

Week of September 26, 2021

Matthew 23

¹ Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and his disciples, ² "The legal experts and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat. ³ Therefore, you must take care to do everything they say. But don't do what they do. ⁴ For they tie together heavy packs that are impossible to carry. They put them on the shoulders of others, but are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. ⁵ Everything they do, they do to be noticed by others. They make extra-wide prayer bands for their arms and long tassels for their clothes. ⁶ They love to sit in places of honor at banquets and in the synagogues. ⁷ They love to be greeted with honor in the markets and to be addressed as 'Rabbi.' ⁸ But you shouldn't be called Rabbi, because you have one teacher, and all of you are brothers and sisters. ⁹ Don't call anybody on earth your father, because you have one Father, who is heavenly. ¹⁰ Don't be called teacher, because Christ is your one teacher. ¹¹ But the one who is greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² All who lift themselves up will be brought low. But all who make themselves low will be lifted up. ¹³ How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You shut people out of the kingdom of heaven. You don't enter yourselves, and you won't allow those who want to enter to do so. ¹⁴ How terrible it will be for you, legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You travel over sea and land to make one convert. But when they've been converted, they become twice the child of hell you are. ¹⁵ How terrible it will be for you blind guides who say, 'If people swear by the temple, it's nothing. But if people swear by the gold in the temple, they are obligated to do what they swore.' ¹⁶ You foolish and blind people! Which is greater, the gold or the temple that makes the gold holy? ¹⁷ You say, 'If people swear by the altar, it's nothing. But if they swear by the gift on the altar, they are obligated to do what they swore.' ¹⁸ You blind people! Which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift holy? ¹⁹ Therefore, those who swear by the altar swear by it and by everything that's on it. ²⁰ Those who swear by the temple swear by it and by everything that's part of it. ²¹ Those who swear by heaven swear by God's throne and by the one who sits on it. ²² How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You give to God a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, but you forget about the more important matters of the Law: justice, peace, and faith. You ought to give a tenth but without forgetting about those more important matters. ²³ You blind guides! You filter out an ant but swallow a camel. ²⁴ How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and plate, but inside they are full of violence and pleasure seeking. ²⁵ Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup so that the outside of the cup will be clean too. ²⁶ How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs. They look beautiful on the outside. But inside they are full of dead bones and all kinds of filth. ²⁷ In the same way you look righteous to people. But inside you are full of pretense and rebellion. ²⁸ How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. ²⁹ You say, 'If we had lived in our ancestors' days, we wouldn't have joined them in killing the prophets.' ³⁰ You testify against yourselves that you are children of those who murdered the prophets. ³¹ Go ahead, complete what your ancestors did. ³² You snakes! You children of snakes! How will you be able to escape the judgment of hell? ³³ Therefore, look, I'm sending you prophets, wise people, and legal experts. Some of them you will kill and crucify. And some you will beat in your synagogues and chase from city to city. ³⁴ Therefore, upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been poured out on the earth, from the blood of that righteous man Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you killed between the temple and the altar. ³⁵ I assure you that all these things will come upon this generation. ³⁶ Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you. How often I wanted to gather your people together, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn't want that. ³⁷ Look, your house is left to you deserted. ³⁸ I tell you, you won't see me until you say, Blessings on the one who comes in the Lord's name."

A Line in the Sand

In his most forceful attack against the systems of oppression and malice found in the institutional Judaism of his day, Jesus drew a very forceful line in the sand against acts he found to be incompatible with God's vision. The root of this was hypocrisy - the Pharisees and legal experts proclaimed one thing and did another. Hypocrisy in organized religion continues to be a sticking point for many, but it's not the faith that's the problem, it's the people. Human beings are, innately, hypocritical - we all profess certain things and then fail to live up to those ideals. This isn't a problem so far as we're able to recognize our shortcomings and strive to correct our behaviors or moderate our ideals. It is a problem, however, when some build their lives around telling people how to think or act and then have zero interest in living it themselves or believe

they are above the rules they set out for others. This is especially true for anyone in positions of power, from parents to pastors to politicians. The Pharisees and legal experts met Jesus' ire because they were the interpreters of the Law for first century Jews and they used that power to demand actions that lifted them up instead of actions that were faithful to God. One of the ways Jesus said this was most evident was in their rigidity with the law of tenth part offerings, an offering that went to the temple and helped make them rich, while ignoring the laws of justice, peace, and faith, which are far more important to God's law. The gift of sacrifice was meant to serve the purpose of justice, not undermine it.

Jesus, in the last few days of his ministry before his death, was finished playing nice. He knew his death was imminent, and that it would be at the hands of the so-called "faithful," so he exposed them for what they were while also providing instruction for those who followed. In this angry speech, Jesus gave three specific instructions: 1. Don't let your faith be ostentatious; 2. Don't follow figure heads - follow Jesus; and 3. Don't become one of those figure heads. For many, modern Christianity has become cults of personality. Mega churches are filled with people who hang onto every word of their superstar pastor, and those superstar pastors face inevitable downfalls when it comes out that they, too, are human. Their followers feel disappointed in the pastor, and the pastor is shamed. Humility is the only solution. We should remember that we are all human, all make mistakes, and all can fall victim to hypocrisy. But we put our faith in one that is not. That is why Christ is our only teacher, why God is our only father, and why those who serve others are the ones who live their faith best.

In our desire to follow you, O God, we have turned to those with ego and great ambition for answers instead of the teacher you gave us - our Lord and Savior, Jesus. Help us to turn to Jesus' instruction first, living out his rule of love and mercy, that we may discover what faith really means. Amen.