

Series: “The Danger of Being Religious: Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew 23”

Main Idea: In Matthew 23:13-22 Jesus begins to expose the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. His words unveil three indicators of a hypocrite.

- I. A hypocrite possesses a self-serving view of God’s kingdom (13-14).
 - A. The Pharisees refused to get right with God on His terms (13).
 - B. The Pharisees made it hard for others to get right with God.
 - C. The Pharisees settled for religious substitutes (14).
- II. A hypocrite possesses a self-serving view of people (15).
 - A. A Pharisee is zealous about recruiting followers.
 - B. A Pharisee wants people to be like him.
 1. Our aim isn’t to build an empire.
 2. Our aim is to see people submit to the King.
- III. A hypocrite possesses a self-serving view of the Scriptures (16-22).
 - A. The Pharisees love their system (16-19).
 1. Which is greater, the gold in the temple or the temple (16-17)?
 2. Which is greater, the gift or the altar (18-19)?
 - B. Jesus shows that the system must submit to the Scriptures (20-22).
 1. What matters is what God says.
 2. What God says is more important than what man says.

Make It Personal: Two responses are in order.

1. Let’s thank the Lord that He tells us the truth about ourselves.
2. Let’s thank the Lord that He has provided a solution for all of our sins, including our hypocrisy.

Jesus is the very definition of what love is and does. *Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.* And this makes today’s text quite shocking. In the ears of some, particularly those who first heard these words (and those like them), Jesus doesn’t sound very loving. Is it loving to look someone in the eye and call them a *hypocrite*, a *fool*, a *blind guide*? Yet as we’ll see, Jesus uses these very potent terms again and again in this address. Why would the loving Jesus speak in such a way? Let’s read and find out.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 23:13-22

One Saturday evening you see your neighbor sitting on his porch and walk over to say hello. After small-talking for awhile, you pop the following question, “Uh, John, how’d you like to go to church with me tomorrow?”

Your neighbor looks at you for a moment, then clears his throat and begins to speak. You get the feeling that his response is a prepared statement: “Thanks neighbor, but I don’t think so. Church isn’t my thing. Don’t get me wrong. If it works for you, fine. But I’ve got some problems with established religion.”

At this point John stops talking, as if expecting you to ask the question, “What kind of problems?” So you ask. “What kind of problems *do* you have with established religion, John?”

“Quite a few,” he says. “For starters, there are so many religions in the world. How do you know which is right? Besides, I think religion is a personal matter, and I don’t need to go to church to worship God anyway. But my biggest problem, and don’t take this personal, but my main reason for not going to church is that there are hypocrites there.”

^{**}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.

¹ For a previous look at Matthew 23, see the messages preached at WBC in 1999.

End of conversation. Have you ever heard that statement about “hypocrites at church”? Perhaps you've said it yourself. It's interesting the reasons people give for not going to church, and this one almost always makes the list.

Years ago I ran across a transparent assessment written by an anonymous pastor. It's a fictitious response to common objections to church: “Football in the fall. Basketball in the winter. Baseball in the spring and summer. This pastor has been an avid sports fan all his life. But I've had it! I quit this sports business once and for all. You can't get me near one of those places again. Want to know why?

Every time I went they asked me for money.

The people with whom I had to sit didn't seem very friendly.

The seats were too hard and not at all comfortable.

I went to many games, but the coach never came to call on me.

The referee made a decision with which I could not agree.

I suspected that I was sitting with some hypocrites, for they came to see their friends and what others were wearing rather than to see the game.

Some games went into overtime, and I was late getting home.

The band played some numbers that I had never heard before.

It seems that the games are scheduled when I want to do other things.

I was taken to too many games by my parents when I was growing up.

I don't want to take my children to any games, because I want them to choose for themselves what sport they like best.”²

Kind of humorous, and yet not really. The truth is, hypocrisy is never a humorous matter. This morning we come to our third message in our series, “The Danger of Being Religious.” Of all the messages of Jesus preached, it's doubtful that any is more blunt than this one. G. Campbell Morgan says concerning Matthew 23, “This passage contains the most terrible words which ever fell from the lips of the King.”³

Allow me to resketch the setting. Jesus preached this message in the temple (21:23), a place where you'd naturally find religious people. It was His final week of ministry, just days before His betrayal and crucifixion. Jesus was encountering increasing hostility from the religious establishment.

As a sidenote, the hostility of religious people would be a major challenge for the early church, too. Scan the book of Acts, and what do you see? You see the Jewish religious leaders constantly hounded Peter, Paul, and to anyone else who proclaimed the message of God's saving grace through Jesus Christ.

When Matthew penned this biography of Jesus (somewhere between the late 50's and the 70's), the church was feeling the heat of the religious establishment. So Matthew included in his gospel this message that he had personally heard the Savior preach two or three decades earlier.

Please keep in mind that Jesus preached many more sermons than those recorded in the four gospels. But the Holy Spirit directed Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to record exactly what He knew we would need. In this case, we would need our Savior's instructions concerning a huge problem, a problem the second generation church faced, as do we. It's the danger of merely being religious.

²Author Unknown, at Calvary, Covington, KY (from internet).

³ G. Campbell Morgan, p. 276.

Your neighbor might use the excuse of hypocrites to stay away from church. While that's a smokescreen, the fact of the matter is, there are hypocrites who say they know God, just as there were in Jesus' day. At least six times in this sermon, Jesus identified the religious leaders of Israel as "hypocrites" (13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29).

Just what is a hypocrite? How can you tell if you are seeing one, or being one? In Matthew 23:13-22 Jesus unveils three indicators of a hypocrite.

I. A hypocrite possesses a self-serving view of God's kingdom (13-14).

Jesus speaks in verses 13-14, "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in."

There was no smile on the Master's face as He uttered these words. A. T. Robertson called verses 13-26 "the rolling thunder of Christ's wrath."

In verses 1-7 Jesus talked *about* the religious leaders, and then exhorted His disciples not to be like the religious leaders in verses 8-12. Now, beginning in verse 13 Jesus speaks *to* the religious leaders, pronouncing a message of judgment on two related groups, the teachers of the law (scribes) and the Pharisees.

He calls them *hypocrites*. This is a serious matter. If I called you a hypocrite, you might brush it off by asserting, "Wow, what's your problem? You don't know my heart, so you have no right to judge me." But to hear Jesus say, "You hypocrites!" is not something you can brush off, for He *is* the Judge, and He does know hearts. And if what He saw and condemned in the Pharisees is present in us, we're in big trouble, too.

"Woe to you!" He said. The Greek word for "woe" is *ouai*. Barclay observes, "It is hard to translate for it includes not only *wrath*, but also *sorrow*. There is righteous anger here, but it is the anger of the heart of love, broken by the stubborn blindness of men."⁴ Jesus didn't lose His temper, but He was angry—angry at the sins of the religious leaders.

The Old Testament prophets used the term "woe" to pronounce the curse of God's judgment on wayward people. Isaiah did in Isaiah 5:8-23. So did Habakkuk in Habakkuk 2:6-19.

Three years earlier Jesus began His public ministry with a sermon that included eight "blessings" called beatitudes. Now He ends His public ministry with a message that includes seven "woes." Matthew seems to contrast the eight beatitudes in Matthew 5 with the seven "woes" in Matthew 23. The first sermon describes true righteousness, the second confronts an imitation righteousness.

As Bruner observes, of the seven woes, the first three address false *teaching*, the next three address false *practice*, and the final one attacks false *security*.⁵

So how do you spot a hypocrite? Jesus put the spotlight on three indicators. Here's the first. *You may be a hypocrite IF...you have a self-serving view of God's kingdom.* You see, it's possible to be religious for self-serving reasons, to be religious and not truly interested in the things that matter to God, namely *His kingdom*.

The Pharisees' self-serving view of God's kingdom showed up in three ways.

A. The Pharisees refused to get right with God on His terms (13). Jesus says in verse 13, "You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces." What does that mean? In the gospels, the phrase "kingdom of heaven" is essentially synonymous with "the

⁴ Barclay, p. 288.

⁵ Bruner, 819.

kingdom of God.” God’s kingdom refers to God’s rule. It’s what God deserves and desires, to rule over what belongs to Him. Adam’s sin was an act of treason, for the created human being said to the Creator, “We don’t want You to tell us what to do. We know better. We want to rule our own lives.”

And what happened? Man’s defiance brought destruction into the world, as it always does. Yet what did God do? In time, in accordance with His eternal plan, He sent His Son into this world, who came to restore what Adam forfeited in the garden, the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is a huge part of Jesus’ message. He taught His disciples to pray for God’s kingdom to come (Matt 6:10). He taught His followers to seek first God’s kingdom in their priorities and choices in life (Matt 6:33).

But a hypocrite isn’t interested in God’s kingdom, for it’s his own kingdom that matters most to him. Nor is he interested in entering God’s kingdom in the way God has provided, which is by grace not merit.

This is the Pharisees’ first problem. A Pharisee refuses to get right with God on God’s terms. The second problem is even worse.

B. The Pharisees made it hard for others to get right with God. Listen to what Jesus says next in verse 13, “*You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.*”

How do you *shut the kingdom in men’s faces*? The Pharisees did it by substituting their own religious system in place of a true standing with God. Essentially, they put roadblocks in front of the “grace-gate” that leads to God’s kingdom.

It’s a terrible thing to refuse to come to God by means of the way He graciously provides. Yet this is far worse. Far worse than refusing to get right with God is to make it hard for others to get right with God who sincerely desire to do so.

This is quite personal, and it may be happening even now in this room. Some of you aren’t right with God, and you’re not interested in His kingdom for it’s your own that matters. That’s serious. But what’s even more serious is what you’re doing to those around you. Perhaps you have a wife or a husband who’s interested in spiritual things. Perhaps you have a child or a parent who wants to please God. And you’re making it hard for them. That is serious. That’s what the Pharisees did. And this is what brought these stern words from Jesus.

Keep in mind that the Pharisees were not irreligious, for they were *very* religious. Yet they insisted on coming to God on their own terms, and were so convinced their own terms were correct that they essentially did all they could to force others to join them.

C. The Pharisees settled for religious substitutes (14). If you have the ESV or NIV, you’ll notice there is no verse 14. That’s because it’s not in the earliest and best Greek manuscripts of Matthew’s gospel. You may see it as a footnote because later manuscripts include it. The statement actually comes from Mark’s gospel and is recorded in Mark 12:40, “They devour widow’s houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.”

The problem of the Pharisees was that they settled for religious substitutes. They bypassed grace and clung to a self-exalting, works-approach to righteousness.

Jesus saw right through it and called them “hypocrites.” Originally the Greek term *hupokrites* meant “one who answers.” Later it became connected with the kind of statements made on the stage. It’s the regular Greek word for an “actor.” Eventually, the

Greeks used the term to refer to the worst kind of actor, a pretender, a person who acts a part and wears a mask to cover his true feelings.

According to Jesus, such were the Pharisees. Oh, they were sincere, and zealous. But their religion focused on outward activity that failed to address the sinfulness of the heart. So they wore phylacteries, and sat in the best seats in the synagogue. They were very religious, but it was all surface. They reduced godliness to a system of external actions.

There are actually two kinds of hypocrites. One kind is the person who says one thing and yet does another. The other kind of hypocrite is the person who does what he considers to be the right thing, but in reality is the wrong thing. I think the Pharisees fit the latter mold.

They were sincere. They truly thought they were pleasing God more than others. They were zealous, yet it was a misguided zeal. It wasn't that they "showed off," but that they thought they had a right to "show off" because they were right. And in the end, convinced of their own *rightness*, they rejected the very Messiah God sent to save sinners, not the righteous.

This is the first indicator of a hypocrite, a self-serving view of God's kingdom.

II. A hypocrite possesses a self-serving view of people (15).

Jesus continues in verse 15, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte [NIV "to win a single convert"], and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves."

This is the second indicator. A hypocrite has a self-serving view of people. He's more concerned about numbers than the good of people. He views people as objects. This was Jesus' indictment of the Pharisees. In verse 15 Jesus shows us an x-ray of a Pharisee's heart which reveals two aspirations.

A. A Pharisee is zealous about recruiting followers. How zealous? Listen to the KJV rendering of verse 15, "Ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte." Land and sea, that indicates a comprehensive search. They didn't just wait for the fish to jump in the boat, but went after the fish. They were zealous about adding to their numbers.

B. A Pharisee wants people to be like him. The NIV uses the word "convert." In the ESV and KJV it's "proselyte." Warren Wiersbe defines a proselyte as "a convert to a cause." Don't miss this. The Pharisees traveled land and sea to win a single convert, not to Judaism, but to *Pharisaism*.

When the Pharisees found a potential recruit, they pursued him hard. They used guilt tactics and peer pressure and intimidation to persuade their would be convert to join their ranks. And once they succeeded, the man became a "proselyte" by being circumcised (if he was a Gentile) and pledging to submit his life to the rigors of Jewish law, including the extra-biblical traditions for which the Pharisees were so zealous.

As Carson observes, Jesus doesn't criticize the *fact* of the Pharisees' missionary endeavors, but its *results*.⁶ He says the Pharisee's convert is "twice as much a son of hell as you are." The phrase "son of hell" means "one destined for hell."⁷ The people the Pharisees recruited often "out-Phariseed" the Pharisees! They sunk their teeth into the notion hook-line-and-sinker that it's possible to reach God through personal, religious

⁶ Carson, 479.

⁷ France, 327.

effort, and thus refused to consider their need for a Savior. Someone has remarked, “The most converted were the most perverted.”⁸

Sadly, pharisaism is alive and well on planet earth. Gary Friesen offers an interesting description of a Pharisee. “The Pharisee is a professing believer with strong convictions who, because of his own pride, takes offense at those who resist his pressure to conform to his point of view.”⁹

Don’t miss this. The Pharisee comes across as a strong man, but he’s actually quite insecure. He’s easily offended. By what? By anyone who resists “his pressure to conform to his point of view.”

This again is the core problem of the Pharisee. Instead of trying to lead people to God, he leads people to Pharisaism. He wants “proselytes.” He wants people who will be like him.

Never forget this, beloved. Jesus told us to make *disciples*, not proselytes. That’s our mission. That’s why we invest our time and energy and money and lives into people, not merely so they’ll follow us, but *Him*. Let’s talk about a couple of implications.

1. *Our aim isn’t to build an empire.* “How big is your church?” is a question I’ve heard over and over in the past nearly four decades. I always cringe when I hear it, for a couple of reasons. The first? It’s not my church, but His. The second? Numbers don’t tell the whole story. The Pharisees were interested in numbers. In fact, they worked hard to get numbers, traveling across land and sea to add even one more person to their number.

But for the Pharisees, it wasn’t about the glory of God, nor the eternal well-being of people. What mattered to them was their system. As long as they recruited proselytes, their system would replenish and continue.

Friends, building an empire isn’t our aim at WBC. This is.

2. *Our aim is to see people submit to the King.* What king? The King who humbled Himself and came to earth, lived a perfect life, sacrificed His life on a cross to pay the penalty we deserved to pay, then conquered death, returned to heaven, with the promise that He’s coming again. That’s the King! He is the One who sends His Spirit to live in all who believe in Him, so they’ll resemble Him, and live for Him, and spread His offer of salvation to everyone on this planet.

Friends, it’s not an empire we’re after at WBC. It’s to see men and women, boys and girls, come to know and submit their lives to the King! It’s why we send our people and money to the mission field. It’s why when the Lord takes people from us and places them in other ministries, we miss them for sure, but we rejoice that we’ve been privileged to spread the fame of Jesus beyond the walls of WBC.

Not so the hypocrite. Losing people is unthinkable, for he has a self-serving view of both God’s kingdom and people. And to justify this self-serving view, he must engage in some fancy footwork with God’s Word, and this brings us to the third indicator.

III. A hypocrite possesses a self-serving view of the Scriptures (16-22).

We have a phrase, “He missed the forest for the trees.” That was true of the Pharisees who were so hung up on the minutia of their system that they missed the obvious.

⁸William Barclay, 290.

⁹Gary Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, p. 416.

A. The Pharisees love their system (16-19). Case in point? Swearing (or oath-taking). In the ninth commandment God had said, “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor (Exodus 20:16).” That’s clear enough, isn’t it? Apparently it wasn’t. So the Scribes developed an elaborate system to prevent inappropriate oath-taking. Their intent was to prevent sinful swearing, but in time the system overpowered the intent.

Back in verse 1, Jesus said the scribes and pharisees sat “in Moses’ seat.” They claimed to be guardians and interpreters of God’s law. But as it turned out, instead of promoting God’s Word, they championed the words of men. In fact, they actually used the Scriptures in a self-serving manner.

Jesus gives an example in verse 16, “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’”

Jesus here calls them “blind guides”. That’s certainly not a compliment, nor the kind of person you want leading you through dangerous territory.

If you want to see a classic example of how a hypocrite handles God’s Word, here it is. Jesus gives it to us in verses 16 and following.

“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred (verses 16-19)?”

Listen to a comment by William Barclay, “To the Jew an oath was absolutely binding, *so long as it was a binding oath* [how’s that for double-talk!]. Broadly speaking, a binding oath was an oath which definitely and without equivocation employed the name of God; such an oath must be kept, no matter what the cost. Any other oath might be legitimately broken. The idea was that, if God’s name was actually used, then God was introduced as a partner into the transaction, and to break the oath was not only to break faith with men but to insult God.”¹⁰

R. T. France calls it “scribal nit-picking.”¹¹ It’s kind of like what we hear our children doing. “But you promised!” says the first child. But the second replies, “Oh I promised, but it doesn’t count. I had my fingers crossed!”

This is Phariseeism, and Jesus exposes its folly here with two questions.

1. *Which is greater, the gold in the temple or the temple (16-17)?*
2. *Which is greater, the gift or the altar (18-19)?*

The first is in verses 16-17. The Pharisees said that if you made a promise, and guaranteed your promise by these words, “I swear by the temple,” you could break that promise. But if you said, “I swear by the gold in the temple,” the oath was binding. So which is it?

The second example of Scriptural hot-potatoes in verses 18-19. The Pharisees said if a person made an oath and validated it by saying, “I swear by the altar,” he could break that promise. But if he said, “I swear by the gift on the altar,” he was bound. So which is it?

¹⁰ William Barclay, p. 292.

¹¹ R. T. France, p. 327.

As you can see, the Pharisees lived by a system rather than the clear, straightforward message of the Scriptures. How did Jesus respond?

B. Jesus shows that the system must submit to the Scriptures (20-22). Jesus cut right through all the “scribal nit-picking” in verses 20-22. “So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.”

Three times Jesus repeats the phrase “whoever swears” (20, 21, 22). This is an important issue. *Swearing*. Being a truth-teller is good. God commands it. But the Pharisee takes this important teaching from God and buries it in the maze of his man made rules.

Jesus’ response is critical. Jesus is a Bible man. He loves the Bible, quotes the Bible, lives the Bible, and has come to fulfill the Bible. Here He confronts the misuse of the Bible. He forces His hearers to think carefully about what God has said in the Book, and why.

This certainly isn’t the first time Jesus has done this regarding swearing either. Back in His sermon on the mount in Matthew 5, He insisted that His disciples tell the truth *all* the time, that oath-taking was unnecessary. He says in Matthew 5:34-37, “But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”

Now in Matthew 23, He once again takes people back to the Book. What does it really say, and mean? He puts the focus on God's Word, not man's rules.

This is the problem of the Pharisee. A Pharisee says he believes in the Bible, sure, but instead of submitting his life to it, he *uses* it to support his own system. Jesus calls that *hypocrisy*, and it should cause us to take note.

1. *What matters is what God says.* Frankly, the Bible is a whole lot simpler to understand than the Pharisees made it. Beware of the person who tries to over-complicate the Bible.

Frederick Bruner offers a helpful insight, “Whenever teachers claim to know the innermost mind of God on the basis of anything other than the clear and uncomplicated interpretation of clear and uncomplicated texts of Scripture, we know we are in the presence of false teaching.”¹²

Friends, when a so-called “healer” claims to know what kinds of prayer God answers for certain ailments, and what kinds of prayer God does not answer, beware. When what a preacher teaches grows out of his fanciful imagination more than the clear sense of the Scriptures, beware.

People can use the Bible to support beliefs and practices that are not in the Bible. Beware. The legalist does this, by adding to what the Bible says (“a godly woman will never wear slacks in the sanctuary”). But so does the libertine, by taking away from what the Bible says (“you don’t have to remain married to that person, for God wants you to be happy”).

Jesus shows us that what matters is what God has truly said in this Book.

¹² Frederick Bruner, p. 822.

2. *What God says is more important than what man says.* No one would question that, yet in practice many professing Christians place more stock in what their system says than what the Savior says. A self-serving view of the Scriptures is a mark of a hypocrite.

Jesus' words today have been sobering, without question. But please, let's not presume that Jesus is talking to *somebody else*. It's always easier to spot hypocrisy in *another person* rather than in *ourselves*. This is why we need a text like Matthew 23. I need it, and so do you.

Think carefully as you listen to the following story told by Kent Hughes:¹³ "Once an African chief happened to visit a mission station. Hanging outside the missionary's hut on a tree was a little mirror. The chief happened to look into the mirror and saw her reflection, complete with terrifying paint and threatening features. She gazed at her own frightening countenance and started back in horror, exclaiming, 'Who is that horrible-looking person inside that tree?' 'Oh,' the missionary said, 'it is not in the tree. The glass is reflecting your own face.' The African would not believe it until she held the mirror in her hand. She said, 'I must have the glass. How much will you sell it for?' 'Oh,' said the missionary, 'I don't want to sell it.' But the woman begged until he capitulated, thinking it might be best to sell it to avoid trouble. So he named a price and she took the mirror. Exclaiming 'I will never have it making faces at me again,' she threw it down and broke it to pieces."

That is exactly what the religious leaders did to Jesus. And it may be what you've been doing. God's Word is a mirror. When we look into it, we see ourselves as God sees us. The mirror doesn't lie. If we don't like what we see, we're faced with a choice. We can try to eliminate the mirror, *or* welcome what it has revealed, and respond as needed.

Make It Personal: Two responses are in order.

1. *Let's thank the Lord that He tells us the truth about ourselves.*
2. *Let's thank the Lord that He has provided a solution for all of our sins, including our hypocrisy.*

Closing Song: #438 "Cleanse Me" (verses 1, 2, 3)

Closing charge: Let the redeemed of the Lord...SAY SO.

Community Group Discussion:

1. In our current series, "*The Danger of Being Religious*," we're considering carefully Jesus' words concerning the scribes and Pharisees whom He calls "hypocrites." What is a hypocrite? What does it feel like to be in the presence of a hypocrite?
2. Take time to read again Jesus' words in Matthew 23:13-22, and then review the main points of today's sermon outline. What stood out most to you from this message?
3. In verse 13 Jesus said that the religious leaders "shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces". What does that mean? What were they doing? Can we do the same, and if so, how?
4. In verse 15 Jesus said the scribes and Pharisees worked hard to "make a proselyte". What is a proselyte and how do you make one? How does Jesus' warning apply to us? Can parents ever be guilty of seeking to "make a proselyte" out of their children, and if so, how?
5. Jesus uses the word "swear" about nine times in verses 16-22. What does it mean to "swear" in this context? What were the religious leaders doing, and what did it reveal about them, according to Jesus? How does this apply to us?

¹³Kent Hughes, *Mark, Vol. 2*, p. 189.

6. Some might say that Jesus is not very kind in this passage, that He's rather harsh. Would you agree? Why is Jesus talking this way? Why do we need a Savior that talks this way?

Further reflections on regulations versus relationship:

As we were driving by the river on our trip in Asia a couple of weeks ago, we saw a crowd gathered by a river. They weren't swimming. They were having a funeral service for a man who had died and were getting ready to burn his remains.

A few days later I was talking with a pastor who came from the villages, and he was telling me how pure the water was in the rivers and streams. "You can drink right out of them, without filtering," he said.

I mentioned the burial scene, and asked, "You can drink out of that water?"

He responded, "Oh, they burn the ashes on the shore beside the river, not in it. The river is pure. It's okay to drink that water."

I'm not sure we were understanding each other. I kept thinking, but wouldn't the remains on the shore eventually wash into the river?

In America we have many regulations. I am sure there is one that says you cannot bury someone next to a river. We have regulations regarding the use of burial vaults, and so forth. I am thankful that someone thought enough of our community health to create such regulations. They exist for our good.

However, if a person doesn't understand the purpose of a regulation, they'll likely think they have a right to complain about it. "Those people up in Columbus, always trying to tell us how to live!"

Such thinking is misguided, isn't it? It is actually an indication of pride to think that if I don't understand a regulation, I have the right to complain about it and even disregard it.

This scenario happens in the church as well. A person assumes that if they don't understand something, they have the right to complain about it, to have a bad attitude about it. But this is not so, says the mature person. I know there's a loving and good purpose for the regulation, even though I may not understand the purpose. I recognize that life is not about me, but about us.