

November 3, 2023
Sermon Manuscript

Matthew 23:1-12 (NIV)

¹ Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ² “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. ³ So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. ⁴ They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

⁵ “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶ they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷ they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.

⁸ “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹ The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹² For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Blessed Deconstruction

The good news I’m privileged to proclaim to you this morning is that the Lord is committed to our flourishing in union with Him, and in today’s gospel Jesus gives us permission - no, He is *calling us* - to cast aside¹ any elements of religion we’ve inherited or perpetuated that are aimed at any other goal.

In this morning’s gospel passage we find Jesus in a posture that we’ve seen quite a bit of in recent Sundays: pitted against the religious leaders who were in power in His day. However, one scholar² has observed that *up to this point* in Matthew’s gospel Jesus has allowed those opposing Him to set the agenda - He’s responded to questions *they’ve been bringing to Him* with the hope of trapping Jesus or undermining his authority in the eyes of the people - but when Jesus begins speaking to the crowds and His disciples in chapter 23, we see Him going on the attack. And in His crosshairs were the teachers of God’s law - also known as the ‘scribes’ - and the Pharisees.

And New Testament scholar Douglas Hare explains the four main criticisms that Jesus levels against them in our text today.

1. Jesus’ first critique is that while the Scribes & Pharisees have no problem telling people what the scriptures would have *them* do, they don’t take those scriptures seriously in their own lives. Speaking to the crowds and His disciples in verse 2, Jesus says, “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. ³ So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.”
2. Then second, Jesus criticizes the onerous religious requirements the Scribes’ & Pharisees’ placed upon people. In verse 4, Jesus says, “They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.” This must’ve left people with the impression not that God loves and cares for them, but that God is an unrelenting taskmaster, unsympathetic to the difficulties of their lives and waiting to punish them for any little failure.
3. Third, Jesus castigates the Scribes’ & Pharisees’ for practicing piety with the aim of garnering the adulation of others, not glorifying of God. Jesus says in verse 5, “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long...” These phylacteries³ and tassels⁴ were common accouterments of the religiously disciplined in first century Israel, but Jesus is saying that the Scribes & Pharisees’ went about them in a manner that revealed

¹ Or deconstruct

² Stanley Hauerwas

³ Just to explain, phylacteries (also called *teffilin*) were little wooden boxes that contained little parchments of paper with God’s word written on them. And the use of phylacteries had come about from an interpretation of Deuteronomy 11:18 God is emphasizing to the Israelites the importance of keeping His word front & center in their lives, to the extent that He says to quote, “Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.” So the practice of wearing the phylacteries containing god’s word had come about, and there was nothing inherently wrong with doing it, what Jesus is criticizing is the motive that the Scribes & Pharisees did it with was not to have their hearts formed by God’s word but rather to demonstrate to others just how religious they were.

⁴ These were blue and white tassels that God commanded His people to wear on the corners of their robes, also meant to remind them of God’s commandments. But some Pharisees made their tassels intentionally long to draw attention.

that for them these religious practices were not about drawing close to God, but all about impressing others.

4. And closely related to this is Jesus' fourth criticism, which is that the Scribe and Pharisees lusted after the recognition and honor afforded to them. Continuing in verse 6, Jesus says, "they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others."⁵

So, needless to say, the Scribes & Pharisees Jesus is criticizing were exactly the sort of religious leaders that no one should want; their hearts were concerned only with themselves, they used their authority to emphasize all the wrong things about religion, and they didn't love the people under their care, but rather they used people to consolidate status and prestige for themselves.

Well, implicit in all that Jesus has said up to this point are the stark differences - the night & day contrast - between the ministries of the Scribes & Pharisees and the ministry of Jesus: both what Jesus has been teaching and what He would soon do for people in going to the cross. Jesus had said elsewhere that He "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."⁶

So, in the final paragraph of our passage, Jesus begins calling the people out from under this toxic religious leadership they've lived under their whole lives that misrepresented God. At verse 8, Jesus says, "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers."⁹ And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven.¹⁰ Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah." Now, if Jesus' words here are taken literally as a command for all time prohibiting His followers from using titles for spiritual leaders, then any of you who call me 'Father John' had better stop. Although, some who *have* interpreted this passage in this way use the title 'pastor' instead as a sort of workaround; but I'm pretty sure the title of pastor would fall under Jesus' prohibition as well, since pastor just means shepherd and we can easily assume that implicit in Jesus' statement would've also been the statement, "do not call anyone on earth shepherd, for you have one shepherd and it's me." But I want to suggest that interpreting Jesus' words here with such timeless literalism misses what He's really up to here, which is that Jesus is releasing the crowds and His disciples from the sense of obligation they had to these religious leaders and this entire religious system that was doing them no good - nay, was doing them harm - and was bereft of love for them as people. What Jesus is doing here that applies to all of His followers for all time is He is releasing them - He's releasing us - from submitting to earthly spiritual authorities that aren't seeking to be a reflection of Him and the heart of God as it's been revealed through *His* life and teaching.

The good news in today's gospel is that the Lord is committed to our flourishing in union with Him and Jesus is giving us permission - no, He is *calling us* - to cast aside any elements of religion we've inherited or perpetuated that are aimed at any other goal.

Jesus is calling the crowds to take themselves out from under the faithless and corrupt spiritual leadership they had been under their whole lives because what it had become was completely at odds with Him and them receiving the salvation He came to bring them. And it would be hard to overstate what a *gift* Jesus is giving to the people here. Think about it: for these people's entire lives - for generations - they had suffered under the religious leadership of the Scribes & Pharisees - they were the chief teachers of the faith, whom everyone respected and revered - and yet, they were misrepresenting God, they were dishonest, living for themselves, and using the people's loyalty & allegiance to feed their own egos. However, there was little that anyone could do to change this, because the whole culture went along with it. No one would have dared question the Scribes' & Pharisees' way of living or what they taught; they would've been terrified to; they had been trained - spiritually abused - into believing that to do so would be to question God himself! But now, here comes Jesus, and He knows they'll kill Him for it, but He ain't scared! Jesus not only *names* all that was wrong about the Scribes & Pharisees - He says it out loud - He was also proclaiming *with the authority of God* that the people didn't have to put up with it, that they

⁵ On feasts: when there were feasts in the Jewish culture, the seating arrangement was always done according to social status and rank.

In the synagogue, most people sat on the floor when God's word was read, but there were seats along the walls reserved for elders and people of status. Apparently, many Pharisees especially coveted and took pride in these seats of honor.

Regarding the marketplace: in Jewish culture there were particular protocols for greetings in public places that everyone was expected to follow. Religious leaders like these scribes and Pharisees would always be greeted by commoners who were less learned in the law, and the person of lower status was always supposed to be the first to give the greeting. And, of course, the most desirous was the title of Rabbi, which literally meant "my great one".

⁶ Mk 10:45

didn't have to be subject to it any longer! And instead, Jesus is inviting them to come to Him. He's saying, "Let *me* be your Lord and rabbi and father and teacher. And I will show you what God is really like and faithfulness really requires." Jesus was giving them permission to see the corrupted religion and teachings they had lived under for what they were and he was giving them permission that their culture wouldn't: to say "enough" and walk away.

And this is true for us as well! The good news in today's gospel is that the Lord is committed to our flourishing in union with Him and Jesus is giving us permission - no, He is *calling us* - to cast aside any elements of religion we've inherited or perpetuated that are aimed at any other goal.

This past week in our Intro to Anglicanism class we were talking about Church History, in particular about the Protestant Reformation in 1517 and what the Church had become in the centuries leading up to it. And there were actually a lot of similarities between the Church then and the religious environment Jesus was critiquing in the first century. Coming out of the Middle Ages, the Church and religious leadership had all the power - the Bible was only in Latin, and even if it wasn't most people were illiterate, so they were entirely at the mercy of what the Church leadership told them was the truth, to know what God was like and what faithfulness really required. But the Lord used a monk named Martin Luther who had studied Latin and discovered that some significant things the Catholic Church was teaching about God and what faithfulness required were not actually supported by the scriptures. And, with his courage bolstered by the Holy Spirit, Luther defied his religious superiors and published these findings, which spread far and wide. And this sparked a movement that changed the church and the world forever, and on the whole led people to a clearer understanding of what God is really like and the free gift of His love offered to anyone willing to follow His risen Son.

Well, I believe we may be living in yet another age of Reformation today. On what scale? It remains to be seen. But there are many Christians in our age who have come to realize that some of the versions of the Christian faith that have been popular or that they had been raised with included teaching and practices and attitudes that upon examination were derived more from western, colonialist, or imperialist culture than they were based upon sound readings of Scripture. Many have come to realize that such distortions of the faith have not led to their flourishing, but rather are hindering it.⁷ And so they've found themselves on a journey that some call *deconstruction*. We call it deconstructing when someone scrutinizes the teachings of the Church and the ways Christian leaders are behaving by holding them up against the life and teachings of Jesus. Doing this can expose some of what the Church does - or the brand of the gospel that particular church traditions pedal - as missing the mark or even false: lies⁸ of worldly power dressed up in sheep's clothing.

And I know there are quite a few among us here at St Matthias who have gone through this process or are in the midst of it as we speak. There are some here who have left church communities that were pedaling the prosperity gospel or word of faith magical thinking or a consumeristic, cheap-grace brand of salvation, or where the heresy of Christian nationalism went unchecked. For others its been less about finding yourself in a toxic church culture as it has been about being in *this* church culture - which is by no means perfect, but where we *do* encourage you to question and examine the-beliefs-you-carry-about-God-and-what-faithfulness-to-Him-requires to discern whether anything is misaligned with Jesus, who is himself the full & complete revelation of what God is like and what He requires. So, this has empowered some to deconstruct some of the ideas we talked about last week that can come out of Reformed thinking that we humans are utterly worthless or the lie that habits of condemning or hating ourselves when we mess up could ever change our character for the better. In a similar vein, many have recognized that any notion of Christian faithfulness that pits truth against empathy isn't really faithful at all. For others, you've been able to embrace that truth that God is with you no matter what you feel - that you don't have to manufacture an emotional experience - to trust in faith that God is always present & at work in your life. Still others have cast off anti-science or anti-intellectual postures toward the world or scripture that have become endemic in Western Christianity ~~or the abusive idea that godly truth can ever be in opposition~~. And I know many have said *enough* with the common practices of using fear and coercion to lead others into the Kingdom and are seeking to learn how to be Christ to people and let the Spirit do what Spirit will.

The list could go on, but to everyone here who's had the courage to scrutinize their faith in these or other ways - and to believe that if something is true it can stand up to the scrutiny - I want to say, "Well done." It is

⁷ Today is All Saints Sunday, and many are coming to realize that high-control religion doesn't make people more saintly.

⁸ And tactics

grievous that such deconstruction can be so necessary, but it is a holy task. And if you've made it to the other side, I am confident that you'd say that you & your faith are the better for it.

But if you're in the midst of such a journey and feeling disoriented or discouraged, take heart. This process can entail a lot of grief and "Man, I wish I woulda knowns." Just think about how disoriented the people in Matthew 23 would've been after Jesus spoke these words to them. Just keep your eyes fixed on Him.

And to that point, there can certainly be paths of deconstruction that can turn unhealthy if one loses sight of Jesus, or where people are just questioning things for questioning's sake, but without any anchor of truth. But this is not where Jesus is calling us. Jesus gave his own life and teachings as the standard to judge everything else against, so that the result of such questioning is more of Him & more flourishing and less of the enemy's lies and spiritual enslavement. The good news is that the Lord is committed to our flourishing in union with Him, and in today's gospel Jesus gives us permission - no, He is *calling us* - to cast aside (to deconstruct) any elements of religion we've inherited or perpetuated that are aimed at any other goal (but that flourishing).

Then again, there may be some here who have still never felt permission to question, who have lived with a "father always knows best" naivete or with a "whatever Christian culture says must be the right tack" sort of tribalism. If that is the case, my encouragement would be to question whether the image of God this has left you with has borne the fruit of spiritual flourishing in your daily life? If not, I pray God might grant you vision of the more that He has for you. There are *always* further steps to take in our journey with Him for everyone of us - we are following Jesus, not just sitting in the same place forever - are you open to Him guiding you forward?

But for those who are somewhere on a journey of deconstruction, I want to encourage you just to keep your eyes on Jesus and be ruthless in holding his teaching and life as your standard for godliness. And I pray that as a Church we will continue seeking to give understanding and empathy to those among us or who come through our doors wrestling with major questions of the faith or seeking to heal from church harm.

And may we never be afraid to ask questions. Anything that is true enough to stake our lives upon should be able to withstand any scrutiny we can offer. And, at the end of the day, our faith is not in an idea or a dogma, but in a person: the risen Lord. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, who is the author and protector of our faith, and whose Spirit is always working for our good and to lead us into more of His truth.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.