

Proposition: In Matthew 23:8-12, Jesus identifies the difference between being religious and being a Christian. The difference shows up in two attitudes, one that we reject and the other that we adopt.

- I. We're not to be concerned about *status* (8-10).
 - A. We don't seek authority over people (8).
 - 1. We have one Teacher.
 - 2. We are brothers.
 - B. We don't seek access to God through people (9).
 - 1. We have one Father.
 - 2. He is in heaven.
 - C. We don't seek acclaim from people (10).
 - 1. We have one Guide.
 - 2. He is the Christ.
- II. We're to be concerned about *service* (11-12).
 - A. The servant is the greatest (11).
 - 1. That's true of Jesus.
 - 2. That's true in the church.
 - B. The person who exalts self is in trouble (12).

Inventory Time: How can you tell if you're religious or real?

- 1. Are you hung up on externals?
- 2. Are you experiencing joy in serving others?
- 3. Are you making Christ the center of your life?

There's a difference between being religious and being a Christian. The difference is eternal. But it's also very hard to see, at times, with the naked eye.

Picture in your mind two people. We'll call them Bob and Bill. It's Sunday, and both Bob and Bill are in church. Bob has his Bible with him. So does Bill. Bob has his giving envelop in his pocket. So does Bill. Bob always gives at least ten percent of what he makes to the Lord's work. So does Bill.

Bob had his devotions before he came to church. So did Bill. Bob led his family in prayer before they ate breakfast earlier in the morning. So did Bill.

Bob sang the hymns earlier in the worship service, some of them from memory. So did Bill. Bob is taking notes of the pastor's sermon. So is Bill.

Bob is concerned about what's happening to the moral fabric of society. So is Bill. Bob wrote a letter to his senator to urge him to get prayer back in the schools. So did Bill.

Bob served on the board of his church in the past. So did Bill. Bob helped deliver food baskets to needy families last year. So did Bill.

Bob keeps his Bible on his desk at work. So does Bill. Bob knows a lot about the Bible. So does Bill. Bob calls himself a Christian. So does Bill.

They're very similar, aren't they? In many ways, yes. To the human eye, yes. But there's one fundamental, eternal difference. One of the two men has religion. The other has a genuine relationship with God. One knows *about* God. The other knows God. One is religious. The other has the real thing.

***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.

Which is which? I don't know. It's impossible to tell from external appearances. But I do know this. Jesus said the following words to men who lived lives every bit as impressive as Bob's and Bill's--in fact, more impressive. To the most religious people of His day, Jesus said: "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell (Matt 23:33)?"

There's a difference between being religious and being a Christian. What is it? We began to explore that subject last week in a six week series I've entitled, "The Danger of Being Religious." Our study is based on a sermon Jesus preached as recorded in Matthew 23. He delivered the message just a few days before the religious establishment carried out their wicked plot to kill Him. This message, undoubtedly, added fuel to the fire of their fury.

Actually, Jesus preached this sermon to the crowds and to His disciples (1) while in the temple in Jerusalem. But this message was clearly an indictment against the religious hierarchy in Israel. At least seven times Jesus uttered the prophetic words of condemnation, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!" (13, 14?, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29).

Though I don't agree with his theology, Harry Emerson Fosdick put it well when he said, "Some people have just enough religion to make themselves miserable."

Case in point--the Pharisees. Last week we investigated verses 1-7 where Jesus exposed the danger and delusion of the Pharisees.

May I remind you that in first century Judaism, the Pharisees were the good guys? They were one of several Jewish sects. Their name indicates their approach to life: "The Separated Ones." They had a high view of morality and ethics. They were champions of the Torah, God's law. They devoted their lives to keeping a strict set of laws, some from God but most man-made, in their attempt to be right with God.

Yes, the Pharisees were impressive. But Jesus wasn't impressed. Jesus told the people in verse 5, "Everything they do is done for men to see." How so? By turning the Bible into a showpiece and clothing into a test of spirituality--"they make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long (5)."

But worse than what they did was what they *loved*. According to verses 6-7, they loved to use their religion to feed their egos: "they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'"

Would you say, in light of Jesus' words, that the Pharisees had a problem? Without a doubt. Which is what makes Matthew 23 so critical for us. Beloved, most of us have been deeply influenced by the pharisaic approach to God. We're either impressed by it, or we've outright adopted it. We've ciphoned grace right out of the gospel. Oh, we may give lipservice to "salvation by grace"--after all, it's in our doctrinal statement--but in reality what we're clinging to is a works-approach to righteousness. Just like the Pharisees.

Which brings us back to that nagging question again. What's the difference between being religious and being a Christian? We'll find the answer in the very next words of Jesus. In Matthew 23:8-12, the Lord explains that the difference shows up in two attitudes, one that we must reject and the other that we must adopt.

I. We're not to be concerned about *status* (8-10).

You'll notice a shift occurs in verse 8. To this point, Jesus has been talking *about* the religious leaders, and He'll return to that subject again in verse 13. But in verses 8-12, Jesus talks *to* someone. Whom? His disciples (and those in the crowd considering becoming a disciple).

Verse 8 begins, "But you." The "you" is emphatic. "'You' are to be different from the religious leaders I've just described. They're hung up on *status*. They think that status with God is something they merit, and that status with people is something they deserve. *But you* are not to be like them."

To make the point Jesus mentions three negative scenarios in verses 8-10. Since we're not to be concerned about status, there are three things we're not to seek.

A. We don't seek authority over people (8). "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers." Notice that Jesus picks up the last problem item He mentioned concerning the Pharisees in verse 7--they loved "to have men call them 'Rabbi.'" But to His disciples Jesus said, "Not you."

Allow me to remind you that the title "Rabbi" was a title used of respected teachers. It meant "my teacher," or "my master," or more literally, "my great one."

The verb is passive. "Don't let others call you 'Rabbi,'" is the idea. Don't seek it or desire it or promote it.

Jesus said, "You are not to be called 'Rabbi.'" Why not? You'll notice the next word is "for." It indicates a reason is about to follow. In fact, in each of the three scenarios, after telling us what we're not to do, Jesus explains *why*. He gives reasons.

Know this, my friend, biblical Christianity is *reasonable*. It's not just, "Do this because I say so." That's the approach the Pharisees took as they "tied up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders (4)." But Jesus offered a reasonable explanation.

Why aren't we to seek authority over people by the use of titles? For two reasons.

1. *We have one Teacher.* The NIV and the KJV both use the word "master," but the Greek term is *didaskalos*, aptly translated "teacher" in the NASB.

But the major emphasis in the verse, as well as in the two verses that follow, is on the word *one*. We have *one* Master/Teacher (8). We have *one* Father (9). We have *one* Teacher (10). We have *one* who is our authority, *one* to whom we look for truth, for answers, and for guidance.

And who is that? It's Christ. He is our Teacher. What are we?

2. *We are brothers.* The Greek word is *adelphoi*. What makes us brothers? The root word in *adelphoi* is *delphoo* or "womb." Brothers are those from the same womb. Listen to Jesus' words in John 3:3, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Peter stated in 1 Peter 1:23, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God."

Let that sink in. If you've been born again, and the person next to you has been born again, then guess what that makes you? Brothers. You've been birthed from the same womb.

Please realize that Christianity is a family affair. Religion is not. Through Christ we are brothers and sisters. We have one Father (9). Not so in pharisaic religion. In

religion, getting to heaven depends on your personal merit, so there's competition and jockeying for position, recognition, and respect. Status is important.

Does that mentality ever creep into the church? Oh, we may not seek the title "Rabbi," but think about how we often refer to people. He's "the Reverend Doctor So-and-So." Or, he's "the Very Reverend Doctor So-and-So." Or, he's "the Most Reverend Bishop So-and-So."

That's why I personally don't like the title "Reverend." Though the term simply means "worthy of reverence," the title often contributes to an unscriptural clergy-laity barrier and undermines the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. The truth is, we have one Teacher, and we who know Him are brothers.

And according to Jesus we are *all* brothers. By the way, that included Peter. There is no biblical support for giving Peter any papal authority over the church. There *is* authority in the church, but the authority is based on the Scriptures, not status. For that reason we don't seek authority over people. Scenario #2...

B. We don't seek access to God through people (9). "And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven." In the first and the following third scenarios Jesus forbids us to "be called" something--a passive verb. In the second scenario the verb is active--we are not to call someone else something.

What are we prohibited from calling another person? "Do not call anyone on earth 'father.'" Why not? Again, two reasons.

1. *We have one Father.* Who is that? It's God. And where is God?
2. *He is in heaven.* "Father" is a wonderful title. Did you realize that Jesus reserved this title for God alone? To whom did He teach us to pray? "Our *Father* in heaven (Matt 6:9)." In John 2:16 He referred to the temple as "my Father's house."

The apostle John said that "our fellowship is with the Father (1 John 1:3)." Paul said that because we possess the Holy Spirit we may cry "Abba, Father."

Isaiah the prophet called on God with these words (64:8), "O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter." (also 63:16)

Jesus told us not to call anyone on earth "father." He's not prohibiting a child from calling his dad "father." His point is that we don't seek access to God through people.

In the first century Judaism, tradition was a big thing. What the "fathers" said held a lot of clout. In fact, oral tradition held just about as much weight as the Scriptures. To have access to God you depended on what the "fathers" said.

To which Jesus said *no*. We don't seek access to God through people. We don't approach God through any human intermediary. We don't need a "middle man."

To put it plainly, we don't need a priest for we already have one--Jesus Christ. Listen to Hebrews 4:14-16, "Since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence..."

Abraham Lincoln once said, "My concern is not whether God is on our side; my great concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right."

An excellent point. But how do you get to be on God's side? How can sinners like us approach a holy God? It's not through our merit. We need a priest, a perfect priest. And we have one. It's Jesus Christ.

G. Campbell Morgan commenting on the statement, "Call no man your father," says: "This is our Lord's forbidding of the recognition of any man's power to impart by ceremony or in any other way, spiritual life to his fellow man... You shall never recognize any man who claims to be able, by sacramentarian grace or any other thing, to communicate life to your soul. The life of God in the soul of a man must come by the begetting of God (274)."

To put it simply, we don't seek access to God through people. We're to call no one "father." There's a third item we don't seek which Jesus spells out in scenario #3...

C. We don't seek acclaim from people (10). "Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ." The word translated "teacher" is an usual word. It's *kathegetes*, and this is the only place in the NT it appears. According to *Vines Dictionary*, the term denotes a master or teacher. It carries the idea of "to go before," or "guide."

What does a guide do? Last year my family visited the Ohio Caverns. Max, the owner of the caverns, was our *guide*. We followed him down the steps into the underground tunnel. We went wherever he told us to go. If we had a question about a stalagmite formation, we asked Max. As our guide, Max was in front of us, showing us the way to go, and telling us what we needed to know.

Now back to Jesus' words. We are not to be called "Teacher" or "Guide." We're not to seek the reputation as being the Answer Man. Why not? For two reasons...

1. *We have one Guide.* "You have *one* Teacher," Jesus said. Who's that?
2. *He is the Christ.* This is foundational to Christianity. We have *one* teacher, one person to whom we look for answers. He not only gives answers--He *is* the answer. He not only speaks truth--He *is* the truth. He not only guides us along the way--He *is* the way.

Be careful now. Can we use Jesus' words to foster such notions as, "I don't need the church, and I don't need anyone to teach me."? No. The Teacher Himself gave "pastor-teachers" (small "t") to the church. We need teachers. But the job of the teacher isn't to invent truth. He's not the "answer man." His task is merely to explain and exhort concerning what *The* Teacher has said.

Do you hear what Jesus is saying? The difference between being religious and being a Christian shows up first of all in our attitude towards *status*. In the church, all are equal in status. No one is *the* teacher, or *the* father, or *the* guide. Those positions are already filled. We are all sinners, and if we're in the family of God, we've all entered the same way--through repentance and faith in Christ.

You see, religion rests on the premise that it's up to man to reach God. And if you buy that premise, then status will be a big deal with you. Why? Because when you compare people with people, then some appear further along than others do on their quest to reach God. Some know more. Some have cleaned up their act more.

And if you're further along than others, then you will falsely think you have "earned" the right to some respect and recognition. You'll believe that you deserve to be called "Rabbi," "father," and "teacher." And you'll convince yourself you're not being self-

seeking. After all, somebody's got to lead the way. It might as well be someone as spiritual as *me*."

Jesus said *no*. We're not to be concerned about status. Rather...

II. We're to be concerned about *service* (11-12).

In verses 8-10, Jesus confronts what we're *not* to seek. Then in verses 11-12 He challenges us with the alternative. Status-seeking is out. Service is in.

Hear Jesus (11-12): "The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Beloved, know this. Christianity is *counter-cultural*. It goes against the grain of the natural man. Our society will not buy this--it's radical. But go a step further. The *religious establishment* won't accept this either. Jesus made two amazing announcements in verses 11-12.

A. The servant is the greatest (11). "The greatest among you will be your servant." The greatest are not those with titles, or Sunday School attendance pins, or Bible knowledge certificates. The heroes in the church are *servants*. Not high profile bureaucrats, not power-wielding charter members, but *servants*. The servant is the greatest.

Who's the best example of this? Jesus Himself. "The greatest among you will be your servant." Know this...

1. *That was true of Jesus.* In Matthew 20:28, Jesus declared, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Is there any greater than Jesus? He is the very Son of God. Yet He left the splendor of heaven to become a lowly servant. He came, not to get, but to give. And what He gave was so costly. He gave His life as a ransom payment. Truly, the greatest among us became our servant! And if that's true of Jesus, then...

2. *That's true in the church.* One day Jesus overheard His followers arguing with each other. Mark records the event (9:33-35), "They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the road?' But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.'"

This would revolutionize any church, including ours, if we all took to heart Jesus' words. True greatness is found in serving others, not in throwing our weight around and forcing others to serve us.

And notice the little word "your" in verse 11. In the Greek text it's plural. You see, it's not just that we serve a few people here and there (particularly those we like). Rather, the greatest in the church is the person who is "your" servant. He's the one who is willing to serve any and all who need such service in the family of God.

We're called to be servants, not status seekers. We're living in a self-serving world, but the world ought to see us serving one another. From the world's perspective, the church exists *for me*--so if I don't feel like participating, I won't. But according to Jesus, I exist *for others*. And that's why I must make church a priority in my life--because I'm called to serve God's people.

Allow me to ask a pointed question. Is that true of you? Are you committed to assuming the role of a servant in the church in which the Master has placed you? Are you committed to this church and to serving the people of this church?

A church full of servants is a beautiful thing to behold. When a congregation of followers of Christ die to themselves and out of love for Christ serve each other, it sends a loud and clear message to the world. Christ can do what mere religion cannot do. Religion can make people look different on the outside. But Christ changes people on the inside so that it shows up on the outside. Now, a second amazing announcement...

B. The person who exalts self is in trouble (12). Jesus' words are powerful, "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." There are only two options. One, exalt yourself in the eyes of man, and be humbled by God. Or two, humble yourself (before God and man) and be exalted (by God).

Let that sink in. Did Jesus say that the person who exalts self is in serious trouble? He did, yet exalting self is the accepted thing today, even in the church.

In one of his books, pastor and author Kent Hughes shares the following account:¹ "I once received a colored brochure which featured eight separate pictures of an 'evangelist' designed to show what a versatile man of God he was. It included pictures of him praying by a waterfall, praying with his hands on a pile of letters, holding a baby (he liked children), shaking the hand of a poor man (he knew poor people). But what really got my attention was the offer of a specially blessed handkerchief which had been dipped in the Jordan River and which, if prayerfully applied, would bring healing. The cost was \$15.00!"

My friend, the American church today needs to take to heart the sober message Jesus preached in Matthew 23. Jesus condemned status-seeking and called for service.

Right there is the remedy for pharisaism. In black and white. Stop being concerned about status. Choose to be concerned about service. It's time for inventory...

Inventory Time: How can you tell if you're religious or real?

I don't know about you, but Matthew 23 puts fear in my bones. When I think that Jesus condemned the most religious people of His day, it hits me. Most of us are a lot more like the Pharisees than we'd care to admit. I wonder...

Have we settled for religion and missed the real thing? How can we tell? Here's how. Compare our lives with what Jesus said in verses 8-12. In light of Jesus' words, I urge you to ask yourself three questions...

1. *Are you hung up on externals?* Like titles and religious protocol and man-made distinctions. The focus of religion is on externals, but if you are a true Christian, what matters most to you will be the *unseen*--pleasing the One we do not see.

2. *Are you experiencing joy in serving others?* Be honest. An evidence of a true relationship with Christ is a desire to serve others, like Jesus did. Do you feel that desire in your life? Are you putting it to action?

3. *Are you making Christ the center of your life?* Not religion, but Christ. It's true, we have one Master and One Teacher. It's Christ. Is He at the center of your life? Not tacked on to Sundays, but at the center of daily life? A religious person may tack Christ

¹R. Kent Hughes, *Mark* (Vol. 2), p. 126.

on to an already crowded life, but a person who truly knows Him will put Him first. Are you?