

1 Sermon, May 15, 2011

Texts: Matthew 23:1-12, Matthew 23:13-22, Matthew 23:23-33

Title: "Appearance or Purpose?"

1. How do you think it would go over if I preached like Jesus?
2. Jesus' kindness was real; Jesus' stern criticism was real
3. Not to guilt us but to free us
4. Leading under the radar; as a servant
5. For those to whom much is given, much is required

1. How do you think it would go over if I preached like Jesus?

How do you think it would go over if I preached like Jesus?

What if I said, "Woe to you, church!"

You are a cursed bunch of hypocrites!

What if I told you that you're just like the ones who killed Jesus?

What if I turned up the heat and the volume and yelled a little? What if I said that you talk a good talk, but you live comfortable lives in the midst of a hurting world?

Well, I think I wouldn't stay here long with that kind of message.

And I don't believe it, either. I look at you and see people who are trying to live their faith; I don't see hypocrites.

But there are ways in which I need to hear Jesus' criticisms. I need to hear Jesus' criticisms of his listeners when he told them of their hard hearts, and their slowness to believe, and that they didn't get it and they didn't pray hard enough.

I also need to hear Jesus' criticism of the Scribes and Pharisees. Jesus reserved his most scathing criticism for the ones in leadership; the ones who should have known better. He didn't say to them, "You're not spiritual enough." He said to them, "You're not compassionate. You don't care enough about the real needs of the people you lead. You make it harder for them to have faith, instead of easier."

2. Jesus' kindness was real; Jesus' stern criticism was real

We think of Jesus as kind and compassionate, and he was. But Jesus was not a two-dimensional cardboard cutout that always said the same thing. He also got passionately angry.

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Today's scripture reading is a long rant, a tirade. Jesus was fed up, and he let loose with a volley of criticism aimed at the leaders of the people. If you've ever wondered why Jesus was put to death, you don't have to look any further than Matthew 23. When you're that critical of the people in power, you're going to get a strong reaction.

And what was Jesus so critical about?

- A. The spiritual leaders didn't practice what they preached.
- B. They interpreted the scripture in a very legalistic way, which meant that it was very difficult for the ordinary person to fulfill the commandments. Only those who had wealth and leisure could really keep all the nuances of the commandments.
For example, many of the commandments made it hard to earn a living. You had to do a ritual bath after handling unclean things. You couldn't touch leather, you couldn't carry things on the Sabbath, and so on.
- C. They would show off in front of others: big phylacteries, long tassels, the best seats at banquets and meetings. They also liked to be called "teacher," and have people make a fuss over them. It's not an unknown temptation today. Anybody here like to be called "sir" or "ma'am"? Anybody here like to be treated like a VIP? People today might like their name on the door, or in the program, or on the TV; might like that title: "Reverend" or "Doctor" or "Senator."
The Pharisees and teachers of the law were concerned with appearance, instead of substance. Jesus called them whitewashed tombs, or shiny cups dirty on the inside (that's the image on the front of your bulletins — a cup that looks OK outside, but is dirty inside.)
- D. The Scribes and Pharisees made more rules — like not swearing by the altar or the temple — these rules were designed to keep people from even naming things that were connected to God because God was unnamable, and they wanted these references to God to also be unnamable. But it became ridiculous. It was a kind of politically correct speech.
It's like today when instead of blind, we say "visually challenged." Instead of poor it is "economically

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disadvantaged." It becomes harder and harder to know what to say.

E. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were particular not only in giving a tithe of the grain from their fields, but even a tithe of the herbs in their gardens. They paid attention to the details, but missed the big picture, like justice and mercy and faithfulness. – Jesus made a joke, saying they "strain out a fly and swallow a camel!" But how often do we get stuck on the details and miss our basic calling to love God and love others? We can get concerned about what's for supper, or when the next doctor's appointment is, or how to fix the driveway. And we can miss out on concern for our neighbor.

3. Not to guilt us but to free us

All of this criticism was meant not to tear down, but to free the vast bulk of Judeans who were burdened by the entrenched rules that were promoted by the Scribes and Pharisees.

It was even meant to get the Scribes and Pharisees to change their lives so that they were looking at their faith from a perspective of God's abundant love, rather than as a series of requirements.

This passage defined the kind of community that the Christians ought to be, only in reverse. It describes what Christians should not be. Christians should not be legalistic; Christians should not be show-offs; Christians should not exclude others by making it so hard to be a Christian. God gives us enough challenges; the church shouldn't make it harder.

Jesus was critical and angry at the Pharisees because he loved them and wanted something much better for them. He wanted them to live a life free of the kind of guilt imposed by ritual requirements. He wanted them to live a life freed by forgiveness; so that they would let go of bitterness and hurt. He wanted them to lead a life free from the burdens of status, where you have to live up to your rank; instead, Jesus wanted them to live as sisters and brothers – equal in God's grace.

And what applied to the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law also applies to us. Jesus invites us to live free of a religion that imposes guilt.

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Jesus invites us to live anew, live better, because we are forgiven and can try again to live more like Jesus. Jesus wants us to be freed to be forgivers – those who let go of bitterness and anger over what someone has done to us. Jesus invites us to live a life of abundance, where we claim God's goodness, God's enough-ness, God's sufficiency for all our needs.

Abundance means that we don't need to follow a bunch of rules in order to be certified as OK. Instead, we can rely on each other, teach each other, encourage and challenge each other because we know we're part of the same family; the family of God.

Abundance means we want to get off our buns and dance, because God is so good.

4. Leading under the radar; as a servant

This is especially true for leaders.

Jesus wants leaders to be servant leaders; to lead without calling attention to oneself, to lead by example.

Jesus wants leaders to fly under the radar as a servant to others, enjoying the company of others, doing good.

Jesus wants leaders to be wise as serpents – to be clever and use all their best skills, but to be innocent as doves – unselfish and doing no harm.

5. For those to whom much is given, much is required

We may not all be leaders, but we are all privileged to some extent. We are citizens of the wealthiest country in the world, we enjoy a freedom envied by many, and most of us have families who love us. Some of us have even more privileges.

We are called to be stewards of the privilege we have. Whatever influence we have, we're called to use it for good. Whatever success, whatever prestige, whatever name we've made for ourselves, we're called to use it for good.

In Luke 12:48, Jesus is recorded as saying, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

Jesus criticized the privileged, but not because they were privileged; instead Jesus criticized how they used that privilege.

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Jesus told a parable about a property owner who went away, and his chief servant was put in charge. The servant became drunk and irresponsible, so he was punished on the return of the owner.

It doesn't take much to see how that applies to us as we try to be servants of Christ. We may not have a problem with drunkenness, but there are many ways we can abuse a privilege given to us.

We can take pencils from work, we can ask for favors we do not deserve, we can use our position to reward ourselves. If we fall into the trap of rewarding ourselves because of our position, it may at first seem advantageous. But soon it becomes enslaving rather than freeing.

Because when we treat ourselves better than other people, it is living a lie. The lie is that I'm better than others. And whenever we live a lie, we have to keep lying in order to cover it up.

By contrast, humility is freeing, because we don't have to lie or pretend. We can just be who we are.

Thanks be to God's freeing grace.

Amen.

The person who wrote the book of Matthew was part of a community of Christians that lived alongside Pharisaic Judaism. Matthew was written after the Judaism of Jesus' time had already been destroyed. In 70 AD, the Roman armies leveled Jerusalem, and the temple with it. So the old way of Judaism, going to the temple to offer sacrifice, a religion led by a group of temple priests — that was gone. Taken away almost overnight.

What replace Temple Judaism was two main things: Pharisaic Judaism and Christianity. The Pharisaic Jews did those things that Jesus criticized.