

Proposition: In Matthew 23:13-22 Jesus confronted the hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees. His words unveil three indicators of a hypocrite.

- I. Look out when you see a self-serving view of God's kingdom (13-14).
 - A. The Pharisees refused to get right with God on God's terms (13).
 - B. The Pharisees made it hard for people to get right with God.
 - C. Instead, they settled for religious substitutes (14).
- II. Look out when you see a self-serving view of people (15).
 - A. A Pharisee is zealous about winning people.
 - B. A Pharisee wants to win people who will be like him.
 1. Our aim isn't to build an empire.
 2. Our aim is to see people submit to the King.
- III. Look out when you see a self-serving view of the Scriptures (16-22).
 - A. The Pharisees lived by a system rather than substance.
 1. Is it the temple or the gold in the temple (16-17)?
 2. Is it the altar or the gift on the altar (18-19)?
 - B. Jesus put the focus on God's Word, not man's rules (20-22).
 1. What matters is what God says.
 2. What God says is more important than what man says.

Response: Two questions to ask yourself...

1. Are you a person that majors on minor issues?
2. Are you a person who's settled the most important issue?

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, but I don't think so. Church isn't for me. Don't get me wrong. If it works for you, that's fine. But I've got some problems with established religion."

At which 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?"

"A lot," he says. "For starters, there are so many religions, how do you know which is right? What's more, I think religion is a personal matter, and I don't need to go to church to worship God. But my biggest problem--and don't take me wrong--but my main reason for not going to church is this. There are hypocrites there."

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.

An anonymous pastor wrote the following fictitious account in 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.

***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.

I suspected that I was sitting with some hypocrites--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."¹

This morning we come to the third message in a series I've entitled, "The Danger of Being Religious." Our text is Matthew 23. Of all the messages of Jesus recorded in the gospels, it's doubtful that any is more blunt than this one. G. Campbell Morgan says of our text, "This passage contains the most terrible words which ever fell from the lips of the King (276)."

I'll remind you of 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 before His betrayal and crucifixion. Jesus was encountering increasing hostility from the Jewish, religious establishment.

By the way, the hostility of religious people would be a major problem for the early church, too. Scan the book of Acts, and what do you find? The religious leaders of the Jews constantly hounded Peter, Paul, and others who proclaimed a message of saving grace in 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 a message he had personally heard the Savior preach decades earlier. Please realize that Jesus preached many more sermons than those recorded in the four gospels, but the Holy Spirit preserved exactly what we needed. In this case, we needed our Savior's instructions concerning a huge problem. The second generation church faced it, and so do we. It's the danger of merely being religious.

Your neighbor might use the excuse of hypocrites to stay away from church. The fact of the matter is, there are hypocrites. There were in Jesus' day, too. At least six times in this sermon, Jesus labeled the religious leaders as "hypocrites" (13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29).

Just what is a hypocrite? How can you spot one? How can you tell if you are being one? In Matthew 23:13-22 Jesus confronted the hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees. A hypocrite is a self-serving person. Jesus unveiled at least three indicators of a hypocrite in verses 13-22.

I. Look out when you see a self-serving view of God's kingdom (13-14).

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! 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."

There was no smile on Jesus' 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 slough it off by asserting, "Well that's just your opinion. You have no right to judge me

¹Author Unknown, at Calvary, Covington, KY (from internet).

because you don't know my heart." But to hear Jesus say, "You hypocrites!" is not something you can slough off, for He *is* the Judge, and He does know hearts. And if what He condemned in the lives of the Pharisees is in our lives, we're in big trouble, too.

"Woe to you!" He said. The Greek word for "woe" is *ouai*. Barclay observes (288), "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." 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 depicts an imitation righteousness.

Of the seven woes, the first three confront false *teaching*, the next three address false *practice*, and the final one attacks false *security* (Bruner, 819).

So how do you spot a hypocrite? Jesus put the spotlight on three indicators of hypocrisy. 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. But you can be religious and not truly interested in the things that matter to God, namely *His kingdom*.

And that was the first of the Pharisees' problems. Their self-serving view of God's kingdom showed up in three ways.

A. The Pharisees refused to get right with God on God's terms (13). "You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces." What does that mean? The kingdom of heaven is synonymous with the kingdom of God which is God's rule in the universe. It's what God deserves and desires. It's why He sent His Son into this world, to restore His kingdom. Jesus taught His disciples to pray for God's kingdom to come (Matt 6:10), and to seek first His kingdom in our priorities (Matt 6:33).

But a hypocrite isn't interested in God's kingdom. Rather, it's his own kingdom that matters to him. The Pharisees refused to get right with God on God's terms.

B. The Pharisees made it hard for people to get right with God. Verse 13 again, "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 oppressive, legalistic system in place of true righteousness. They put roadblocks in front of the "grace-gate" that leads to God's kingdom. They refused to come to God by means of the way God prescribed.

But there's something worse than not getting right with God. Do you know what it is? It's making it hard for others to get right with God who sincerely want to.

Some of you aren't right with God. You're not interested in His kingdom. 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 that's what brought these stern words from Jesus.

But the Pharisees weren't irreligious. No way. They were very religious. But they refused to come to God on God's terms, preferring their own. And because they preferred their own way, they made it hard for other people to get right with God. How so?

C. Instead, they settled for religious substitutes (14). There is no verse 14 in the earliest and best Greek manuscripts of Matthew's gospel. The NIV includes it as a footnote because later manuscripts included it. The statement actually comes from Mark's gospel as 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 works-approach to righteousness.

So Jesus 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 zealous. And sincere. But their idea of religion was outward activity that failed to address the sinfulness of the heart. So they wore phylacteries, and sat in the best seats in the synagogue. Yes, they were very religious. But it was all a cover-up. They reduced godliness to a system of external actions.

You see, there are two kinds of hypocrites. One kind is the person who says one thing and yet does another. The other kind of hypocrite thinks he's doing the right thing, but he's actually doing the wrong thing. I think the Pharisees fit the latter mold.

They were sincere. They truly thought they were serving God better than others. They possessed a false zeal. It wasn't just that they "showed off." They thought they had a right to "show off" because they were right! And in the end, convinced they were "right," they rejected the very Messiah God sent to save them. Is there any higher form of hypocrisy than clinging to religion and missing God?

That's indicator #1--look out when you see a self-serving view of God's kingdom. May I hasten to say *look out* if you see it in yourself, and also, look out when you see it in others. A second indicator...

II. Look out when you see a self-serving view of people (15).

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are."

Here's the second indicator. A hypocrite has a self-serving view of people. He's more concerned for numbers than for God's work and the good of people. He views people as objects.

That was Jesus' indictment of the Pharisees. In verse 15 Jesus shows us an x-ray of a Pharisee's heart, and in the x-ray you'll notice two aspirations.

A. A Pharisee is zealous about winning people. How zealous? In the KJV 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. They went to the fish. They were zealous about winning people.

B. A Pharisee wants to win people who will be like him. The NIV uses the word "convert." In the 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 Pharisaiism. "You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are."

When the Pharisees found a potential recruit, they went after him. The man became a "proselyte" by being circumcised (if he was a Gentile) and then by pledging to submit his life

to the rigors of Jewish law, including the extra-biblical traditions for which the Pharisees were so zealous.

Jesus doesn't criticize the fact of the Pharisees' missionary endeavors, but its *results* (Carson, 479). He describes the Pharisee's convert as "twice as much a son of hell as you are."

Someone has remarked, "The most converted were the most perverted."² The phrase "son of hell" means "one destined for hell (France, 327)." The people the Pharisees recruited often "out-Phariseed" the Pharisees! They bought the notion hook-line-and-sinker that it's possible to reach God through religious effort, and refused to consider their need for Jesus the Christ.

The spirit of pharisaism is alive and well on planet earth. Gary Friesen offers this definition: "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."³

Here's the basic problem of the Pharisee. Instead of trying to lead people to God, he were sought to lead people to Pharisaism. He wanted to win people who would be like him. He wanted "proselytes."

Beloved, know this. Jesus didn't tell us to make proselytes, but *disciples*. Disciples who would follow *Him*, not us. I see two lessons here for us.

1. *Our aim isn't to build an empire.* It's not to attract people who will be like us. The Pharisees weren't interested in the well-being of others. What mattered to them was their system. As long as they recruited a proselyte now and then, the system would replenish and continue. But building an empire isn't our aim. Rather...

2. *Our aim is to see people submit to the King.* What king? King Jesus! The King who came to earth, lived a perfect life, and then sacrificed His life on a cross to pay the penalty we deserved to pay. That's the King! It's the One who conquered death three days later, who returned to heaven and sent His Spirit to live in all who would believe in Him. That's our aim, to see men and women, boys and girls, submit to the King!

A hypocrite has another agenda. He has a self-serving view of both God's kingdom and people. And to justify that self-serving view, he must engage in some fancy footwork with God's Word, which brings us to the third indicator of a hypocrite.

III. Look out when you see a self-serving view of the Scriptures (16-22).

We have a phrase that goes like this, "He missed the forest for the trees." That was true of the Pharisees. They were so hung up on the details of their system that they missed the obvious.

Case in point--the subject of swearing (or oath-taking). The ninth commandment stated, "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor (Ex. 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 called them "blind guides" (16)--that's not the kind of guide you want to follow!

When it came to their approach to the Scriptures, the Pharisees had a problem...

A. The Pharisees lived by a system rather than substance. In verses 16-22 Jesus puts the spotlight on the Pharisees' man-made system, and shows how their system blurred and obscured the substance of God's Word. Let's listen to Jesus (16-22):

²William Barclay, 290.

³Gary Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, p. 416.

"Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it."

A legalist is a master of evasion. A classic example was the Pharisees' use of oaths. A comment by William Barclay helps explain (292), "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."

R. T. France calls it "scribal nit-picking (p. 327)."

It's kind of like what children often do today. "But you promised!" says the first child. To which the second replies, "Yea, I promised, but it doesn't count. I had my fingers crossed!"

That's what the Pharisees did, and Jesus confronted their folly with two examples. 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?

1. *Is it the temple or the gold in the temple (16-17)?*

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?

2. *Is it the altar or the gift on the altar (18-19)?*

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 put the focus on God's Word, not man's rules (20-22). Jesus cut right through all the "scribal nit-picking." Three times in verses 20-22 He repeats the phrase "he who swears" (20, 21, 22). That's the issue--*swearing*. The point is to be a truth-teller, but that point had been lost in the maze of man made rules. So Jesus put the focus where it belonged, on God's Word, not man's rules.

In fact, back in Matthew 5, He insisted that His disciples simply tell the truth *all* the time--that oath-taking was unnecessary. Listen to 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."

Biblical Christianity puts the focus on God's Word, not man's rules. Not so Pharisaic legalism. A Pharisee believes in the Bible, but instead of submitting his life to it, he *uses* it to support his system. Jesus calls that *hypocrisy*.

In light of Jesus' assessment of the Pharisees, let's affirm two truths that are at the heart of true Christianity.

1. *What matters is what God says.* The fact of the matter is this. The Bible is a whole lot simpler to understand than the Pharisees made it. Indeed, beware of anyone who tries to over-complicate the Bible.

Frederick Bruner offers a helpful insight (822), "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."

Allow me to be specific. 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, look out. When any preacher teaches ideas that grow out of his imagination more than the clear sense of the Scriptures, look out. Just because someone says he received a message from God does not mean it came from God.

What matters is what God says. And what God wants us to know, He preserved for us in the Scriptures. Let's affirm a second truth...

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.

The Pharisees prided themselves as experts in knowing the Bible (see John 5:39-40). They could dissect the fine points, but they missed the main point! In essence, they studied the Bible to get a system, and then put their Bible on the shelf and promoted their system.

We do the same today. Some go so far as to put it on their church signs: "First Church. Fundamentalist [whatever that means]. Independent. Separatist. Pre-Millennial. Pre-Tribulation. King James Only."

This has been a serious study. Please, don't presume that Jesus is talking to *somebody else*. It's easier to spot hypocrisy in *someone else* than in *yourself*. That's why we need a text like Matthew 23. I need it, and so do you.

Think about the following story told by Kent Hughes:⁴ "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 done. His Word is a mirror. When you look into it, you see yourself as God sees you. The mirror doesn't lie. If you don't like what you see, you're faced with a choice. You can try to eliminate the mirror, *or* welcome the mirror. So in response...

Response: Two questions to ask yourself...

1. *Are you a person that majors on minor issues?* Are you? As you hear Jesus describe the Pharisees, do His words ring true of you?

2. *Are you a person who's settled the most important issue?* You may have system, but do you have the Savior?

⁴Kent Hughes, *Mark*, Vol. 2, p. 189.