

# Religious People Condemned

## Introduction:

- I. One of the groups of people we meet in the New Testament is the Pharisees. How did they appear to the average Jew?
  - A. They were recognizable by their clothing.
  - B. They were commonly seen engaged in religious activities: attending services at the synagogue, praying in the streets, giving alms, etc.
  - C. They seemed to have a great reverence for God's word (phylacteries; ritual cleansing).
  - D. They didn't seem to want to have anything to do with certain other people whom they viewed as "ritually unclean."
- II. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and scribes sharply in Matthew 23.
  - A. He presented the divine view of these religious people, a view radically different from the way they considered themselves and the way other Jews saw them.
  - B. His comments must have been startling to the average Jew. Probably not more startling than His comment in the sermon on the mount.
    1. **Matthew 5:20 (ESV)** <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
    2. More righteous than a Pharisee?? You've got to be kidding!
    3. Matthew 23 helps us understand the problems with the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.
- III. Applicability of Matthew 23 to us...
  - A. Any Pharisees in the assembly this evening? I thought not.
  - B. There is a very real danger that we could fall into the same error as they.
- IV. Purpose:
  - A. Examine the Lord's rebuke of the Pharisees and scribes in Matthew 23, identifying the problem with their "brand" of righteousness.
  - B. Show how we can avoid their error.

## Body:

- I. **You're Missing the Point!**
  - A. A prime motivation behind their religious activities was to be seen by men (vv. 5-7).
    1. They cultivated the appearance of righteousness/religiosity.
    2. Their interest in the praise of men stemmed from their sinful pride.
    3. True greatness in the service of God springs from humility (vv. 11-12).
  - B. They had devised ways of getting around the Law of Moses (vv. 16-22).

1. The Pharisees and scribes had invented ways that a person could swear without being responsible for the content of the oath (by the temple, but not the gold of the temple; by the altar, but not by the gift on the altar).
  2. What was the purpose of the law regarding swearing?
  3. “The really important thing is...” - a common method of ignoring specific teaching in God’s word.
- C. They were satisfied with the appearance of law-keeping (vv. 23-24).
1. They were neglecting the “weightier” things of the law: justice and mercy and faith.
  2. **Matthew 12:7 (ESV)** <sup>7</sup> And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.
    - a. The quotation is from Hosea 6:6.
    - b. The issue was not sacrifice per se; it was always about honoring God.
  3. What is the difference between the Jew who sins with abandon and then covers it all with a sacrifice...and the Christian who lives in an ungodly manner and then “pacifies” God with church attendance on Sunday?
  4. Note that Jesus did not condemn them for paying attention to detail (“without neglecting the others” - v. 23).

## II. You’re Hypocritical!

- A. As teachers of the Law of Moses, the scribes and Pharisees sat in Moses’ seat (v. 2).
1. Nevertheless, the Jews were not to follow their example because they did not do as they said (v. 3).
  2. It is possible to be preoccupied with one’s religious appearance and yet in fact be a good moral person.
  3. The Pharisees and scribes were hypocrites in that they laid rigorous responsibilities upon others, but did not fulfill such responsibilities themselves (v. 4).
- B. They presented the facade of righteousness, but in truth were unrighteous (v. 14; NKJV - this verse omitted in the ESV).
- C. Religion must be concerned with the inner man (vv. 25-28).
1. The cup and dish illustration (vv. 25-26)
    - a. With a drinking cup, the inside of the cup is the part that one wants to be clean. In the same way, the purity of the inner man is the important issue in the service of God (see Luke 11:39-40).
    - b. It is easier to present the outward appearance of righteousness than it is to change one’s heart, i.e., manner of thinking, attitudes, etc.
    - c. The literalness of the illustration breaks down in verse 26. You can’t make the outside of the cup clean by cleansing the inside. From a spiritual application, however, if the heart of man is pure and clean, his visible conduct will reflect the same purity.
  2. The whitewashed tomb illustration (vv. 27-28)

### III. **You're Hindering Others!**

- A. The legalism of the Pharisees hindered others from entering the kingdom of heaven (vv. 13, 15).
  - 1. Luke 11:52 - "A true knowledge of the Scriptures was a key which opened the door to the glories of Christ and his kingdom. This the lawyers had taken away by teaching not the contents of the book, but the rubbish and trifles of tradition. They did not open the door for themselves, and by their pretentious interference they confused others in their efforts to open it." (McGarvey, *Fourfold Gospel*, pp. 315-316).
  - 2. The proselytes of the Pharisees became more devoted to the traditions of the fathers than the Pharisees themselves (v. 15).
- B. Not only did they not follow the truth themselves, but they also persecuted the ones who taught the truth (vv. 29-36).

#### **Conclusion:**

- I. Jesus told the Pharisees:
  - A. You're missing the point! Your religion is not for the purpose of making you look good in front of others; it is to honor God.
  - B. You're pretenders! You are not what you seem to be because you have forgotten that the inner man is the site of God's spiritual creative work.
  - C. You are a stumbling block to others!
- II. V. 33 - "How are you to escape being sentenced to hell?"
- III. Jesus' scathing rebuke of the Pharisees and scribes suggests the real danger of veering off the right path.

#### **Invitation:**

- I. Being religious isn't enough!
  - A. Saul of Tarsus was religious, but he was obviously working against Jesus as he persecuted Christians (Acts 9).
  - B. Ananias and Sapphira were religious, but they were obviously not acceptable to God (Acts 5).
  - C. Matthew 7:21-23
- II. Cornelius was not only a religious person, but also a good man (Acts 10:2, 22). Yet he needed the cleansing blood of Jesus to redeem him from his sins.

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