

Sincerity, Sympathy and Humility

Matthew 23:1-12

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In our Tuesday night Adult Study we've been viewing a video series called LEAD BEYOND OUR WALLS. Each week a different pastor from around the country is the featured speaker. These are pastors of mega churches, churches that experience an average weekend attendance of thousands and thousands of people. They are messengers of the mystery and traffickers of God's grace. They are changing lives through their sermons. Thousands and thousands of people are being changed through their messages.

And yet there is no one who has touched more lives and changed more people through His sermons than Jesus of Nazareth. Today we are going to look at one of His sermons recorded for us in Matthew's account of the Gospel, chapter 23. Matthew had been traveling with Jesus now for about three years. He'd heard a lot of sermons by Jesus during that time. This sermon is one of six that the Holy Spirit inspired Matthew to include in his account of Jesus' life and teachings. At the end of His sermon it says, "And Jesus left the temple...." He had to be there before he could leave it, so we know that is where He was speaking.

This sermon is often referred to as the Seven Woes. But for today, we're going to focus on the first part of the sermon and leave the Woes for another time. In this sermon Jesus really lets the Scribes and the Pharisees have it. It's no wonder He had to leave the temple when he was finished speaking. Matthew and the other disciples must have been wondering if they were going to make it out of there alive. I can see them grabbing Jesus by the cloak and shoving Him out the door and across the court yard to where they could disappear into the city.

Some scholars have suggested it was just Jesus and His disciples there in the temple. If they were there alone that would explain how He could say all those things about the Pharisees and teachers of the law and get away with it. It is always easier to criticize someone behind their back rather than to their face. But that really wasn't Jesus' style. He spoke directly to those He had a problem with. I'm certain the Scribes and the Pharisees were there that day, perhaps even sitting in the front row. After all, they were the official expounders of the law and they were there to judge the accuracy of what was being taught in the temple. These guys were legal authorities and theologians all wrapped up in one. They were responsible for quality control in the temple. It would be unimaginable that on a given day the temple would be completely empty of any Scribes or Pharisees and yet verses 2 - 7 refer to them in the third person, as if they weren't really there.

Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever been in a room where people were talking about you as if you weren't there? Like you were invisible? Maybe you were in the hospital recovering from some kind of surgery and the doctor came in and began to talk to your family member about the surgery as if you weren't there. In that situation people come and go and

talk to your spouse about you but not to you. You can kind of hear them, but you're still groggy from the anesthesia. That's one thing to have people talking about you as if you weren't there when you probably weren't all there, but it's another thing to do what Jesus did by talking about the Scribes and Pharisees as if they weren't there when they were. It must have made them very angry. It is no wonder a couple of days later Jesus was handed over to the authorities to be crucified. What Jesus said about the Scribes and the Pharisees filled them with intense anger and rage. Jesus really let them have it. He called them out. He condemns them for what they lacked in their lives.

The first thing Jesus condemns in the Scribes and Pharisees is their lack of sincerity. He says, "*They sit in Moses' seat*" which is a way of saying that the Scribes and Pharisees are authorized successors of Moses. Their authority has been handed down to them as a trust. They have been given the responsibility to preserve the accuracy of the law and to see that it is obeyed. They required all kinds of things from others but then they went out and did whatever they pleased. They didn't hold themselves to the same standards they held others to. I suppose we all have heard the phrase, "**Do as I say, not as I do.**" I remember hearing adults say that when I was a child, and I thought, "There's something wrong here." I have never said that to my children and by the grace of God I never will. I would feel like such a hypocrite if I held them to a higher standard than I held myself. I don't think there is a more stinging indictment to a parent or a teacher or a minister than "**they don't practice what they preach.**"

God calls us to be sincere, transparent followers of Jesus Christ. By God's grace we are to strive to be people who practice what we preach. We are to be people who hold ourselves to the same standard that we teach others. But often we expect others to be perfect and never do anything to offend us or let us down. Sometimes we even refuse to see anything wrong with the way we are, with the things we say and do. We can see the speck in someone else's eye and not the lumber mill in our own eye. God calls us to practice what we preach and live sincere lives of faithful obedience to the teachings of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

The second thing Jesus condemns in the Scribes and Pharisees is their lack of sympathy. These guys had mastered the art of avoiding the burden of the law for themselves while piling it on for others. They had buried the Law of God under hundreds of manmade laws so that no one could possibly follow them all. They had heaped heavy moral burdens on the backs of the people while they themselves manipulated the law to their own advantage. Jesus says, "*They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves aren't willing to lift a finger to move them.*"

The Bible teaches that we will avoid God's wrath and make our home in heaven by the grace of God, not because of our good deeds. Our good deeds are evidence of God's grace at work within us. They are what we have been saved to do. But they are not what saves us. What a freeing experience it is when we understand that. We are set free to do our good works without keeping score. If we do good because we want to make God love us, we are doing that good for a wrong reason, a selfish reason. We are to do good out of gratitude for what Christ has already done for us on the cross, not in an attempt to make God love us or to earn our way to heaven. The Bible is very clear; ***"It is by grace that you have been saved, not by works...so that no one can boast."*** (Ephesians 2:8) Salvation is by completely and totally by grace alone.

The third thing Jesus condemns is their lack of humility. He says, ***"Everything they do is done for men to see... They love the places of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi'."*** All this is an illustration of the way the Scribes and Pharisees would milk the crowd for praise for themselves when they should have been telling people to give all the glory to God. If we do our good deeds to impress others, then they are done for the wrong reason.

Did you know that Jesus spent more time talking about humility than just about any other subject? It was obviously very important to Jesus that we get this. At the end of the day, when all is said and done, how do you do on the humility scale? As you look back over the day, did you do the good things you did because you wanted to impress others or because you wanted to bring glory to God? Was it to show yourself better than others or to give God the credit for pouring His grace into your life - giving you the desire and strength to do what is good and kind and loving? What motivates you to do the good things you do? Is it the praise of others, or the praise of God? Remember, God sees what is done in private and He rewards those who humbly seek to please Him and bring glory to Him and not self.

The Scribes and the Pharisees were constantly looking and longing for public recognition of their prominence. They wanted to be addressed as "rabbi", which literally means "my lord". They wanted the high reputation as teachers of the Law. They were hungering and thirsting, not after righteousness, but after recognition. Jesus condemned their yearning for rank and privilege. He condemned them for having as their driving force the desire to get special recognition above everyone else. Jesus told them, if you want to be my follower, you must not allow your attention to be fixed on human titles and distinctions but on God, who alone is worthy.

This day on the church calendar is designated as Reformation Sunday. The Sixteenth Century Reformation had many slogans that rallied the people. These slogans helped the people remember what they were fighting for. They were much like the battle cry "NO TAXATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION" during the American Revolution. There were six slogans of the Reformation. The first slogan is **SOLA SCRIPTURA**, (by scripture alone) which proclaims that the Bible is the highest authority for how we should live and what we should believe. If someone, even the Pope, teaches something other than the plain truth of Scripture on a matter, we of the Reformed faith are to stand with Scripture. Martin Luther said, "Here I stand. I can do no other." The second slogan is **SOLUS CRISTUS** (by Christ alone) proclaims that we are saved from our sin by what Jesus has done for us on the cross and not anything we do. It is the sinless life and obedient death of Christ on our behalf that makes us acceptable in God's sight. The third slogan is **SOLA GRATIA** (by grace alone). God applies what Christ has done as an act of grace toward us. We don't deserve it. That's what grace is. He gives us something we don't deserve. He credits to us the righteousness of Christ. **SOLA FIDE** is the fourth battle cry. It means by faith alone we receive the benefits of Christ and the faith we have is not of ourselves but is a gift from God. Fallen human nature has always recoiled from recognizing the need for Christ. Apart from God's grace we think we earn our salvation because we're better than others. We're smarter than others. We're more insightful than others. Or at best we give credit to the teachers we have had who shared Christ with us. But the truth is: God can use even the worst teacher to bring someone to Christ. Faith is a gift and it is with faith that we embrace what Christ has done for us. The fifth slogan is **SOLI DEO GLORIA** - (to God alone be the glory). When we are motivated to do our good deeds out of a desire to have God get the praise, then we are living according to this slogan.

Those are the slogans of the Reformation that we looked at last year. Today I would like to mention briefly two more concepts restored by the Reformation. The first is **Corum Deo**. It addresses how we are to live. *Corum Deo* means "before the face of God." We are to live every moment of our lives with the awareness that God sees all. There is nothing he does not see. Nothing escapes His awareness. We live transparently before Him. He sees the good, the bad and the ugly and He still loves us. This truth is to motivate us to do the best we can to please Him. We don't need the recognition of others for the good works we do or the sacrifices we make. God sees what we do in private and He will reward us accordingly.

The second is "THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS." Jesus says to crowd, "*You are not to be called 'Rabbi', for you have only one Master and you are all brother.*" (Matthew 23:8) This statement brings down those who elevate themselves above others and lifts up those who humble themselves before their Master, Jesus Christ. The great reformer, Martin Luther, declared that when we are baptized we all become priests by virtue of our baptism. Luther cites the scripture passage from 1st Peter 2:9. The apostle Peter writes, "*You*

are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

Everyone who is called by Christ, who responds in faith to follow Christ, resting his or her whole salvation in what Christ has done, enters into the royal priesthood. You are all priests if you have been baptized and trust in what Christ has done for you. As such you are called to share Christ with the world and proclaim how He has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

From Revelations we read, *"They sang a new song [to the Lamb]: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased humankind for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God...'"*(Revelation 5:9-10)

Let us be priests to one another and to the world - priests whose lives are marked by sincerity, sympathy and humility.