority given by God, submit to our own reasoning, take a back seat to our own wisdom, to our own critique and our own sinful desires and determination, when we make it conform to us rather than us to it. It is a spirit that must die and be cast out from the people of God! The Pharisees were usurpers of God's authority. Next, Jesus points out that

They lack integrity... "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." (Matthew 23:2–3, ESV)

Now understand what Jesus is saying here. He is not speaking out of both sides of His mouth. He is saying that as much of what they say is truly the Word of God as delivered to Moses, that you do. When they read from the Word of God and it calls you to love and worship God, to love your neighbor, to walk in holiness and faithfulness, to call upon the name of the Lord in prayer – those things you should do. God's truth is God's truth whether it comes from a faithful man or out of the mouth of a donkey. Hear and receive and do what they say that is true, but do not be like them, because they do not practice what they preach.

This is one of the fundamental problems of religious hypocrites. They make much of rules, much of their requirements and laws, but they do not practice what they preach. They call people to a high standard, to obedience to the Word of God even, but by their actions, by their lives they deny the very things that they demanded.

The Pharisees simply lacked integrity. Their much speaking, their grandiose preaching, their persuasive arguments were not matched by their actions. Their lips and their lives did not match.

That spirit is alive and well today in the church. So many times our lives do not match our words. We can say much that is true but our lives are the real measuring stick of authenticity. We can speak of holiness, of love, wax poetically about forgiveness, of honesty, of submission, can speak flowery words about preserving unity, of devotion to Christ and all of these things, but do we practice them? That is the real question. This is why Paul can say to Titus: “Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.” (Titus 2:7–8, ESV) Paul's point is that sanctified behavior is the essential companion to authentically sound doctrine. You may verbally affirm the finest confession of faith ever written, but if your words and deeds deny it, then your words are worthless. Charles Spurgeon once wrote concerning this subject, “A man's life is always more forcible than his speech. When men take stock of him they reckon his deeds as dollars and his words as pennies. If his life and doctrine disagree the mass of onlookers accept his practice and reject his preaching.” That is why Christ warned the people – do what they say in keeping with God's word but do not do what they do. That spirit is alive and well in the church today and we to strike it a death blow and pursue true integrity.

Having integrity means requires serving God with all that is in you, with no holding back. It means that before God, the world and other believers, you live out what you say that you believe, you do what you say you will do, you finish the race strong. A person of integrity is not fractionalized with duplicity or hypocrisy. A heart and life of integrity is consistent in its faithfulness to God. The Pharisees never even got off the starting block. They lacked integrity and Jesus said:

They are graceless... “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.” (Matthew 23:4, ESV)

Rather than making the service and worship of God a joy and being the people of God a great grace from God to be enjoyed, they instead made it a burden. They emphasized their brand of the law, their rules and regulations, and placed the people under an unbearable strain. There was never any word of mercy or grace. Rather than faithfully preaching and applying the law to the lives of the people, showing them their sin and then pointing them to the grace and the mercy found in Yahweh God, they heaped burden upon burden to keep the people in bondage.

Religious hypocrites are exceedingly gifted in heaping heavy burdens and responsibilities upon other people, and are equally gifted at finding a loophole for themselves. You see it today in the false teachers that pile extra-biblical commands, wrongly interpreted Scripture passages, legalistic codes all sort of intended to create in people a non-specific, continual, low-grade guilt. Now, I am not talking about the faithful proclamation of commands of God in the Scriptures, the expectations of His people, proper doctrine properly applied – that should lead to true conviction in the heart of believer.

I am talking about heavy burdens and requirements that are not in keeping with the truth of God that they bind up and place upon people – no word of forgiveness, no word of grace, no word of the mercy of God for the repentant, no word of the sufficiency of the cross and the blood of Jesus to cleanse from sin, no word of the empowering work of the Holy Spirit dwelling within or the blessings of Christ won for us on the cross.

We see this spirit in the modern church age in false teachers who consistently try to make you feel like you are not doing enough to be worthy of your salvation, to earn God’s favor, making up all kinds of rules and rituals to be followed to show how devoted and faithful to God you are – requirements not made by God. That spirit is evident in our own lives when we place impossible standards on other people, when we deal with fellow believers in a rigid and merciless manner, refusing forgiveness, refusing to deal with them as new creatures in Christ, refusing to give people grace and room to grow, reading into their hearts sinful motive, stifling the work of the Spirit in people’s lives by putting excessive burdens on them and in a loveless

manner doing nothing to help them truly grow. That is the spirit of the Pharisee and it needs to die. Religious hypocrites are graceless and

They are self-promoters and appearance-driven...“They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long,” (Matthew 23:5, ESV) Their greatest concern was not the approval of God but the on-looking eyes and esteem of men. Everything they did, they did for an audience – not God but man. They did what they did to promote their image and exalt the appearance of their piety. In particular, Jesus mentions two things that they did.

First, He said that they made their phylacteries broad. I mentioned this two weeks ago when we were looking at the Passover in Exodus. In light of God’s faithfulness to them, His grace to deliver the Israelites from bondage, God told them to tell the story of His salvation year after year. Moses told them in Exodus 13:9 – “And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the Lord has brought you out of Egypt.” (Exodus 13:9, ESV)

It was metaphor that God used repeatedly in Israel’s history. It was a figure of speech indicating that his words were to be on their hearts and in their minds, keeping the message of salvation before God’s people, defining the way that they lived and thought, serving as a continual theme in their speaking.

At some point in the inter-testamental period, the Jews began to take this literally and they made these things called phylacteries. A phylactery consisted of a small leather case that contained Scriptures verses written on parchment or vellum, and tied to the left arm (near the heart) and on the forehead. Jewish men would usually only wear it for worship, but the scribes and Pharisees took to wearing it all the time. Not only that, they supersized them so that everyone who saw them would know how spiritual they were.

Then he speaks of the fringes of their garments, tassels which God commanded them to sew on the edge of their garments after grave sin in the wilderness. Numbers 15 says: “The LORD said to Moses, “Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their



garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner. And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God.” (Numbers 15:37–40, ESV) Each time they glanced at the tassels, they were to be reminded that they were set apart to God to do His will, to serve Him and be set apart to Him. The scribes and Pharisees, of course, wanted to give the impression that they took God's commandments more seriously than everyone else, so they had especially long and noticeable tassels, so that no-one could mistake their devotion.

Both of these things, that were to be a means of calling attention to God, the Pharisees and scribes used to draw attention to themselves. The whole aim and intent of the Pharisee was to dress and act in such a way as to draw attention to themselves, to promote themselves. But the aim of the faithful Christian should be just the opposite. As John the Baptist said, I must decrease so that Christ would increase. It is not that we should hide our devotion to the Lord, but that we should not make merchandise of it. Like Jesus said: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16, ESV) Any religion which produces self-promotion and feeds the pride is a false religion.

Religious leaders – pastors, teachers, elders, deacons, are particularly susceptible to this temptation. John Flavel once said: “A man may have the tongue of an angel and the heart of a devil.” And he is right in saying that. It can be very easy for religious leaders to appear spiritual, to appear that they have a much more vibrant and faithful relationship with Christ than they do simply because they say true things from the pulpit or teach true things in a classroom. There is a particular temptation for people in these areas to feed an appearance that is not reality because they are speaking “God” words or parroting things they have read in a book. It is very real danger that we need to be on guard against.

You can see it in all the twitterpated, instagrated, blogified social media darlings with their social media machines are bursting into prominence in ministry today who have never been tested, never really vetted, and who quite often fall on their faces or prove to be doctrinally deficient and undefined and so bring reproach on Christ.

But it is not just leaders. That putrid rot that craves attention, that longs to be celebrated, that wants to be center of attention, that fleshly perversion of seeking acceptance with men based upon our appearance rather than acceptance with God that is found in Christ, making everything all about us, affects all of us to one degree or another. It is an insidious sin that can manifest itself in false humility and also in open and arrogant pride. In the case of the Pharisees, it consumed them.

The Pharisees' religion was all for show and for self-gratification and exaltation. They paraded their supposed piety so that they could get the reverence and the adoration of the people and it all adds up this reality:

They are glory stealers...“and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.” (Matthew 23:6–7, ESV) This is far more than just liking the best seats at feasts and enjoying being called by Rabbi. The deeper issue is that the Pharisees were actually contending with God for His glory. By maneuvering for honor, for the best seats and for titles and for greetings, and for the esteem and reverence of the people, the Pharisees, whether they realized it or not, were attempting to supplant God as the central religious reality of the nation, as the most important religious figure. They were trying to steal glory from God.

What all of this adds up to is the overarching truth that the Pharisees were self-absorbed. Self-importance, craving attention, and arrogant posturing ruled the day with the very men who should have walked in humility because they should have known the truth of God. But they were the worst kind of self-promoters and God-users. They used God for personal gain (their reputation, the admiration of others) reducing Him to a cheap gimmick for their advancement. Rather than living for the glory of God they lived for more recognition. But that is not to be true of the faithful. Jesus, finishing His evaluation of the Pharisees for a moment, then describes

The Non-negotiable Characteristic of the Spiritually Faithful (v. 8-12) Jesus says: “But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for

you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matthew 23:8–12, ESV)

Understand the point that Jesus is making here. It is not that it is wrong “to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.” (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13, ESV) Paul said of the Corinthians: “I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” (1 Corinthians 4:15, ESV) He is getting at something deeper – no faithful teacher, no genuine Christian should desire for glory, for honor, for mastery over people. Instead the opposite is the case. Being so filled with gratitude at God’s grace, being so humbled at the way that God in Christ has served him through the laying down of His life, the life of a faithful Christian should be that of humility before God and man and a life of servanthood. Personal glory is never the goal, cannot ever be the motivating factor of life or the pursuit of the faithful believer. Lording it over anyone... Do you see how Jesus says it? When he says to His disciples that you are not the teacher, you are not the instructor, He is telling them to be humble recognizing that they are not the source of truth. That is God’s Word. They are not the illuminator of divine truth. That is the role of Christ through His Spirit. When He says, call no man father, He means that only God is the source of spiritual life. You are all brothers born by grace and so there should be no seeking of position over another, no glory at another’s expense, no elevating oneself and so obscuring Christ as the head.

The faithful Christian servant, the faithful slave of Christ, every faithful preacher of Christ understands this reality. We are not infallible. We are men of like passion as you, needing the same cleansing blood, and same life-giving Spirit, set apart to a holy calling for the kingdom but only men.

John MacArthur, in his dry wit said of this: “You're not going to have a title if you're a servant. You're not holy reverend doctor bishop slave. You're not right reverend father master guide professor foot washer. You see, greatness consists in self-giving. Greatness consists in humble outpouring of life for others. It's the servant leader. If you want to be great the serve, that's all. Jesus was just Jesus in terms of His earthly name. And He served and He washed feet and He gave His life. And He said "The son of man has not come to be ministered unto, but to," what, "to minister." Or serve, give his life. That's the point. So he that is greatest isn't the one with

the most degrees and the most titles and the highest rank, but whoever is the lowest servant. Whoever's the best server, whoever's the most selfless.”

Though our society, this world system, thinks of humility as a weakness, as some loss, it is not. Jesus did not cease to be God because He humbled Himself and took upon Himself human flesh. The Lord Jesus didn't cease to be a king because He made Himself as a servant. He didn't cease to be the Lion of Judah because He laid down His life as the Lamb of God. He did not lose His place as Authority and Judge because He humbled Himself and was for a time He allowed Himself to be judged by wicked men. Jesus did not cease to be Lord when He humbled Himself to the death of the cross according to the will of God the Father. On the contrary, “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9–11, ESV) A man doesn't lose his honor by humility, but is honored ultimately for his humility. Whoever humbles himself is exalted! It is true of our Savior and it will be true of us.

The motivating factor of the Pharisees' hearts was to receive honor, to make much of themselves, to serve their fleshly desire for adoration, to grasp for personal glory, to be served by others and made much of by them. That was the hallmark of their lives – magnify themselves. They were hypocrites plain and simple. Jesus' point in this introduction to his sermon, before He pronounces woes upon them, is to conclusively show that the heart of the faithful believer is motivated by something far different. The desire of the faithful and true Christian is to submit to and live under God's authority, to live a life of integrity and true uprightness, to receive and to give grace, to do good to others and serve them in Christ's name, to make little of themselves, to never contend for God's glory or obscure Him in any way, but to live for His praise and fame. Godly authenticity must characterize us as Christians.

Do you see the contrast that Jesus is drawing for us this morning? The driving motive of the religious hypocrite, what he crafts his life around is appearance, the pretence of being someone who is spiritually admirable and special. He longs for the approval and praise of other Christians; and, the religious hypocrite's way of life is on direct opposition to the sacrifice and example of Jesus Christ. For the true believer, he or she, wants Christ to be glorified and truly honored and sees others as someone to serve rather than their servants; for the true believer, he or she, desires the humble and plain walk of faith; motivated by a self-denial that shuns the spotlight and he is most concerned with the applause and approval of God.

There is only one way that becomes a reality in the heart of man...one way...through the transforming power of salvation in Christ and continued abiding in Him as the greatest treasure of our souls. What a surprise (just kidding) that this sermon would bring us back, once again, to our indispensable need for Jesus. Only He can purify our sinful souls and warped desires. Once again we see our central need for Christ, our desperate need for life centered in, dependent upon, abiding in Jesus. – His blood, His forgiveness, His saving death and resurrection, abiding in Him, drawing life from Him by faith. He is the antidote to fruitless and dead faith. He is the antidote for empty and vain profession. He is the antidote for dead orthodoxy or departing into heresy. He is the antidote for the insanity of claiming to be the people of God without Christ as the Cornerstone. He is the antidote to the deadliness of spiritual hypocrisy. Jesus is – His blood, His gospel – the Christ. It is the people who know the worth and the power of the gospel, that know the value of Christ that know how vital it is to never move past the gospel. The gospel is the not the gateway to life – it is life.

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