

ch23: confrontations climax: “What do you think about the Christ?” The question of all questions, especially for Matthew. This gets at the heart of the Gospel. The religious leaders fail to see Jesus for who He really is. What an indictment on their leadership, especially sitting in the seat of Moses! No wonder many woes will follow our passage today: such is Jesus’ judgement, which will ultimately climax at the fall of Jerusalem not long after.

Js condemnation so stern that many theologians question whether or not these words are really His. When they compare ‘love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’ from the Sermon on the Mount, for example, they come away thinking that the Jesus who commanded love must be a different Jesus from the one who spoke these words in chapter 23. They fail to realize that the kind of *love* Jesus commands of His disciples in the Sermon On the Mount is way different than the sentimental, soft-and-sweet version the world has in mind. And secondly, let’s not forget about the Jesus we’re talking about here in ch23: the-coming-Kingdom Jesus; Jesus the King, who will one day return at the end of the age, to judge the living & the dead. That’s what the next chapter—chapter 24—is all about. The language of this chapter—chapter 23—readies us for all of that. Indeed, the woes of chapter 23 are all about judgement, making it understandably difficult to correlate them with loving enemies. However, before the Sermon On the Mount was over, you remember, we hear perhaps one of the sternest warnings against false-Christianity in all the Bible:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ –Mt7.21-23

The Jesus Christ who taught His followers to lay down their lives, even for their enemies, gave His very own life as the supreme-sacrifice we so desperately needed, but that same sacrificial Lamb also told us in 10.34 that He came “not to bring peace, but a sword.” It is precisely this righteous sword-Bearer who proclaims judgement upon false-teaching in chapter 23, warning His faithful bride to renounce such falsehood in readying herself for His return for her. He is coming again, O Bride of Christ, soon! Are you ready? Are the crowds about Him making ready? Are the disciples about us making ready?

1 Jesus has been warning the false religious leaders since chapter 15. He loves His followers & so warns them of fakes & frauds. For the most part, those early cautions were kept private, but with the Cross just a couple of days away, He goes public with His denunciations. Why do you think Matthew specifically mentions that Jesus directed His words to the crowds & His disciples? Because Matthew knew Jesus meant to compel these Israelites of Jerusalem to make a choice: Choose this day whom you will follow: the selfless Servant, or the self-serving religious leaders? Those who follow the false-teachers would suffer the same condemnation as those who misled the masses, away from their Messiah. In compassion & mercy Jesus was revealed as the Promised One they should trust & obey. But for most, still there was no room for Him in their inn. Is it any wonder that, before this chapter concludes, we will hear the Master lamenting the lostness of Jerusalem and depicting the judgement that would follow?

2 Jesus calls out both *the scribes & the Pharisees*. The scribes were the teachers, but the Pharisees were not. However the Pharisees were those who propagated the teaching of the scribes, they were the ones who spread it around. The scribes were liken those who make the laws while the Pharisees, one might say, were those enforced it. By mentioning both the scribes & Pharisees, Jesus is basically attacking their theology: their false understanding of the Scriptures as well as their false application of them. Their whole theological system is wrong. In other words, when the foundation is flawed, it's impossible for the structure not to be. If you're wrong about God—in other words, if your understanding of who & how God is wrong—then everything else that you build upon that essential foundation—your entire worldview—will be wrong as well.

With their flawed understanding of God, these authority figures had taken their seat in Moses' seat as the authoritative teacher of their synagogues. They believed that they were Moses' legal successors: whatever authority he had was all theirs now. Think about that: authority Moses never really wanted—"but God, I stutter; I can't even talk well"—these scribes & Pharisees were taking for themselves. I'm reminded of the words of Jesus' brother James in v3.1:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Makes you wonder if these scribes & Pharisees had any idea what sort of responsibility they were really taken upon themselves as caretakers of the souls of God's people.

3 Whoa! Wait a minute. Is Jesus really instructing the crowds as well as His own disciples to follow the teaching of the hypocrites here? We can certainly see how a casual read of this verse

could cause someone to think so. But is that really what's going on here? Are we to disregard how often Jesus criticized the teachings of these scribes & Pharisees, the many times He pointed out how contrary to God's Word much of their oral traditions are? Jesus has spoken at length about their hypocritical teaching: in 5.21-48, again in 15.3-14, chapter 16.21; and He'll do it again in this very same chapter, in vv16-36; and all of this on the heels of His exposition of their Scriptural ignorance in the passage we looked at just last week: 22.41-46. So then why in the world would Jesus now tell them to "observe whatever they tell you"? ¿Just because they "sit on Moses' seat"? I believe there's a bit of irony going on here. And with a thoughtful read of the context of this passage, I think we'll see that Jesus employs such irony to strengthen & emphasize His warning of the crowds & disciples NOT to follow these hypocrites.

Lord willing, we'll come back to vv2-3 to see if reading it with a tone of irony doesn't shine a faithful light on it. But first let's see how well verse four fits with this idea: the suggestion that Jesus words in vv2-3 are strongly ironic, if not downright sarcastic.

4 Even back then, the Pharisees were considered to be "the expounders of smooth things." They liked to round off the hard corners of the law, make things easier for themselves, but in such a way that made obedience harder for others. It wasn't as though they were unwilling to be obedient to some of the harder rules, but they most certainly refused to help others whose circumstances made it more difficult. In contrast stood Jesus:

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." –Mt11.28-30

O how marvelously different the Messiah is from the scribes & Pharisees who wouldn't lift a finger to help anyone whose proximity or situation made temple pilgrimages difficult, or whose health was poor, or whose income & offerings were meager. The Lord's burden is light and He promises rest for the weary. But the leaders who were called to minister God's Word & aid to God's people—the false teaching scribes & Pharisees—were doing more harm than good. Surely Jesus wasn't suggesting that the weary & burdened crowds, that His very own disciples would be served, would find their joy by subscribing to the instruction of the false teachers just because they'd seated themselves in Moses' place of authority?

So, with that in mind, let's return to vv2-3, and read them through the filter of irony that I think Jesus intended:

“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, [*hoity-toity*] so *practice and observe whatever they tell you*—but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice.

I believe such biting irony is the most faithful way to understand Jesus' intent in vv2-3. And that naturally fits the context as well as the rest of the chapter. As I mentioned earlier, Jesus had previously pointed out the scribes & Pharisees' *false-teaching*, and now He addresses their *false-practicing* as well.

5-7 Jesus said that all of their religious activities were done—not to honor the Lord, but—to honor themselves; not to be seen by the audience of One, but for the audience of *everyone*, everyone else but God. ¿Should the crowds or disciples follow their lead? Is that what faithful religion, what faithful love for God & love for others looks like in practice? No!

Phylacteries were little boxes worn on the arm or tied to their head-coverings. They contained small strips of paper that had Scripture written on them. They also kept the fringes of their garments really long. These things were intended to serve as reminders, ever before them, that they belonged to God, that they were set apart by God & for God's service. But instead, and most likely influenced by pagan practices that Israel had incorporated down through the years, these boxes got bigger and the tassels got longer, all for the sake of show. Not because they loved God, but because “the loved places of honor at feasts and the best seats in they synagogues,” you know, the ones closest to the ancient scrolls, closest to—ironically—the faithful words of God. They loved it when people greeted them at the store or on Main Street, calling them *rabbi* or *teacher*, esteeming their supposed superior status. Jesus saw right through all that nonsense. As John 2.25 tells us, Jesus “needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”

8-10 But YOU are NOT to be like them, the Master says to His curious crowds, but more likely directing this especially toward His disciples. He is calling them to make a distinct choice as to whose preaching & practice they would follow: false Pharisees or the faithful Messiah. But, in addition, Jesus is also depicting what relationships within His family ought to look like. Rather than seeking special titles of superiority over one another, rather than wanting to be called *rabbi* or *teacher*, His humble hopefuls would know that the Spirit of God is the One who teaches them. And neither should they call these false teachers their “spiritual fathers”, for God in heaven is their Father, and Christ is their instructor. These unfaithful, self-centered, proud men have no role to play in the family of God, no seat at His supper table. If they cannot answer the

simple questions that Jesus had been asking them these last few chapters, then they had no business guiding or directing—fathering—God’s family of faith.

In John 5.46, Jesus makes it clear that He was the Author & Instructor of Moses’ words & directions for God’s people. So, technically speaking, Jesus is not only the only One fit for Moses’ seat, the throne of God’s authority has always belonged chiefly to Jesus, the Giver of God’s Word, the Word made flesh. He is the voice of authority in the family of God. And the same applies today! The risen Lord is just as displeased and will have just as much judgement for any pastor or preacher who climbs in the pulpit today demanding anyone submit to His authority apart from so much as he is faithfully proclaiming God’s Word. Do not be lured away, brothers & sisters. Just because he or she has a fancy seminary degree, cufflinks and a coat & tie, that does not mean that the words you hear coming out of their mouth are necessarily in line with the Word of God. Expensive words and showy piety may not have anything to do with godly surrender.

Well then how can we be sure? How can we know whether or not we ought to submit ourselves to a pastor’s teaching & instruction, whether or not we should follow their counsel? Don’t forget what the Lord said: A tree is known by its fruit. In other words, consider their walk as well as their talk. Do you discern the humility of your Messiah in what they think, say & do?

11-12 These words are so familiar to Matthew’s account of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Matthew cites them regularly, most likely because they are so contrary to the false religious leaders of his time. Jesus repeated again and again the necessity of humility among His people: “Blessed are the meek...” of humbling oneself. “Gentiles lord it over you,” He said, “but that should not be the case among My people. No, whoever would be great among you must be your servant... *just as* the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mt20.20-28). Is such the character you see in your scribes & Pharisees? Then don’t follow them! Don’t call them your leaders or look to them to lead you to Jesus!

This idea of leaders humbling serving was & is still today so unnatural, so contrary to our natural ways of thinking about the esteemed among us. What comes natural in our human kingdoms is complaint, is “I deserve better service than this!” But in Christ’s coming Kingdom, humility depicts God’s people, service rather than being served. Where do we see this best? Is it not in Christ, the most Supreme, the highest King, when He bore our sins to the cross, when He took upon Himself the judgement our rebellion deserved? O yes, now there is our Instructor, there is

our Teacher, there is the One worthy of our submission, our lives, our love & our longings. Having done the greatest service, God the Father has most highly exalted Him with the name above every name, King of kings & Lord of lords.

Christ, the Love of God, warns His followers of false teachers & false shepherds.

And the beloved of God heed His warning, discern with their hearts AND their minds, and humbly serve & love one another as Christ Himself, to the glory of God Almighty.

SONG: *How Sweet & Awful is the Place*

COMMUNION

SONG: *Amazing Grace*

BENEDICTION: *NOT. -2CO13.14*