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Evergreen PCA
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Sermon Title: Hypocritical Religion

Sermon Text: Matthew 23:1-12

Matt. 23:1 ¶ Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,

Matt. 23:2 “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat,

Matt. 23:3 so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.

Matt. 23:4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.

Matt. 23:5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long,

Matt. 23:6 and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues

Matt. 23:7 and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.

Matt. 23:8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.

Matt. 23:9 And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.

Matt. 23:10 Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.

Matt. 23:11 The greatest among you shall be your servant.

Matt. 23:12 Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Main Point: Jesus is thoroughly disgusted by people who invent ways for people to feel like they have pleased or disappointed God.

Outline:

1. Hypocritical Religion is Self-Centered (23:5)
2. Hypocritical Religion Performs to be Seen (23:5-7)
3. Hypocritical Religion Creates Burdens (23:4)

Introduction

Up to this point in the story, Jesus has entered into Jerusalem. He knows that this will be his last time entering Jerusalem before he is executed. And like someone who knows how the story ends already, he is full of boldness. And so today here he comes like the prophets of Israel's history with fire and fury and brimstone. Today's passage is the beginning of a stinging indictment of the Jewish leadership.

And what I want to do is to focus on the warnings Jesus gives, because that's most of this passage. But before we do that, let's look at the affirmative thing Jesus says in verses 2-3 and try to make some sense out of it:

“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you.”

What does Jesus mean when he says, “do and observe whatever they tell you”? Isn't he about to rip them to shreds? It seems like a huge thing for him to lead by telling the people to do and observe whatever they tell you. Well let me compound the dilemma even more. Jesus has specifically taken issue already, not just with what the Pharisees do, but with what they teach.

- In Matthew 15:3 he said that they broke God's commandments through their traditions – which they taught.
- In 15:14 he said they were “blind guides” who were leading people into the pit.
- In 16:5, he warned against the leaven of the Pharisees which was their teaching.
- In 19:3, he showed that their teaching on divorce was straight up wrong.

- Not only that, but in our own reading this week and next, he will directly challenge aspects of their teachings, and not just their behavior.

So how on earth can Jesus also say to do “whatever they tell you”? Should we listen to their teaching... or not?

Well remember: Jesus always took the Pharisees back to the Scriptures, and pulled them away from any traditions that added to God’s word.

I think the key to understanding what he says is found in this appeal to the Seat of Moses. Every synagogue in Israel had a special seat called Moses’ chair. And we see in places how Jesus would speak in synagogues, and he would sit in this chair to teach the law of God. The seat of Moses was symbolic of someone who rightly reads and teaches God’s law.

When Jesus tells the people to do whatever the scribes and Pharisees teach because they “sit on Moses’ seat,” he is not providing a blanket approval of all of their teachings. Instead, he is saying that when the leaders are faithful in how they open and explain the Law of Moses, they are rightly sitting in Moses’ seat. He’s doing what he’s already done, which is he’s taking their teaching and holding them up to the lens of Scripture.

All things are to be tested by God’s word, and not simply by the force of the personality of the speaker.

And I think what Jesus is doing here is, he’s affirming that these are men who are often very focused on the law of Moses. And insofar as they are reading Moses well, and faithfully, and not adding to it, they should be listened. They aren’t always wrong, because they do have the law. The problem is when they begin to add their own rules and requirements to people. That’s when the wheels start to come off.

And that is going to be our focus this week and next, because Jesus is very troubled by the religious propensity to take what is good, and to add to it. To take what is clear and true and godly and Scriptural and to say, “Yes, but there are also some other things that I want to add.” “Yes, but look what I can do.”

And this goes back to a constant problem, not just with the Jewish leaders, but with all of us: **we tend toward performance and hypocrisy the way a rock tends**

towards the ground. We just gravitate toward favoring a good appearance rather than a good substance.

If we're willing to have our own hearts searched out today, Jesus gets us going. You might think this passage is about these other people – these bad people – these bad teachers of the law; and it is. But this is about the tendency we all have toward religious hypocrisy. We are constantly tempted to focus on the external, to focus on performance, to focus on ourselves, to live on the surface but to fear going much deeper. And so listen to Jesus today, but let his warnings be about you, not just other people.

Today, Jesus shows us three things: First, hypocritical religion is self-obsessed. Second, hypocritical religion performs to be seen. And Third, hypocritical religion creates burdens.

Let's just get right to it, and as we do let's ask God to search out our own hearts.

1. Hypocritical Religion Is Self-centered (23:5)

First, look at this: hypocritical religion is self-centered.

Let me say something about that phrase I'm using over and over again in our outline today: "Hypocritical religion." I'm intentionally adding that word "hypocritical" as a modifier. And here's why.

It's common for some people – and especially ministers – to talk about "religion" as if religion itself is the problem or at least a problem. To be honest, I think this has been a very confusing way for ministers to speak to people. Speaking negatively about religion itself.

And ministers have been doing this for decades, and it has been copied by those in the pews. It was something I remember hearing in preaching constantly. I can't tell you how many times I heard preachers say, "Christianity isn't a religion, it's a relationship." They just kept denying that Christianity is a religion.

But not only do I think that's unhelpful, but it's incredibly unclear, I think you might even say it's disingenuous, and I think it has produced bad fruit. Let me explain what I mean.

According to the Bible, religion is not a problem.

James 1:26 tells us that religion which is *all talk* is worthless. So the Bible has a problem with worthless religion.

And in the next verse James says that we should practice religion that is “pure and undefiled before God” (1:27). Again you see there, the Bible tells us that religion is good.

Paul tells us the false teachers promote “*self-made* religion.”

So it's not religion that is the problem, it is impure, defiled, worthless, man-made, self-centered religion that is the issue. It's religion that is twisted and misused that is the problem.

And so because of this, I think we need to take back the goodness of the term “religion.” Let me say a bit more.

We are in a moment where people think they can have spirituality but somehow *not* be religious, where they think that religious practices like going to church, hearing the Bible preached, receiving the sacraments, singing songs, and praying in public are unnecessary because it should be “just me and Jesus.” A generation that's heard we need to strip things back to the basics and get away from institutions like the church, as though people would be better off without the church (even though Jesus invented and established his church).

People hear confusing messages saying that religion is bad, and that it's a “relationship” that matters. I think this is something that has been said (especially in pulpits) for decades now. And this pattern of telling people repeatedly that religion is bad has left people deeply confused and thinking that “well I don't need church.” “That's religious, and religion is bad. Relationship and spirituality good.” “I can have a relationship without a religion.”

And now many of us millennials have parents who were fed on that message that “it's not a religion, it's a relationship,” and who really have stopped going to church. They got the message.

These sorts of catchphrases and ways of speaking were well-intended, but they didn't come from Scripture and they have poisoned and confused people. These anti-religious catchphrases have been in the waters that evangelicals have been drinking for decades. And now those waters have fed into a generation where many people who once believed in the importance of worship and church decided they could get all of the things they wanted from a self-centered spirituality without actually being a part of any church.

What I want to say is not that telling people "it's not a religion it's a relationship" is the sole reason so many people are now spiritual but not religious. But I am saying that it hasn't helped. And I'd go even further and say, they made it worse by doing that! It was well intentioned, but it was destructive.

This isn't the only solution, but I think part of the answer is for us to embrace true religion rather than hypocritical religion. Religion was never the problem. We should be clear about that.

I think we need to stop criticizing religion and recapture what the New Testament points us toward. It never criticizes religion, it criticizes "performance-centered religion," "self-centered religion," and "man-made religion." All things that are actually centerpieces of the modern tendency to be "spiritual but not religious."

I say that hypocritical religion is "self-centered." It's self-obsessed. Its eyes are primarily on the self. This is why I'm so passionate about taking on this modern belief that we don't need church. What's happened is, we've basically got a generation of people whose eyes are fixed on themselves, on what they prefer, on what they think they need, on what their intuitions and preferences are, and said, "I'm going to craft a spiritual life that suits me." And in that sense, this lines up with the Pharisees. Because in both cases instead of setting one's gaze on God, or on the good of His church, both the Pharisees and the spiritual but not religious say, "It's time to do it my way."

Not only that, but the gaze and focus of such a person is also rooted in the self. If you do not have someone repeatedly placing your gaze on Christ constantly, if you have no correcting force (which the pulpit tends to be) that is responsible to keep you on track, then you will drift like a log down a river. You will fall like a stone to

the ground... you will move toward finding security and life and peace by looking inward.

Hypocritical religion, in other words, is self-obsessed.

In verse 5 you see this self-centeredness really clearly. Jesus says,

“They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.”

So notice, you can self-obsess by withdrawing from the church, sure. But you can also self-obsess as a performance for the church. That’s why it’s hypocritical religion that is the problem.

Notice the focus of this person Jesus is speaking about: it’s all about me. Where are my eyes? Where is my hope? Where is my peace? Where do I find myself resting?

This person is so in their own head, there is no room to focus on Christ. And we can be the same way. We can become self-focused, self-obsessed, and self-interested, just like the leaders Jesus is speaking about.

We will talk about this more, but the answer to self-centered religion is Christ-centered religion. Jesus presents his very self as the answer to these things.

2. Hypocritical Religion Performs to be Seen (23:5-7)

Second, hypocritical religion performs to be seen.

There is this extremely visible and social aspect to hypocritical religion, according to Jesus.

If you look at verses 5-12, let me just point out some of the highlights of how hypocritical religion is interested in what others think of us.

- In verse 5, “They do all their deeds to be seen by others.”
- Verse 6: “they love the place of honor...and the best seats.”
- Verse 7: they love “greetings in the marketplace.”

It is an interesting manifestation of unbelief that we become less interested in the invisible God, and care more about the visible people around us. In hypocritical religion, we take our eyes off of the true and living God... we stop living for His pleasure, and we start living for the approval of others.

Our new driver, our new interest, our new obsession becomes living for likes, subscriptions, and follows. I do mean that as a literal criticism of social media. But it's not just a problem for people who use social media. We are all tempted to perform so people will like us, even if we don't have a Twitter or Facebook or a Tik Tok account.

That's what the Pharisees did, according to Jesus: they were driven primarily by this question: what will people think of me today? Will I be honored today? Will I be greeted today? What can I do to draw attention from people today? Will people think better of me today after I do this or that?

What a prison. To always be bound and held fast by the opinion of the crowd!

It's the same as our last point, in a sense, right? It goes back to a self-centered religion. And the cure is to become God-centered. To be Christ-centered. To find your meaning and value outside of yourself, and away from the crowd. Instead of being greeted by men, we ought to begin the day greeted by God.

Instead of praying to be seen, we ought to praying in a way that is unseen, according to Jesus. In Matthew 6:6 Jesus says, "when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret."

Do you know why that's so important? Because in secret prayer, you're all alone. There is no person there to high five you or to be awed by your holiness. Solitary prayer is an act of pure faith. If you have faith, you'll do it. If you don't have faith, then why do it at all?

The life you live apart from anyone else's gaze or opinion becomes an incredible thermometer of your spiritual life in a way that public performance isn't. If you're only living to be seen by God, then there will *be* no performance to you, only who you are before God, because he always sees your secret self and who you are truly. You cannot trick him. He sees right through.

Christian, who you are when no one but God is looking is a better reflection of your true self than the you who makes those public appearances.

Now, the person everyone else sees? I'm not saying it doesn't matter. Jesus says our relationships matter, and our love for others matters. There is necessarily a public side to all of us because we live in community with others. But who you are in your secret heart, in your solitary life of prayer, in your solitude before God is a more accurate picture of your own spiritual life than what happens for everyone else to see.

And if you live your life public-facing side first, then the cart will be driving the horse of your life.

Others may be impressed with you, but who are you before God? Or others may not know about your spiritual life at all. And if they don't, that's okay. Jesus says your primary concern must not be what others think of you.

In Scripture, we are warned about the fear of man. Proverbs 29 tells us that "the fear of man lays a snare." Fearing man is a problem, because instead of trusting in the Lord we live trying to avoid pitfalls and we avoid doing and saying things that we ought to do and say because we fear public opinion.

But there is also a danger that we might call the Love of Man. John's letter warns us just how dangerous it is to live so that the watching world will approve of us. John says that if that's what you love, and if that's who you want to love you, then you don't have the Father's love in you.

You see, hypocritical religion is more interested in the world's love and approval than in obeying and following the Savior. Hypocritical religion performs to be seen.

3. Hypocritical Religion Creates Burdens (23:4)

Third, hypocritical religion creates burdens. Look at verse 4 again:

"They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger."

Up to this point we've talked about how hypocritical religion is very self-focused. But in this point Jesus has an even bigger problem: hypocritical religion proliferates and spreads. Hypocritical religion catches like a disease. It doesn't stop with the one who is self-focused, it keeps going.

One way this can look is a person who places unbiblical expectations on another person. This is much of what Jesus takes issue with in the Pharisees. They were always creating additional traditions that they found the seeds of somewhere in Scripture, perhaps, but they multiplied and taught them to others. And they spread very naturally.

Hand washing is a perfect example of how this spreads. The law of Moses says Levites were supposed to wash when they served in the temple. So the Pharisees said, "We should all wash our hands even though the Law of Moses didn't tell us to." The thinking was, "what's the harm in going above and beyond?" And we know that it didn't stop with them. They started going around and watching to see if others did the same, and then they would peer pressure others into joining their man-made traditions.

That's one kind of burden that hypocritical religion creates, right? And perhaps you've known people who expected you to do things that weren't found in Scripture. I have definitely known people who, with the best of intentions placed expectations on me that weren't drawn from God's word.

This is where mutual love and respect in the church is so important. If you wish other Christians would do this or that, live one way or another, or do things differently than they do, this is very important: make sure before you go to them that you go to the Word of God.

Actually find this thing you're about to bind them with in Scripture, so that it's really God who is binding them.

If you are going to tell someone that they ought to do this or that, make sure it isn't just your opinion or your pet project. Instead, ask the question: am I creating a new standard that makes sense to me? And if our expectations for others doesn't come from Scripture, we should recognize that we might just be trying to

control another person with our own preferences and opinions. Instead, we should pull back, and respect the right of this other person to be different from us.

Another way that hypocritical religion creates burdens is not by creating new rules, but by failing to set forth Christ. Hypocritical religion moralizes and neglects the actual gospel. **The gospel tells us that in Christ God shows you all the mercy you will ever need, and that you cannot do anything to deserve it.**

The gospel makes us so that we never feel more secure because of something in ourselves. Instead the gospel is a Christ-focused hope that doesn't ebb and flow based on how I'm doing, how I'm working, how I'm performing. The gospel says, "Because Jesus is a great Savior, I have peace." "Because Jesus Christ has saved me, I am accepted and loved and now have peace with God."

Conclusion

In hypocritical religion, you are constantly asking, what have I done? What can I do? What should I be like? What will other people see? And the cure to hypocritical religion is what Jesus offers.

Instead of creating burdens, Jesus lifts them. Instead of creating new ways for you to disappoint God, he presents to you all the ways that he has satisfied the demands of God.

Paul says that the worst thing that can happen to a person is for them to be blinded "from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). What a contrast, right?

In true religion, our eyes are set on the gospel and on Christ.

In hypocritical religion, our eyes are set on us.

In true religion, we have peace because of Jesus Christ.

In hypocritical religion, we strive for peace by watching and examining ourselves.

In true religion, we are driven to love God and to love others.

In hypocritical religion, we are lovers of self (2 Tim. 3:2).

In hypocritical religion, your eyes are set on you.

What you are doing.

How you are doing what you are doing.

How you plan to keep doing it.

What you have done.

How you have done it.

How long you have done it for.

How you have failed.

How long since you failed.

How badly you failed.

What *you* will do to erase your failure.

How to make sure as few people as possible know about your failure.

How to pass the blame for your failures.

All of it hypocrisy.

The Gospel of Jesus is the antidote to self-centered religion, to self-focused performance, and to the flimsy security that is found by looking at yourself and your own heart and your own obedience and your own prayer and your own behavior.

Jesus presents himself to us. He sets the focus on himself:

You are tempted to follow yourself? Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life."

You're tempted to provide for yourself? Jesus says, "I am the bread of life...the living bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:51).

You're trying to follow your own path? Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness" (John 8:12).

You're tempted to make your own way, to live in such a way so that you can find peace with God without being in his debt? Jesus says, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved" (John 10:9).

He keeps talking about himself. Almost as if it's all about him, and not us. Huh.

Repeatedly Jesus does this for us. He says, "Come to me." "Come to me." "I'll lift your burdens."

He drives us to himself, and in the process toward our true selves. This is the difference between true religion and hypocritical religion. Hypocritical religion is built upon us, around us, and for us.

True religion means to come to Jesus Christ, to find peace in him alone. That is a world of difference.

Let's pray.