

July 8, 2018

Lesson 6: Jesus Criticizes Unjust Leaders

Scripture: Matthew 23:1-4, 23-26

Context:

This week Jesus moves from calling for justice and mercy to calling out those who do not practice justice and mercy. Today's lesson is based in the Gospel of Matthew towards the end of his ministry. However, the leaders he calls out are those well known in all the gospels, the Pharisees and the legal experts. One does not have to go far in any of the gospels to find these groups who Jesus discussed and debated scriptural interpretation.

The scripture verses selected from chapter twenty-three tell of Jesus's words to the disciples and crowds as he labels the legal experts and Pharisees hypocrites. Hypocrites are those who give instructions on how to live and then do the opposite. In this case, the Pharisees have the right teaching, but they do not follow what they dispense.

The same goes for the ritual understanding of the latter verses as they focus more on details than on the more abstract aspects of God's commands. The gist of the message is that these teachers miss the real point of the teachings as they focus on precise measurements, but then negate their commandments to love their neighbor. Yet the garden herbs will have the proper tax! Jesus goes on to point that they are like the outside of a cup and plate that looks appetizing. Yet on the inside, there is filth that needs to be cleaned.

Upon reading this passage, one would think they have a clear understanding of the Pharisees and legal experts. However it is important to note that at the time the Gospel of Matthew was being written, the Christian community was still developing. That meant Jews were also in the process of figuring out their identity with rival religious groups within Judaism competing with one another for followers. In reading scripture, it is important that there was a current audience the writer was trying to target. In the case of Matthew, there is an attempt to persuade Jewish Christians on the fence to jump to Christianity.

Today modern Jewish scholars contend that Christians should be careful when reading this chapter as it could be read as a condemnation of all the Pharisees, those who are today the founders of modern Judaism.¹ There were just as many religious and good-natured Pharisees including Hillel, Shammai, and Jochanan ben Zakkai who helped lead first-century Judaism.² They are to be honored as noble leaders.

Jesus is clearly addressing a different crowd that he encountered in his ministry. There were hypocritical Pharisees and legal experts just as there have been numerous hypocritical Christian leaders. All one has to do is look at the list of Popes during the

¹ Douglas R.A. Hare, "Matthew," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1993), 263.

² *Ibid.*, 263.

Middle Ages and the current sexual scandals in the Protestant world to know that hypocrisy is not for just one religion. Hypocrites are in every major world religion.

Application

I think I know why this chapter was one of the last before Jesus was arrested and crucified. Jesus's words pack a punch and do not hold back from walking over anyone, including the religious authorities of the day. Imagine all the toes Jesus stepped on when he said these words.

Yet I would think that everyone, whether a part of the crowd or the disciples, would feel their toes stepped on as they heard Jesus speak of those who do not follow the rules, give reluctantly to God, follow shallow ritual observances of a check list, and are experts at superficiality. Jesus's sermon was not just directed as shade against the Pharisees and the legal experts. He was warning the crowd of the temptation of hypocrisy, especially when you accumulate power over others by authority or position.

Have you ever been called a hypocrite? I have before and I can tell you it's not a pleasant experience, especially if there is truth in the statement. However, from time to time we have and will probably be hypocrites on some issue. We will say one thing and then do one another.

This is especially difficult when we are leaders. It is easy when people are looking to you for direction or guidance to give them the right words of which path to follow. Yet, it is different when we ourselves have a different part of our journey where we know the right thing to do, but it's just too hard to do so. It is easy to follow into the trap of telling others what to do and then not do the same yourself.

I think that is why it is important to always be honest with yourself and with a close group of colleagues or friends about where you are on your spiritual journey. Hypocrisy cannot stay alive when you have others who truly love you and will be honest with you about where you are thriving and where you have some growing edges. The truth can hurt and it also sets you free.

We will all mess up in life. We will all lose our tempers with someone who knows the right button to push. We will all have that event that we secretly dread to attend. We will all have a day where we just wake up on the wrong side of the bed and need someone to wake us up. The danger is to let those things fester and to keep going and make excuses about our hypocrisy. The better options are to confess to someone your frustrations, to pray about a situation, to meditate on scripture, or even to work your stress out through a hobby or creative outlet.

As we are reminded from Jesus's words today, we are to clean up our insides and God is there willing to help us get cleaned up. There is no judgment or condemnation, just assurance that God will help us. Jesus came so that we might live, lead, and be like him even with people who are difficult and when the times are hard. Jesus calls us to be a part of justice league, one where the agents are not just hearers, they are doers.

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