

The CITYGATES C H U R C H

Matthew 23:25-39 The End of External Religion

Summary: God-less religion is critiqued by a patient, persistent, God who will ultimately judge all people and return to reign triumphantly over mankind.

Last year the President made news by proposing the creation of a Space Force as a new part of the Department of Defense. That's not as crazy as it may sound to some people. The Air Force and the Navy have been heavily invested in space for decades, and a new force would consolidate their efforts along with some others.

A few weeks ago I watched a video put out by the Air Force on YouTube, about some of their current space-based capabilities. For example, did you know the Air Force operates the satellites that enable GPS to work? They also had a segment on a group that uses massive antennas housed inside what look like gigantic golf balls to talk with infrared satellites that maintain surveillance over the entire planet. One of their main functions is launch detection. If a missile or rocket is launched anywhere on the planet, it has a heat signature as all that fuel is burned. The heat can be detected from space, and the men and women who work in this section can identify that and send an early warning to anyone who might be affected by the launch.



As I sat there watching the video I thought, "This is amazing!" Let's say you're the enemy, and you're sitting in your own country, out in the middle of the woods, there's no one around for 100 miles, you launch a rocket and you think it's a secret, there's no one there to see what you did, hear what you did, but people still know because way up above you there's a satellite sensing the heat you caused, and now they know exactly where you are and what you did – it's not a secret, you're not getting away with anything.

Well, this morning, we're going to see something similar with Jesus as He continues His critique of some of the religious leaders of His day. He has been patiently reaching out to them, answering their questions, working miracles to prove His identity, but they continue to resist Him so now He provides this withering assessment of their true spiritual condition. Notice how, like a space based satellite, Jesus sees through everything and knows exactly what is going on:

Matthew 23:25 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.

27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead *men's*

bones and all uncleanness. 28 Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

29 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 30 and say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’

31 “Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers’ *guilt*.

33 Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?

Did you notice the intensity of God’s scrutiny? He knows how these people appear, and how they really are. Friends, God sees through the external forms of our lives and right into our very hearts, minds, and motives. He sees things no one else sees.

Jesus says these people **outwardly appear righteous**, they seem like they have it all together. I think they would fit right in here with the rest of us here on the outskirts of Washington DC where most people look great from the outside.

I’ve done ministry in other parts of the country, and in other parts of the world, I’ve been able to minister to people whose lives were falling apart, and they knew it. But that’s not these guys. No, they looked good from the outside. They smiled when they came in the door, they had confidence, they were leaders. You wouldn’t know, just by looking at them, or even in casual conversation, that anything was wrong.

But Jesus sees right through it. He sees the discontinuity between the exterior appearance and the internal reality. Outside, they’re wearing nice clothes, saying polite things, doing nice things. Inside, they’re full of greed, self-indulgence, hypocrisy and lawlessness. In other words, they’re entirely self-oriented, focused on their own wants and desires.

They use civility, society, and religion, to cultivate an image and identity that is ultimately as self-centered as the hooligan, the hoarder, or the heroin addict.

They have what we might call a god-less religion, full of rituals and rules and robes, but no connection to the one, true, living God. They’re playing religious games.

Why would you do that? Why be so involved, so concerned, with a godless religion? Why go through all the rules, robes, and rituals and yet have no real connection with the divine? What’s the point? I’ll give you two main reasons, though there are others.

First, godless religion allows self-justification – you can point to something good you’ve done to explain away, or overshadow all the wrong you’ve done.

This is one reason diets fail. You tell yourself, well, I went to the gym this week so I can have a treat. But that treat winds up having more calories than you burned at the gym – and now you’re in a worse place than if you just skipped both the gym and the treat.

Jesus said the Holy Spirit shows up in our lives and brings us conviction of sin, righteous, and judgment. God is actively at work in our lives, it might be through this sense you get, you might call it your conscious, or this little voice in your head, but something tells you what you’re doing or what you’ve done is wrong. Or you come across Scripture that seems to leap off the page at you. Or someone says something in a conversation, it can happen all kinds of ways, but God gets your attention about something in your life and you have a sense of conviction that it’s wrong.

But you don’t want to change, you don’t want to stop, you don’t want to give it up, so you try to negotiate, to bargain. Alright God, I’ll go to church. Alright, I’ll give some money to a good cause. Alright, I’ll do something nice for someone else. You try to make up for *this* with *that*. But you never really address the original issue. You look good, righteous, clean, on the outside, other people think you’ve got it together, but you never dealt with the real issue inside. And every now and then the conviction comes back and you know you ought to do something about it, but you’re not ready, not yet, not now, not that. So you fight off the conviction and you keep doing these other things, trying to justify yourself on some invisible scale, piling up more good than bad in your life.

The other reason you might pursue a god-less religion is for the sake of finding identity. We all want to belong to something; we all want to be recognized, to be approved of. That doesn’t mean we want everybody to talk to us, we just want them to think highly of us. To be sufficiently impressed with us. No one wants people to think poorly of them. At some level, we all care what people think.

These men lived at a time when the Romans occupied their nation. So, it wasn’t like you could have any real aspirations of political leadership. There was very little room for independence. But, religion was an option. There was a hierarchy, a system, a ladder that could be climbed, a status to be gained, titles to be had. And that is always attractive to some people – there are people who go into religion, and even religious leadership for the sake of what they can get out of it – sometimes that’s money, but more often than not, it’s a sense of nobility, of moral superiority, and “deep spiritual insight.” People love to be right, and what better to be right about than the loftiest subject of all?

When religion is a system, some will exploit it for selfish-gain.

The good news is, God sees through it all. There is an incredible intensity to His scrutiny – He sees through the externals and into the deepest parts of our hearts, minds, and motives. What’s really remarkable though, is how He responds to what He finds there.

Let’s continue reading and notice the persistence of God’s patience towards us.

34 Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: *some* of them you will kill and crucify, and *some* of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, 35 that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

37 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under *her* wings, but you were not willing! 38 See! Your house is left to you desolate; 39 for I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘*Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!*’”

This is the last public address of Jesus. These are His final public words as a teacher and they are full of patience and deep, heart-felt, disappointment. It’s the disappointment of a parent who knows they must discipline their child for a grievous offense, it’s the heartbreak of a spouse who discovers their husband or wife has been cheating and is doing it again. It’s a woe for the judgment to come mixed up with a wish that it didn’t have to be this way.

Friends, you have to know, you have to see, you have to feel, the persistent patience of God – not just as you read about the way Jesus interacted with the scribes and Pharisees, but in your own life. You have to know that He sees right through your mask, looks right through your chest, reads your mind, knows your heart, and still, His first reaction is not rage, or anger, or disgust, but compassion. He calls out to you, asks you to leave the things that you’re caught up in, and come to Him.

Here He calls out “**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem**” – not once, but twice, because of the strong emotional pull He experiences. He didn’t just have an idea this one time to reach out to these people, He says, **He often wanted to gather [them] together**. And not for His own benefit, He wanted to gather them as parent watches over their child, as a bird watches over it’s young. He wanted to do things for them, *good things*.

Let me ask: Do you believe that God has your best interest at heart? Do you believe, when you hear God calling out to you, do you believe, that He wants good for you? Do you believe that no matter what He is calling you to, or from, that it will be good for you?

And can you appreciate His patience? Do you have an appreciation for how patient God is with you and your sin? He points it out to you again and again, calls you away from it. Sends people and circumstances your way to give you a warning or a way out, helps you see temptation coming, gives you a moment of cognition in the middle of your sin – to see what is happening instead of striking you down instantly. Do you appreciate that? Do you thank God for that?

Because it's not a cheap patience. God mourns, and His people suffer, while sinners sin. Jesus even talks here about the casualties of patience. He mentions Abel and Zechariah.

Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel. They both went to worship God one day, and they offered two different sacrifices. God accepted Abel's sacrifice, but not Cain's and that made Cain angry, so he killed his brother – it's the first recorded murder in human history and it's in Genesis *chapter four* – in other words, it didn't take very long for violence to enter our lives, and pay attention to this: the first victim suffered because someone hated his relationship with God.

That pattern continues throughout the Bible. People wander away from God after their own desires and when He sends people to get their attention and call them back to Himself, when people speak up for righteousness, they aren't always received well. You see that in the first pages of the Bible with Abel, and then in the last pages with Zechariah.

The Hebrew Bible contains all the books we have in the Old Testament. But they're in a different order. The Hebrew Bible begins with Genesis, but it ends with Chronicles. And not far from the end, in 2 Chronicles 24, you have the story of Zechariah's death.

LAW	PROPHETS	WRITINGS
Genesis	<i>Former Prophets</i> Joshua Judges 1-2 Samuel 1-2 Kings	Psalms
Exodus		<i>Pre-Exilic Writings</i> Job Proverbs Ruth Song of Songs Ecclesiastes
Leviticus		
Numbers		
Deuteronomy		
	<i>Latter Prophets</i> Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel The Twelve	<i>Post-Exilic Writings</i> Lamentations Esther Daniel Ezra-Nehemiah 1-2 Chronicles

He came into the court of King Joash and rebuked the nation for their sin so the king stirred up the people to stone him right there in the royal court.

When Jesus talks about [all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah](#) – He's saying from the first pages of your Scriptures to the last, righteous people have been put to death by people who couldn't stand them.

And now, these men are getting ready to do it once again. They can't stand what Jesus is doing, can't stand His message, can't bear the conviction, have no desire to repent and change, they're happy with their god-less religion, so they're plotting to have Him murdered in cold blood, just like Abel, just like Zechariah, and just like countless others before and since.

It is a mystery that is hard to understand, but not only is there an incredible intensity to God's scrutiny as He sees what is going on in our lives, there's also a persistence to His patience as He waits for people to repent, even though that patience sometimes means good people have to suffer; even if it means His own Son has to suffer. God is that patient, that compassionate, that willing for us to repent and change.

But let me show you something else, turn with me to the last pages of our Bible where we see people who were persecuted for their faith while God patiently called their persecutors

to repentance, but we see things from an eternal perspective. Turn with me to the book of Revelation, chapter 7.

The context here is God's judgment being poured out on the earth. God is persistently patient, but the time comes for every one of us, and for the entire world, when God says enough is enough. In Revelation 6 and 8 we see that happening, God's wrath and final judgment being poured out on the unrighteous, but nestled right between them we get a glimpse of what is happening in heaven, and it says:

Revelation 7:9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation *belongs* to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 11 All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying:

"Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom,
Thanksgiving and honor and power and might,
Be to our God forever and ever.
Amen."

13 Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?"

14 And I said to him, "Sir, you know."

So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. 16 They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; 17 for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Friends, the day is coming when God will bring an end to all suffering for those who have been cleansed inside by Jesus. He will bring an end to all need, He will bring an end to all frustration, and fear, and heartache, and injustice, an end to all discrimination, and worry, and illness. If you are in Christ, if Christ is in you, the day is coming when you *shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike [you], nor any heat; 17 for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd [you] and lead [you] to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from [your] eyes.*

But for those who have not been cleansed on the inside, for those who do not respond to the instruction and conviction that God brings, there will be a day of reckoning. God never just forgets the wrongs we have done. Either they are forgiven in Christ, or they are stacked

against you forever and you will be held accountable. No one, ever, really gets away with anything.

God sees right through every one of us – whether we appear upright and righteous, diabolical and sinister, or we just don't look like much at all. He sees to the core of who we are, and will judge us for that. He will judge the intentions and motives of our hearts and minds. But only after He has patiently and persistently called us to repent.

Jesus' last public teaching is a message of condemnation for those with a godless religion, but it's meant to be a message of warning, encouragement, and hope for His disciples. Because, think about this: if God can see through those people, see who they really are and what truly motivates them, and still patiently and persistently reach out to them, still mourn over the fact that they haven't turned to Him, what does that tell us about His attitude toward those that love Him?

The fact is, we all start off as dirty cups. We all need to be cleansed. So if you see dirt in your life, if you feel it, if you know it, don't just try to polish up the outside, ask Jesus to power-wash every part of your life. He will. He wants to, He's even patiently waiting to do it.

But after that first washing, cups get dirty through daily use. We sin still sin, we still struggle. Don't respond to that by creating more religious rules, or determining to do more religious things, don't try to fix the dirt in your life with robes, rules, and rituals, seek God, seek daily renewal and cleansing for your souls. Seek greater alignment between your inner and outer life. God isn't just running a system of satellites watching what is happening on earth from way up there in space. He wants to put His hands on you, scrub you, cleanse you, love you, up close and personal, inside and out.

We're going to celebrate communion now, we're going to remember what Jesus has done to make us clean. And as the men distribute the elements it's a good time for us to sit and reflect - to let God speak to us about the parts of our lives that need to be cleansed, to let His Spirit testify to us about what He sees when He sees right through us, and to be reminded that He is patiently, persistently, desiring our good - this bread and this cup that represent His body and blood, they prove it.

Let's pray.