

**Proposition: In Matthew 23:23-28 Jesus gave three illustrations that portray what God thinks of someone who's hung up on externals.**

- I. We're in trouble if we major on minor issues (23-24).
    - A. That's what the Pharisees did.
      1. They gave God insignificant things.
      2. They failed to give God the most important things.
    - B. Here's what Jesus said about it.
      1. Major on major issues.
      2. Beware of the deception of "selective obedience."
  - II. We're in trouble if we clean up the outside without touching the inside (25-26).
    - A. The Pharisees focused on surface issues.
    - B. Biblical Christianity is just the opposite.
      1. It starts on the inside.
      2. It shows up on the outside.
  - III. We're in trouble if we appear righteous but are not (27-28).
    - A. A Pharisee is like a white-washed tomb.
      1. He's clean on the outside.
      2. He's corrupt on the inside.
    - B. A Pharisee is in big trouble (and doesn't know it).
- Response: We must ponder three sober realities...
1. It's possible to act like a Christian and not be one.
  2. It's possible to know how to be a Christian and not be one.
  3. It's possible to think you are a Christian and not be one.

One of the most thought-provoking books I've read in recent years is a work by Kent Hughes entitled, *Are Evangelicals Born Again?* I highly recommend it. Pastor Hughes confronts the common notion that if you possess the right label, you're right with God. He's convinced--and I agree--that there are countless people in churches who call themselves "Christian" who've never truly been born again. He begins the book with the following true story:<sup>1</sup>

"Are evangelicals born again? This long-smoldering question was aflame once more in my mind after the events of the day. For in a convention hotel room, I had just watched an evangelical church leader come to Christ.

"The hour had left me exhausted. Initially I had been incredulous as the man recounted his enviable heritage. He was the son of a prominent theologian and minister. From childhood he had attended Christian schools and had graduated from an evangelical Christian college. He had married a Christian from another notable family. He was successful in business, a leader in his denomination, and a board member of several prestigious Christian organizations. His children were believers.

"My initial incredulity faded as he carefully explained that since his youth he had sensed that he was not a believer, but conforming to conventional piety had come easy to him. As a boy he had 'gone forward' and been baptized. He knew his Bible and offered admirable prayers over dinner and in public.

"Yet all the while he was quietly aware, almost sardonically so, that he had never truly bent his knee to Christ--and so was not born again.

"He tearfully explained that he would never have come for spiritual help if his illegal business practices had not been uncovered. He had come to the end of himself. There

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\*\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup>R. Kent Hughes, *Are Evangelicals Born Again*, pp. 9-10.

was nowhere to turn but to Christ--and he did. As we knelt together, I witnessed a moving, passionate outpouring of genuine contrition for sins. This man, this evangelical churchman, now believed in Christ, repented, and was truly born again."

We've been learning about the danger of being religious by giving careful attention to the sermon Jesus preached in Matthew 23. What a pointed message Jesus preached that day! He was in the temple--in just a few days He would be on the Cross. Out of concern for their eternal destination, Jesus delivered a message concerning the religious leaders of His day. Seven times He declared, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!"

One of the biggest problems of the Pharisees was this. They were hung up on *externals*. They had reduced righteousness to ritual and religious activity.

And that is a serious matter. In case you're not convinced, hang on to your seats as we come to part four in our study of Matthew 23.

Before us is a text which shows us what God thinks of mere religion. In Matthew 23:23-28 Jesus gave three illustrations that portray the divine assessment of people who are hung up on externals--the illustrations of spice giving, cup cleaning, and gravestone washing. Here's what we'll see. To put it bluntly, we're in trouble if the following three things are true of us.

#### I. We're in trouble if we major on minor issues (23-24).

Notice...

**A. That's what the Pharisees did.** Listen to Jesus: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill, and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel."

Jesus' first illustration has to do with giving, specifically *tithing*. When it came to giving, what was Jesus' observation of the Pharisees? It was twofold...

1. *They gave God insignificant things.* Like what? Jesus mentions "mint, dill, and cummin."

In the Torah (in texts like Lev 27:30 and Deut 14:22ff) God instructed His people to give Him a tithe of what their fields produced, namely corn, wine, and oil. In other words, they were to honor Him by offering a tenth of the produce of their main crops.

So what did God have to say about spices like mint, dill, and cummin? Very little--and that's the point. The Pharisees wanted to do *more than* God commanded to show their seriousness. They tithed even their common garden growth (Bruner, 823).

Historian William Barclay sheds light on the practice (293), "Mint, dill, and cummin are herbs of the kitchen garden and would not be grown in any quantity; a man would have only a little patch of them. All three were used in cooking, and dill and cummin had medicinal uses. To tithe them was to tithe an infinitesimally small crop, maybe not much more than the produce of one plant. Only those who were superlatively meticulous would tithe the single plants of the kitchen garden."

And that's exactly what the Pharisees were like. They were so meticulous about tithes that they made sure God received one-tenth of even one clump of mint.

Please don't misunderstand. Tithing is good. God commands us to give to Him, and if we are not giving to Him, we are robbing God. In His Word, God has a lot to say to His people about giving.

Leviticus 27:30 states, "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD." Apparently

God commanded the Israelites to offer *three* tithes: 1) the general tithe paid to the Levites, who in turn gave a tenth of that to the priests (Num 18:21, 26); 2) the tithe associated with the sacred meal involving offerer and Levite (Deut 14:22-27); 3) the tithe paid every three years to the poor (Deut 14:28-29).<sup>2</sup>

So God commanded the Israelites to give. He told them to bring at least ten percent of their possessions to the sanctuary. All they owned had come from Him, and giving the first portion back was their way of saying "thank you."

Proverbs 3:9-10 states, "Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine" God wants us to honor Him by giving Him the firstfruits of our income.

In fact, Malachi 3:8-10 indicates that if we don't give to God we're actually *robbing* Him. "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me? But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse--the whole nation of you--because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the LORD Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."

In the New Testament, texts like 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 and 2 Corinthians 8-9 reinforce the importance and privilege of giving.

Dear friend, you cannot outgive God. If you are not giving to Him regularly and generously from the first portion of your income, you are robbing God of what He deserves. That's a serious matter.

Jesus isn't downplaying the importance of giving here. Rather He's confronting the pharisaic approach to giving. The Pharisees gave. They even gave God such *insignificant* things as garden spices. And that would be okay except...

2. *They failed to give God the most important things.* They neglected the most important matters of the law--justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Isn't that ironic? The Pharisees prided themselves as sitting "in Moses' seat" (verse 2), as being experts in God's law. But Jesus said they missed the "weightier" matters of the law.

Jesus' words seem to paraphrase what the prophet Micah said centuries earlier (6:6-8), "With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

God's not impressed when we give Him things--even meticulously--but fail to give Him the most important things. The things that reflect His character--justice, mercy, and faithfulness. But that's what the Pharisees did.

**B. Here's what Jesus said about it.** "You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel (23b-24)." I see two insights here which will help us if we're locked into the pharisaic approach to giving.

1. *Major on major issues.* Jesus said, "You should have practiced the latter," that is, you should have majored on justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

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<sup>2</sup>Taken from *NIV Study Bible*, footnote on p. 182.

You see, the tithe wasn't the only thing God commanded His people to give Him. He also commanded them to give Him lives characterized by justice, mercy, and covenant faithfulness. Wasn't that His message through Micah centuries before?

But how do you measure that kind of giving? You really can't. How much *justice* did you give God last week? How much *mercy*? That kind of giving is not quantifiable. So it's easy to overlook. But it's critical. It's essential, as Jesus emphasized, "You should have practiced the latter."

Yet notice the next phrase, "Without neglecting the former." Notice the balance. Christianity is not about externals *only*, but it does include externals. We'll develop that further momentarily. For now, a second insight...

2. *Beware of the deception of "selective obedience."* Isn't Jesus' word picture in verse 24 graphic? "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel?" Can't you just imagine the scene? A person who is taking great care to prevent himself from swallowing a tiny bug, but all the while he's munching on a large camel, hooves and all!

There may be a pun here. In Aramaic (which Jesus was speaking) the words for gnat and camel sound much alike: *qamla* and *gamla*.

According to the Law, both were unclean creatures. The rabbis had a saying, "He that kills a flea on the sabbath is as guilty as if he killed a camel."<sup>3</sup>

The Pharisees were sticklers for details--we talked about their "scribal nit-picking" last time--but they missed the heart of it all. The greatest (actually *worst*) example was what they did to Jesus. They thought nothing of condemning an innocent man, but refused to enter Pilate's judgment hall lest they be defiled (John 18:28)! How's that for straining a gnat while swallowing a camel! I call it the deception of selective obedience.

It's so easy to settle for a few externals and blindly think, "There! God must be pleased with me. I may not be perfect, but look what I *have* done!"

Please beware of the deception of selective obedience. We tend to justify our disobedience of God's Word in one area by our obedience in another. For instance, think of the man who ignores his family, who fails to minister to his wife and children, and yet spends countless hours in his ministry at church. Indeed, he's a hard worker at church, so much so that the common perception of him is, "Wow! What a spiritual man!"

But is God impressed? Hardly. Why not? Is it wrong to serve in the church? Surely not. But it is wrong to think that ministry in the church excuses disobedience in another area of your life. So beware of the deception of selective obedience.

How about you? You may be obeying God's Word in many areas--that's great. But is there any area in your life where you are disobeying God? Is there any command in Scripture--anything that God wants from your life--that you are ignoring? Are you justifying that disobedience by pointing at your meticulous obedience to God in other areas of your life?

Beware of selective obedience. It shows up in lots of ways. When a man is unethical at work yet proudly shares that he reads his Bible every day. Or when a teen uses ungodly language yet salves her conscience by insisting her friends come to the youth group. That's called straining out a gnat but swallowing a camel.

Yes, we're in trouble when we major on minor issues. Secondly...

## II. We're in trouble if we clean up the outside without touching the inside (25-26).

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind

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<sup>3</sup>Bruner, 825.

Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean." By using this second illustration, Jesus offers us a clear contrast between the pharisaic approach and true Christianity.

**A. The Pharisees focused on surface issues.** Jesus said they cleaned the outside of the cup and dish, but didn't touch the inside which was full of greed and self-indulgence.

The Jewish law had a lot to say about uncleanness. The issue wasn't dirt so much as ceremonial "rightness." They had a long list of rules to insure ceremonial cleanness.

In fact, the Pharisees had already confronted Jesus about His lack of conformity to their ceremonial rules. Listen to Matthew 15:1-3, "Then some Pharisees...came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" Jesus replied, And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?"

It's interesting that Leviticus 11:33 declared unclean any earthen vessel if the inside of it was touched by something unclean (for instance, if a lizard fell into a clay pot, the contents became unclean and the pot had to be broken). But the Pharisees went the extra mile to protect the *outside* of the cup, too.

The Pharisees focused on surface issues. In our day they would be spokesmen (excuse me, spokespeople) for political correctness. Their approach to being right with God was "outside-in." They tried to legislate godliness.

But a rule can't make a heart clean, can it? Oh, rules may look impressive, but they lack the power to change a heart. The Pharisees focused on surface issues, but...

**B. Biblical Christianity is just the opposite.** Listen to Jesus again (26), "Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside will be clean." You'll notice two characteristics of genuine, biblical Christianity here.

1. *It starts on the inside.* Jesus said *first* clean the inside of the cup. "First" indicates where we're to start as well as where we're to place the emphasis. Christianity works "inside-out."

Being a Christian starts on the inside with a heart change. The heart change occurs the moment you admit the truth about your sinfulness and place your trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ. At that moment, you are justified by God and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. God gives you a new heart, a clean heart.

It starts on the inside as the result of the work of God. But it doesn't stop there.

2. *It shows up on the outside.* The proof of a heart-change is a life-change. Christ enables you to "clean up the cup," so to speak, as He said, "First clean the inside of the cup...and then the outside will be clean (26)."

Someone might say, "Well, as long as my heart is right, that's all that matters." Not necessarily. If your heart *is* right with God, it will show up in external actions. You'll give evidence of it by a life lived in conformity to God's Word. If it doesn't show up, it's time to check your heart.

I must warn you to look out for two common perversions of Christianity. First, some people, like the Pharisees, settle for simply cleaning the outside of the cup. They think being a Christian is merely cleaning up your act. That's morality.

But on the other hand, other professing Christians settle for a deficient sort of internal, cup cleansing that doesn't affect the outside at all. "My faith is a *personal* thing." And it's so personal it has little effect on how they live. So they carry a Bible to church on Sunday yet don't apply its message Monday through Saturday.

That shouldn't be. Jesus said, "Clean the inside of the cup, and the outside also will be clean." There's a connection. If the inside *is* clean, it will follow that the outside will be clean, too. And God will get the glory for it all.

In the 18th century John Newton, the writer of "Amazing Grace," shared this testimonial: "If I ever reach heaven I expect to find three wonders there: first, to meet some I had not thought to see there; second, to miss some I had thought to meet there; and third, the greatest wonder of all, to find myself there." (Hughes, 16-17)

That's the confession of a person who's been changed inside-out. Thirdly...

### III. We're in trouble if we appear righteous but are not (27-28).

Case in point--the Pharisees. According to Jesus...

**A. A Pharisee is like a white-washed tomb.** Verses 27-28, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."

The picture Jesus used here would have been familiar to any first century Jew. A common place for graves was alongside the road which created a potential problem. According to Jewish law, anyone who touched a dead body became unclean. If you were traveling and stumbled off the path into a burial site, you defiled yourself.

Now suppose you were on your way to the temple to worship, and happened to stumble on a grave. You now had a problem for at that point you became ceremonially unclean. Is that bad? Yes, it meant you couldn't complete your act of worship.

To help eliminate this danger, once a year, just before Passover (during the month of Adar), it was customary to whitewash grave-sites with lime. The intent was to warn traveling pilgrims to "stay away!" and avoid ritual uncleanness. It made quite a sight, tombstones shining in the sun.

Jesus said that's a perfect picture of the typical Pharisee. Two things are true of him.

1. *He's clean on the outside.* In fact, he's quite impressive, just like the ornate tombstone glistening in the sunlight. But...

2. *He's corrupt on the inside.* "Full of dead men's bones," is how Jesus put it. It's a case of "what you see is *not* what you get."

In the first two illustrations Jesus confronted what the Pharisees *did*. Now in the third He exposes what they were *like*. "You are like a white-washed tomb!"

Then in verse 28 Jesus lays it on the line. Verse 28 is the punchline. "In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." This is serious. According to Jesus...

**B. A Pharisee is in big trouble (and doesn't know it).** He *appears* righteous--to men, that is, and only on the outside. He appears righteous, *but He isn't*.

So is the solution to *not* appear righteous? Obviously not.

Remember, a Pharisee is a person who majors on external issues. Quite frankly, a lot of the externals he champions are good things. The problem has to do with his motivation for doing them.

A modern-day Pharisee might say, "If you want to please God, then read your Bible every day. Be in church when the church doors are open. Don't support an entertainment industry that mocks God's standard of holiness. Don't cheapen the Lord's day by shopping and treating it like any other day."

At times, the problem of the Pharisee isn't the standard he keeps, but why he keeps it. Too often we think, "If I have standards, I'm being a legalist." No, I'm being a legalist if I think that keeping my standards contributes one ounce to my right standing with God.

Let that sink in. Here's why the Pharisee is in trouble. He appears righteous. He thinks he is righteous. The reason he thinks he's righteous is because he does the "right"

things. But it's merely *external*. And on the inside, unseen to the naked eye, is a heart full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

In fact, the Greek word for "wickedness" [KJV "iniquity"] in verse 28 is *anomos*. It literally means "lawlessness." How ironic! The Pharisees prided themselves in keeping the *law*, but Jesus said in their hearts they were *lawless*.

You say, "Well, this is interesting, but what's the big deal? The Pharisees were a sect of Judaism in the first century. But they no longer exist, do they?" The sad fact is that the spirit of pharisaism is very alive today. Sadly, we've welcomed it with open arms right into many churches. We ourselves may well be modern-day Pharisees.

That's why we need to give careful attention to these words of Jesus.

Response: We must ponder three sober realities...

1. *It's possible to act like a Christian and not be one.* Just like the evangelical leader Kent Hughes described earlier. I'm struck by the fact that the people Jesus called "whitewashed tombs" were the most devout, the most religious people in first century Judaism. I wonder what He'd say if He visited our church this morning.

Most of us here today call ourselves "Christians." But in light of Jesus' words, I encourage you to ponder a question. Are you truly a Christian? The fact is, it's possible to *act like* a Christian, and not be one.

Have you ever truly been born again? Have you experienced the transforming, inside-out work of the Spirit?

2. *It's possible to know how to be a Christian and not be one.* It's possible that you could show someone else how to be saved, but you're not. You know the gospel. You know that Jesus Christ lived a perfect life, then died on a Roman cross to pay the sin-penalty for all who would believe on Him, and three days later He arose from the dead. You know that the Bible teaches that whosoever will call upon the Lord will be saved.

It's possible that you know all that. You know what needs to happen, and yet you refuse to humble yourself before God and submit your life to Jesus Christ.

It's amazing the difference one step can make. When you're standing at the entrance to an airplane, take one step and you're on your way to a new destination. Don't take that step, and you're going nowhere (Hughes, *Mark*, p. 120).

Jesus told a teacher of the law in Mark 12:34, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." The man was close--but he still wasn't in. Just think of it. A person can be close, even within an inch of the kingdom, and yet spend eternity separated from God. There is no reward for being close.

3. *It's possible to think you are a Christian and not be one.* In Matthew 7:21 Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." May God help us.