



## **Matthew 23:1-12** **Esteeming Humility**

Summary: Jesus warns of corrupt religious motives and conduct while encouraging us to listen to God's instruction in Scripture and humbly serve others.

When you read the different biographies of Jesus in the Bible, one thing that might surprise you is who Jesus has conflict with. You might think He goes around showing up at parties on Friday nights and yelling at all the drunk people. You might think He goes into the Roman temples and zaps everyone who has come to worship some idol. Or, you might think He goes around stopping crime like some sort of first century Superhero.

But when you read the Scriptures, you don't find Jesus doing that. Instead, His largest conflicts are with people everyone else would say are very religious. He certainly condemned drunkenness, spoke out against worshipping false idols, and He was absolutely pro-victim and anti-crime, but He was also very concerned about how people represented or misrepresented God.

As we jump into Matthew's gospel this morning we find Jesus giving a very honest, open, and at times, forceful, critique of the religion of His day.

If you have been with us recently you know how right before this Jesus stood in the Temple in Jerusalem and gave illustration after illustration to help the leading religious groups, and even the priests, see and understand what God was doing by sending Jesus. He worked miracles to prove that His authority came from God and that people should listen to Him. He answered question after question they posed to Him. But even with all of that, few of the religious establishment would accept Jesus.

So now He's going to offer a public criticism of the people involved. He's going to warn His followers, including you and me, about things to watch out for in our spiritual lives and He's going to give us a better path forward involving humility and service and then, before we close, we'll learn how we can evaluate ourselves and the churches and ministries we're involved in to see whether or not we're on the right track today.

So, let's look together at Matthew 23:

**Matt 23:1** Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, 2 saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, *that* observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. 4 For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay *them* on men's shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers. 5 But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and

enlarge the borders of their garments. 6 They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, 7 greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' 8 But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. 9 Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. 10 And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. 11 But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

The first thing I would like you to see in all of this is: *it is possible to be very religious yet remain distant from God.*

Jesus is critiquing men who seem very religious from the outside, everything about them says: I take God seriously. The way they dress, the way they speak, the places they go, the titles they go by, all make it seem like God is the very center of their lives. And yet, here Jesus is criticizing all of it.

So, who were these people? Well, the scribes were like religious lawyers – they spent time studying the Scriptures and then debating and cataloging what they meant and how, exactly, people should obey them. The Pharisees were a religious denomination of Judaism that was obsessed with doing everything the scribes said in order to prove that they were really good Jews.



Let me give you an example based on something we see here: the phylacteries these men wore. These are small boxes attached to leather straps that are wrapped around the hands, the arms, and the head during times of prayer and they contain small pieces of paper with these verses written on them.

It was a practice with origins in Scripture.

Look at Deuteronomy 6 with me, but give me just a minute to get the point of the phylacteries. Here is Deuteronomy 6 Moses is giving the people of Israel what they called the Law, special instructions from God about how they were to live as people in a special covenant relationship with Him. So Moses tells them:

**Deuteronomy 6:4** "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD *is* one! 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

You might remember we saw this two weeks ago when the scribes asked Jesus what is the greatest commandment, and He quoted this to them and added one other clause – that you should love God this way, AND love your neighbor as yourself.

Well, that passage goes on to say:

**Deuteronomy 6:6** “And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.

Now that should sound familiar to some of you because it’s on the plaque we present to families each time we do a baby dedication – it’s a reminder that parents have the privilege of telling their children about God and talking about issues of faith in the house, in the minivan, on the way to school and coming home from the store – that discussion about spiritual things should be a normal part of life and mom and dad should be the primary leaders of that discussion.

Then it says,

**Deuteronomy 6:8** You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The Jews took this instruction literally and created what are called phylacteries in Matthew or *tefillin* in Hebrew.

They do the same thing with little containers mounted to their doorposts that contain small scrolls of Scripture.



And back in Matthew you see Jesus making reference to the borders of their garments – this is a fringe of string found at the corners of their clothing that you will still observe Jews wearing today.

Now, it’s important to note: Jesus is not criticizing these men for having or wearing these distinctive religious items. *He’s criticizing them for making such a show of it.* They made sure they did what the Bible commanded in such a way that everyone knew they were doing it. They were doing the right thing, but the wrong way, with the wrong motives – proving, as we noted earlier, *it is possible to be very religious yet remain distant from God.*

But how does that happen? How can you be so obviously concerned with spiritual things and yet be so completely off target? The answer is, it often happens when we make religion more about us than about God.

Notice that Jesus warns His disciples about turning the beauty of faith and religion into something that resembles a sweaty competitive sport. He criticizes the scribes and Pharisees for taking things that were good, right, and true, and transforming them into something to show off and compete with.

It wasn't enough to wear phylacteries; they made them bigger. It wasn't enough to have tassels on your garments; they made them longer and more prominent.

And on top of that, they came up with all kinds of religious rules to keep – [heavy burdens, hard to bear](#), so you could prove whether you were really serious about all of this or not.

Because, as with all rites of passage or tests, if you pass, you get a reward – you get [the best place at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplace](#), and you get to be called, [Rabbi, Rabbi](#), by people who are less important than you. Rabbi is often translated teacher, but it's literally Hebrew for 'My master.' You're seen as the expert, the one who really knows – you've made the cut, you're cool, and they're all looking up to you now and affirming how great you are. Master, teach me how to be as good as you!

Can I point something out here though? There is no mention of the reward of a greater knowledge of God or a greater relationship with Him as the result of these things. All the approval, all the recognition that comes from completing these tasks or doing these things, comes from other people. You're going through all these religious motions simply because you want other people to give you recognition. It has nothing to do with God. My friends, this is a horrifying reality. People can, and do, use religion as just another arena to compete in because we all, deep down, want to be recognized and valued.

It is sad, but true – the human heart will always find a way, in any environment, to sort people into more and less important categories. There is something deep in our hearts that always wants to judge, am I just like you, better than you, or less than you?

We compete with our appearance: does she dress nicer than I do? Does He have a better build than I do, could I take him in a fight? We compete in education: what classes are you taking, where did you go school, what's your degree in? We compete in athletics: do you play? What sport? Travel or rec? JV or Varsity? And we compete at work all the time.

Sadly, we even search for ways to compete at church, ways to stand out, to be noticed, to belong because we all want to be recognized, we all want to be affirmed.

And that's true even of my fellow introverts – we just stand quietly in the corner and make smug judgments about people. We think we're better than they are because we're not out there showing off or jostling for position like everyone else. But we're still comparing! The human heart is always looking for ways to justify and affirm itself.

My friends, some of us came in to church today looking for affirmation and approval from other people, hoping to be noticed by other people or hoping to talk to so and so. And some of us look around and pat ourselves on the back because we think we're doing such a good job here, we're really good Christians. It's not malicious, it's probably not intentional, but we're doing it: we're making this morning more about us than it is about God. We love being seen, being noticed, being affirmed for the religious work we're doing, being greeted by others.

And the message that Jesus has for all of us is: we need to stop it. We need to stop comparing ourselves to each other. *We need to know who we are individually before God.*

You need to know that you have value simply because you bear the image of God. You need to know that He actually has a plan for your life. You need to know that He sent His Son to die in your place as an act of sacrifice so that you could be brought closer to God. You need to know that you have inherent dignity, inherent value, not because of what you have attained or what you rules you follow, or what you drive or what you wear or where you work or what shape your body is in. You have an identity and worth that cannot be taken away from you because God has given it to you. So receive that.

Stop trying to carve out an identity on your own. Keeping up your image is exhausting at times. You know it is. And the competition with others is exhausting too, but that's all part of the game when you make life about *what I can do* instead of about *who I am*. If you can keep up you feel good about yourself, you feel smug, you feel justified and proud. But what if you can't? How do you feel then? Defeated, depressed, condemned, and eventually disengaged, you give up – if you can't win, why compete?

Look, tell God you're tired of trying to establish your own identity, tell Him you're tired of living for the approval of others, and tell Him you want to receive the identity He has for you in Christ. Tell Him you want to live for His good pleasure. You want to be more concerned about what He thinks of you than anyone else. Tell Him you want to live for His recognition and approval. And tell your soul to be still and rest in Him.

Learn to say like David,

**Psalm 62:1** Truly my soul silently *waits* for God;  
From Him *comes* my salvation.  
**2** He only *is* my rock and my salvation;  
*He is* my defense;  
I shall not be greatly moved.

God is calling you into a relationship where you depend more on Him than on your own achievements. A relationship based on acceptance and approval because of who you are in Christ instead of what you can do and how hard you can try.

But let me tell you, this is not a switch you flip once and it's over. This is a fight you have to keep fighting, your heart will always want to slip out and find a way to justify itself through comparisons, so get ready for a battle, but fight it, and keep fighting it.

And as you do, you'll experience a shift. You'll still be aware of people around you, but instead of comparing yourself to them or asking if they have noticed and approved of you, now you start to ask, what do the people around me need and how can I best help them?

Listen to the words that Jesus speaks to you when He says:

**Matthew 23:11** ... he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. 12 And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Jesus is on an epic rescue mission – He came to seek and to save the lost. He came to radically change the lives of men and women, boys and girls. He came to redirect our lives. And after He has done that for you, He wants to make you spiritually contagious and use you to affect others. He wants you to show His love and concern to others. He wants you to be genuinely helpful to people around you – the greatest help you can ever be is to care for the eternal destiny of their souls, to pray for them, asking God to save them and then to take action, to have conversations with them about spiritual things, to invite them to church, to share the gospel with them. To Humble yourself and serve them.

The best way you can serve them is by caring for their soul, but you can also serve them by meeting practical needs – to see something that needs to be done and do it. To help in whatever ways is necessary because you see yourself available as God’s servant in their life. You don’t need everyone to approve of you, affirm you, or think highly of you, you get all of that from God, and so now you’re just free to serve. And the crazy thing is: that when you humble yourself like that, when you make yourself increasingly available to God, He will exalt you. In His way, in His time, but nothing you do for Him ever goes unnoticed. As long as you’re truly doing it for Him, and not the recognition of the people around you.

Well, let me bring one other thing to your attention while we are here in this passage and that is: *God’s Word is the unchanging standard by which we should judge all other things.*

Notice how Jesus began His remarks -

**Matt 23:1** [He] spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, 2 saying: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. 3 Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.

Jesus says, even though these guys have messed up motives and behaviors, you still need to hear what they say when they’re telling you what God’s Word says – when they sit in Moses’ seat and tell you about the Scripture.

This is one rare situation where it’s OK to do as they say, but not as they do.

And that is an important lesson for us to hold onto today. Because pastors and ministry leaders are going to do things wrong sometimes. They might even have a moral failure and embarrass themselves, their family, and the church spectacularly. Pastors, priests, and ministry leaders are capable of committing the same sins as celebrities, entertainers, athletes, politicians, and Hollywood producers *if they take their eyes off God.*

Unfortunately, it seems like we're never far enough away from the latest headline or newsfeed telling us about a church scandal and while I don't want to dismiss or minimize anyone's behavior, I do want to say Jesus separated the truth these men proclaimed from the lives they lived. When they sat in the seat of Moses reading the Scriptures in the synagogue, they were proclaiming the right things, but they were doing the wrong things about it. So, Jesus says:

**Matthew 23:3** ... whatever they tell you to observe, *that* observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.

People, pastors, ministry leaders, even whole churches and denominations may misrepresent God, but that doesn't make His Word any less true. Jesus says listen to the Scripture they read to you, but don't follow their example in applying it to daily life. Compare what you find in Scripture to what you see and hear in their lives and consider how the two line up.

Some of you have had bad church experiences. You were around bad teaching or bad application, toxic environments, and God led you out of them. How? By helping you see the difference between what His Word really said and what you were seeing and hearing around you.

Christian, I want to encourage you to read your Bible. I want to encourage you to know what it says. It tells you the qualifications for a man to be a pastor. When you want to know what my job is, you go to the same source as I do. When you want to know what God says about prayer, or miracles, or heaven and hell, or money, or social justice, or sexual identify, you go to the same place I do.

I don't have any special information that only pastors get. You have your own personal copy of everything God wants us to know, you have a way to check everything you see and hear in church or on the radio, or in some ministry or some video or podcast – you have the Word of God, so use it to verify and validate things for yourself, especially if something seems off.

In the book of Acts we're told that the people of Berea were more noble than others because when they heard Paul preaching, they went home and examined the Scriptures for themselves to see whether these things were true. I want to encourage you to do the same. Read ahead, you know where we're going - next week we're going to be back in Matthew 23 read the chapter this week, see what God shows you as you read, and pray for me that I would know exactly what to say about it next Sunday.

Today we need to avoid two extremes – either blindly loving and uncritically following our pastors and leaders on the one hand, or despising or discounting them on the other. The fact of the matter is, Scripture says Jesus has given pastors and teachers to the church; they

are a gift from Him, to you, for your benefit. It's OK to love them, to be grateful for them, just make sure you're ultimately thanking God for the way He has used them in your life.

Today, there are far more good pastors and ministry leaders than corrupt ones, we just hear about failures and frauds more often because they're more memorable. Many of you know that Judas was one of Jesus' disciples because he's the one that betrayed Him, but how many other disciples can you name? I can't always remember the other 11 off the top of my head – but less than ten percent were defective and he's one of the names we remember most.

Pastors and ministry leaders have the same struggles as everyone else. They're not perfect. In fact, they're in the enemy's crosshairs – Satan knows that he can discourage far more people and discredit far more truth and good works if he can bring down a pastor or leader. So, the more you appreciate your pastor or ministry leader, the more you should pray for them.

Personally, it's been a joy to pastor this church for the past three years and to see all that God has done in our midst. But I believe He wants to do even more. I think God wants to do something greater here at City Gates for His glory and the last thing I want to do is disqualify myself or hinder that work through selfish sin.

So pray for me.

Your prayers are the fuel of this ministry, not our leadership or marketing or programming or any of that – God will bless us as long as we keep saying yes, Lord – as long as we keep making ourselves increasingly available to Him. As long as we, individually and collectively, keep saying Jesus, we want You and Your ways over everything else – You must increase and we must decrease. I believe God wants to do more here – and I believe that we could blow it, IF we make this about us instead of about Him. So let's stay in His Word, let's receive our identify and affirmation from Him, let's humble ourselves, and let's look around and ask: who do You want me to serve?

Let's pray.