

Proposition: In Matthew 23:1-7, Jesus exposes two problems of the Pharisees.

- I. Jesus exposes the danger of the Pharisees (1-4).
 - A. We learn who they are (1-2).
 - B. We learn what they deserve (3a).
 1. God's law is good.
 2. God's law has a good intent.
 3. The danger comes when God's law is used for a different intent.
 - C. We learn where they are deficient (3b-4).
 1. The emphasis of religion is on doing.
 2. The emphasis of biblical Christianity is on knowing.
- II. Jesus exposes the delusion of the Pharisees (5-7).
 - A. The first evidence is what they do (5).
 1. They do what they do to be seen.
 2. They focus on externals.
 - B. The second evidence is what they desire (6-7).
 1. They love to use religion to get social perks.
 2. They love to use religion to get power.
 3. They love to use religion to get public recognition.
 4. They love to use religion to get personal honor.

Implications: Beware of the spirit of pharisaism...

1. It's possible to be sincere, yet wrong.
2. It's possible to be busy for God, yet not know Him.
3. It's possible to change today--inside out.

Religion. The *Living Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language* defines "religion" as follows: "Recognition on the part of man of a controlling superhuman power entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship; the feeling or the spiritual attitude of those recognizing such a controlling power, with the manifestation of such feeling in conduct or life; the practice of sacred rites or observances."

Amidst all those words you'll notice two components of religion included in Webster's definition. First, religion involves a relationship with God. And second, out of that relationship flows a response which shows up one's behavior--Webster calls it "the practice of sacred rites or observances."

Answer this. Is it possible to have the second without the first? Can a person demonstrate religious behavior and not truly have a relationship with God?

For the first part of my life I had "religion." My parents made sure our family attended church regularly. I can still visualize the high ceiling in the sanctuary, the pulpit, and the communion table up front. We were there on Sunday mornings. We sang the songs. We listened to the reading of the Bible. When I reached a certain age I was even given a Bible by the church.

Yes, we were religious. We practiced what Webster called the "sacred rites and observances." But I must confess something to you. For me, it was empty and meaningless. Not just because I was young, either, for I was still a young person when that all changed--when God moved our family to another church, and God brought me into a relationship with Himself through Jesus Christ.

*** 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.

And since then I've discovered that my story is not unique. The world is full of people--people who call themselves "Christian"--who are going through religious motions who truly do not know God. Indeed, it's possible to be *very* religious and *very* lost.

How do I know? It's not just my opinion. I know because of a message Jesus preached one day during His final week of ministry, just before His crucifixion and resurrection. In that message, Jesus took to task the religious leaders of His day. Of all the sermons Jesus ever preached, this one is perhaps the most severe. He used words like "fools," "hypocrites," "blind guides," and "son of hell" to describe people.

What people? Religious people. In fact, the most religious people of His day.

You'll find Jesus' sermon in Matthew 23. It will be our text of study for the next six weeks in a series I've entitled, "The Danger of Being Religious."

I'm going to make a statement that may shock you, yet it's true. In church after church this morning, all across this country, there are people who are singing songs and offering prayers to God, listening to sermons, teaching Sunday School lessons, and serving as ushers, yet if they died today they would enter into a Christless eternity. What's the problem? They're just like the group of people Jesus confronted in Matthew 23.

Did you ever notice how often Jesus offended the religious leaders in His day? The common people loved Him, but He ruffled the religious establishment. And there was no one group He took to task more than the Pharisees.

Why? What was wrong with the Pharisees? That's no moot question, for indeed, the spirit of pharisaism is alive and well in the world today, isn't it? That fact will become even more apparent as we open our hearts up to Jesus' sermon.

Jesus began by exposing two problems of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:1-7. We're going to investigate those two problems and then consider the implications for us.

I. Jesus exposes the danger of the Pharisees (1-4).

In the first four verses of Matthew 23, we learn three insights about the Pharisees.

A. We learn who they are (1-2). "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 'The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.'"

Stop there. As we ponder the context, we notice the text begins with the transition word "then." What's just happened? It was perhaps a year earlier that Jesus first denounced the Pharisees publicly, as recorded in Matthew 15:7: "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.'"

After that, Jesus warned His disciples with this word of caution (Matt 16:6), "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Saducees."

Then things really heated up. According to John 11:53, following the resurrection of Lazarus and in response to Jesus' increasing popularity, the religious leaders began plotting to kill Jesus. Jesus actually preached the sermon of Matthew 23 just a few days before they carried out their deadly plan.

As you scan through Matthew 21-22 you'll notice the tension rising. The leaders challenged him in Matthew 21:23, "Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. 'By what authority are you doing these things?' they asked. 'And who gave you this authority?'"

Jesus responded with a couple of parables that stung the chief priests and Pharisees, so much so that according to 21:46 they "looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd."

In 22:15 the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus with the question about whether it's right to pay taxes to Caesar or not. Then, in 22:23, the Saducees took their turn at trying to entrap Jesus, but failed.

After that run-in, Jesus turned the table and asked the Pharisees a question (22:42), "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" Following the ensuing discussion concerning the identity of the Messiah, the religious crowd was speechless. It was at that point--"then"--that Jesus began to speak, as 23:1 says, "to the crowds and to his disciples."

About what subject? About the teachers of the law--called the "scribes" in the KJV--and the Pharisees. Though Matthew mentions two groups, there's actually overlap between them. Technically, the scribes had teaching authority, while the Pharisees did not. Many of the Pharisees were actually laymen--middle class businessmen.

Then, too, the term Pharisee had an even broader meaning thirty some years later when Matthew penned this biography of Jesus' life. D. A. Carson observes (471), "The 'teachers of the law,' most of them Pharisees in Matthew's time, were primarily responsible for teaching. 'Pharisee' defines a loose theological position, not a profession like 'teacher.' The two terms are distinct, even if there is much overlap on the personal level."

So picture the setting. Jesus is speaking. He's in the temple courts in Jerusalem. The crowds are listening and so are Jesus' disciples. Matthew doesn't mention them, but I have a strong hunch the Pharisees were on the fringe listening in--and what they were about to hear no doubt infuriated them.

Who were the scribes and Pharisees, anyway? There were actually many Jewish sects in Jesus' day, the Pharisees being just one. Here Jesus says they "sit in Moses' seat."

You'll recall that God gave His Law to the Israelites through Moses fourteen centuries B.C. Barclay says the sect of the Pharisees came along about 175 B.C. The name means "The Separated Ones"--these were men who dedicated their whole lives to careful, meticulous observance of every rule and regulation which the Scribes crafted.

And there weren't very many Pharisees, either. In Jesus' day, there were about 6,000. Not all were hypocrites (remember Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea), but all were zealous.

How zealous? There's a hint of their zeal in Jesus' description of them in verse 2. He said they "sit in Moses' seat." The literal translation would be, "They *have seated themselves* in Moses' seat." They were champions of the law.

Perhaps Jesus had in mind a rabbinic tradition which Frederick Bruner describes (811), "Israel had a tradition that the Lord built Moses a chair on Sinai, from which the law was handed down from Moses to Joshua to the elders to prophets and now to present Bible teachers. All who later occupied Moses' chair received respect because of the chair's venerable past occupants and present high duties--the exposition and application of the law of God."

The "seat" represents teaching authority--much like universities today use the term "chair" to depict the head of a department.

The question is--who gave the Pharisees the right to assume Moses' seat? There is no record in the Scriptures that God assigned this authority to any group. They took it upon themselves. After all, "Somebody's got to make sure God's people obey God's law! We'll do it!" And so they did.

So there's insight #1 concerning the Pharisees. In verses 1-2 we learn who they are...

B. We learn what they deserve (3a). The first words in verse 3 are shocking. Jesus says, "So you must obey them and do everything they tell you."

Say what? Obey whom? The Pharisees? Why would vehement critics of Jesus deserve a listening ear, let alone obedience? What's Jesus saying?

That's a tough question to answer. Carson suggests Jesus is being sarcastic. That's possible. Certainly Jesus is going to "let the Pharisees have it" in a moment. Indeed, for most of His sermon Jesus is going to condemn the Pharisees--with a series of seven woes.

But notice how He begins--with a recognition of their position. Regardless how they got there, they sit in Moses' seat. They represent Moses. They represent the Word of God in Israel.

Don't miss this. To the extent that the scribes and Pharisees taught the Word of God as Moses had done, they were to be obeyed. But conversely, when their teachings went beyond the Scriptures, when what they taught didn't come from God's Word, they were not to be obeyed.

By the way, doesn't that apply to us? Any person who holds a teaching position in the church deserves our respect. And to the degree they teach the Word of God, they are to be obeyed. But if their teaching isn't based on the Bible, it holds no authority over us.

At this point, allow me to explain where the Pharisees got into trouble. It had to do with confusion over God's law. Three things are true of the law of God.

1. *God's law is good.* Sometimes people will say, "We're under grace, not the law," implying that the law is bad. It's true we're under grace, but it's not true that the law is bad. How could it be? God gave it! God gave the Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai. If God gave it, we can be sure it's good.

2. *God's law has a good intent.* What was the reason God gave the law? To show the redeemed nation of Israel how to live in the Promised Land, right? The law was the written record of what He expected of His covenant people.

Inherent in the law was a twofold intent. First, the law was intended to reveal God's glory. And second, the law was intended to reveal man's inadequacy. The law was never intended to be a ladder for men to climb to God. It's a spotlight which unveils the sinfulness and inability of man to reach God (that's what Galatians is all about).

3. *The danger comes when God's law is used for a different intent.* For example, think of a screwdriver. A good tool? Yes, but not if you try to drive nails with it. Why not? It wasn't designed for that intent.

Here's where the Israelites got into trouble. As time passed, many of the Jews began using the law for a different intent. They saw it as a means to reach God. As time passed, Judaism took a very "Arminian" to religion--"It's up to man to reach God."

Here's where their logic to them. If it's up to man to reach God, and if the *law* is the *means* to do so, we need safeguards to insure we're keeping the law. So the Jewish leaders began to develop a whole list of man-made laws intended to clarify and compliment God's law. And in time people began to view these man-made laws (or "traditions") as equal in authority with God's law.

Do you see the inherent danger in this approach? It shows up today in various forms. When I was a teenager, in order to participate in a Christian quizzing event, they used to check your hair length. If a hair went over the top of your ear, you couldn't quiz.

Is there anything in the Bible forbidding a young man's hair to touch his ear? No. Why the rule then? I suppose it grew out of an attempt to insure that young people would be morally pure--which is a biblical command (1 Thes 4:3). So a man-made law was created to help reinforce God's law.

Realize something. Personal convictions are fine. But when man-made laws are given equal authority with God's commands, we're in serious danger, aren't we?

Now, guess who became the self-appointed conscience in Israel? Who took it upon themselves to guarantee the Jews would keep these "laws"? You guessed it--the Pharisees! Which brings us to insight #3.

C. We learn where they are deficient (3b-4). Jesus said, "But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them."

Herein lies the deficiency of the Pharisees. They didn't practice what they preached. Few things are more harmful to the cause of Christ than this--people who do not practice what they preach.

What's worse, the Pharisees imposed this heavy, legalistic system on others. They placed the burden of religion on the shoulders of others, and refused to assist them in carrying the burden. Which brings us to an important contrast...

1. *The emphasis of religion is on doing.* A religious system is an oppressive thing. It's heavy, burdensome, and difficult. In religion the emphasis is on *doing*--do and do and do and do in your attempt to reach God. But in the end you never know if you've done enough. But conversely...

2. *The emphasis of biblical Christianity is on knowing.* On knowing a Person who has done it all--Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ did what we couldn't do--He met the demands of the divine law *perfectly*. And then He sacrificed His life to pay the penalty for our failure. Then He conquered the foe of death in His resurrection.

Jesus said in John 17:3, "Now this is eternal life: that they may *know* you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

Did you notice how the common people in Jesus' day flocked to Him? Why was that? Because He had compassion on them (Matt 9:36). Beloved, Jesus doesn't offer us a cold, sterile, harsh religious system. He offers us reality, substance, and hope. He offers us *Himself!*

Listen carefully. Many people in our age are disillusioned by established religion with all its bureaucracy. This is a great time for ministry for this reason. What we have to offer people isn't a religious system. It's a relationship with a Person! And when you come to know that Person, He places you in a Body, His Body, in relationship with other people who know Him. That's what the church is, a living organism.

That's biblical Christianity, beloved! How foolish to settle for anything less! That's why we must beware of the danger of the Pharisees. Now a second problem...

II. Jesus exposes the delusion of the Pharisees (5-7).

Please don't misunderstand. In Jesus' day, the Pharisees were considered the good guys. To their peers they were zealous, committed, and even godly. And though some were shady, a lot of them were very sincere. But, according to Jesus, they were deluded. That's a serious charge, one that demands some hard evidence to prove it. So in verses 5-7 Jesus spells out two evidences of the Pharisee's delusion.

A. The first evidence is what they do (5). "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long." According to Jesus, you can sum up the activity of the Pharisees in two ways, the first is general, the second more specific.

1. *They do what they do to be seen.* The Greek verb for "see" is *theathenai*, which means "to be seen," or "to make theater." The Pharisees used religion to attract

attention, rather than to glorify God. They wanted to be seen. They wanted to look impressive.

Do we ever do that? Take inventory. Why did you come to church today, or teach your Sunday School class, or put your offering in the plate? To be seen by men *or* to please God?

To say, "They do what they do to be seen," is a strong accusation. So Jesus gives some concrete examples of how they "showboated" religiously. They did it by focusing on externals...

2. *They focus on externals.* Jesus mentions two examples. One, "they make their phylacteries wide." What's that mean? In Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18, God told His people to put His Word on their foreheads and arms--probably meant originally in a metaphorical sense. But the Pharisees took it quite literally. They placed portions of Scripture in small, leather boxes, and wore them on their arm or tied to the forehead, for all to see!

And secondly, they made "the tassels on their garments long." They based their practice on Numbers 15:37-41. They tried to look religious by what they wore. Do we ever do that? If we do, we're like the Pharisees. For the Pharisees, the emphasis was on the external

There's a second evidence of their delusion. Jesus put the spotlight on it in verses 6-7. The first evidence is what they do.

B. The second evidence is what they desire (6-7). Notice the first two words, "They love." Jesus is going to let us see inside the heart of a Pharisee. Here's what they love. Here's what they want. Here's what the idol of their heart is. Here's what their ambition is. Here's what drives them. Four things, four *loves*...

1. *They love to use religion to get social perks.* "They love the place of honor at banquets." When they went to a public meal, they used their religious status to get the best seats. They loved the limelight. They learned that being pious was a way to get it.

It's true. There are social perks that go along with Christianity. There are people who come to church because "it's good for business," or "it makes my marriage go smoother."

2. *They love to use religion to get power.* In the middle of verse 6 Jesus continues, "They love...the most important seats in the synagogues."

In the synagogue, the back seats were occupied by the children and the most unimportant people. The closer to the front you sat, the more important you were. The most honored seats were reserved for the elders and these seats actually faced the congregation (Barclay, 287). To have such a seat represented authority and power.

And so the Pharisees used religion to get power. They were like the minister Woodrow Wilson described as the only man he knew who could "strut while sitting down."¹

3. *They love to use religion to get public recognition.* Verse 7, "They love to be greeted in the marketplaces." They loved to be noticed. They fed on their egos on public recognition.

4. *They love to use religion to get personal honor.* Verse 7 concludes, "They love...to have men call them 'Rabbi.'" They were hung up on titles and protocol and image. And they loved to hear people say to them, "Rabbi."

¹Kent Hughes, *Mark*, p. 126.

The title rabbi is a transliteration of the Hebrew word meaning, "my master" or "my teacher." It was used of Jesus (26:25). Originally it signified respect. But in time it became inflated to the point that it meant "my great one."

And the Pharisees loved to hear it. They loved to be looked to as the "answer man," as the person on the top of the pile. "Oh, my great one, speak to us!"

Dear friend, we are in trouble the moment we forget that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. There are no heroes in the kingdom of God, save one--Jesus Christ.

What's the remedy for the delusion of the Pharisees? That's the subject Jesus addresses and we'll consider next time in verses 8-12. But we can't afford to stop just yet, not until we talk about some implications. You see, most of us would classify as "religious" people--by virtue of the fact that we are in church today.

Could it be that Jesus is talking to us?

Implications: Beware of the spirit of pharisaism...

It's easy for us to see the faults of the Pharisees, isn't it? It's not quite so easy to see our own. Their hypocrisy showed up in the way they dressed and where they sat and what they liked to be called. They tried to use God for personal advancement. Does that ever happen in the church today?

Let's do some self-examination. In light of Jesus' words, let's ponder three possibilities.

1. *It's possible to be sincere, yet wrong.* Many of the Pharisees were very sincere. They sincerely thought that if they did all the right things, they'd reach God. But they were sincerely wrong.

My friend, if you think that a holy God will accept you into heaven because you've lived a good life, think again. Titus 3:5 says, "It's not by works of righteousness which we have done."

If you think you are okay with God because your name is on a church roll, think again. Isaiah 64:6 says our righteous acts are like filthy rags to God. My name could be on a dozen church rolls, and if that's what I'm trusting in to reach God, I may be sincere, but I am wrong. It's not enough to be sincere, beloved.

2. *It's possible to be busy for God, yet not know Him.* If the Pharisees were anything, they were busy for God. They were busy all right, but they did not know the Lord. And what's worse, He did not know them.

What about you? Do you know the Lord? Is He real in your life? Please be honest, the consequences are eternal. You may have been in the church all your life--that's not the issue. The question of all questions is--Do you know the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you know Him? Which brings us to a third possibility...

3. *It's possible to change today--inside out.* The Pharisees tried to change people outside-in. That doesn't work. Here's what works. "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your *heart* that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your *heart* that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."

It's possible for you to be changed today--inside out. Are you willing?