

“How to Kill a Church”
Matthew 23:1-12
September 22, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

Back in 2012, *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat wrote a book called *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*. As the title indicates, he traces how Christianity has gone off the rails in our nation, and is in the process of taking the nation with it. Jesus speaks similarly in Matthew 23, where he warns the Church by his critique of Israel’s decline. He wants his followers to avoid the demise Israel is about to experience by their bad religion. What is the chief mark of this bad religion? It is bad religious leaders, a subject to which this entire chapter is devoted.

Some commentators don’t much like this chapter, concluding that it doesn’t fit with Jesus’ emphasis on love of enemies in the Sermon on the Mount and his command for neighbor love in the previous chapter. One commentator called this “the most un-Christian chapter” in Matthew. Another commentator said of this chapter, “I stand as an interpreter next to the text in a state of shock and I sometimes wish that this chapter did not stand in the Bible.” I would respond that there are times when the most loving thing you can do for someone is to warn them of a danger. When I ride my bicycle in a group ride, we are shouting out warnings to one another constantly, particularly the person in the front, who has a better view than others. We warn of things like holes in the pavement, gravel on a corner, dogs coming, and other such dangers. Never once has someone replied to a warning by saying, “How dare you speak so negatively about these dangers!” On the contrary, we are very thankful for the warnings. The danger Jesus is warning of here is far more serious than a bicycle accident. It is the danger of the death of the church from within. While Jesus had assured us that no outside power, not even the gates of hell, would be able to prevail against the church (Matt 16:18), there is the danger of dying from within. This comes from sinful leadership.

The religious leaders Jesus condemns in this chapter are the scribes and Pharisees. Note the strength of his language. He calls them hypocrites, sons of hell, blind guides, fools, robbers, self-indulgent, whitewashed tombs, snakes, vipers, persecutors and murderers. The shocking thing about this is that these were the most highly regarded religious leaders of the day. You have probably heard how scrupulous the Pharisees were in their obedience to God’s law. Let me give just one example. The Pharisees practiced something called “the double tithe.” The Bible requires a tithe, so they were careful to make sure to give a tenth of any earned income. But they didn’t stop there. They also tithed everything they purchased, effectively adding a ten percent tax, in case the

seller failed to tithe it. So this chapter invites us to heed Jesus' warning about the danger of bad religious leaders. Let's look at that more carefully.

I. Living with Bad Religious Leaders

Before Jesus speaks to the scribes and Pharisees, beginning in verse 13, he speaks to **“the crowds and to his disciples”** about the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes were the professional Bible scholars and teachers, while the Pharisees were the strict law-keepers. Not all scribes were Pharisees and not all Pharisees were scribes, but there was overlap in both groups. In any case, these scribes and Pharisees possessed significant religious power. Jesus begins by addressing how his followers were to respond to those possessing this religious power, particularly the teachers.

I note that Jesus doesn't advocate rebellion against these teachers. Rather, he makes a distinction between the office they hold and the officeholders themselves. When he says that they **“sit on Moses' seat,”** he is referring to the office of teachers of the law. Israel had a tradition that the Lord built Moses a chair on Mt. Sinai when he was giving him the law. That law, and the obligation to teach it to the people, then passed to Joshua and the elders. It then passed to the prophets and on down to the present teachers in Israel during Jesus' day. So Jesus tells the people to respect the office by practicing and observing what these teachers say, even while being careful not to follow their example.

Jesus' command here requires discernment. Hearers are charged with the task of evaluating what a teacher is saying and observing and practicing those things that are faithful to God's word while rejecting the things that fall short of that standard. That's what the Jews in Berea did, as recorded in Acts 17. Paul and Silas preached the word in the synagogue in Berea. The response was in marked contrast to what had happened in the previous city of Thessalonica, where the preaching of the word resulted in violent opposition. But in Berea the Jews **“were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so”** (Acts 17:11). You honor the office of pastor-teacher, which is the office I have as your pastor, when you don't believe something just because I say it. It is your duty to evaluate what your pastors are saying to you by the standard of God's word. The standard is not, “Does he make me feel good?” It is not, “Does he tell funny stories?” nor “Does he seem sincere?” As those who hear God's word from your pastors week to week, you have far more power than you realize. You help keep us faithful by wanting us to be faithful to God's word and by insisting that we do so.

II. Recognizing Bad Religious Leaders

This brings us to the heart of this passage, which is a description of these bad religious leaders. The first one is that **“they preach, but do not practice”** (v. 3). They know the truth of God’s word, but that truth doesn’t get converted to practice. They are orthodox in their beliefs but not in their behavior. There was an example of this early in Matthew’s Gospel, the first time we encounter the scribes. The Wise Men had come to Jerusalem announcing that they had seen the sign of the birth of the child who was to become king of the Jews. Herod wanted to know where this king would be born, so he summoned the scribes to find out. They told him that according to the Scriptures, the king of the Jews would be born in Bethlehem. But the scribes did not go with the Wise Men to worship this king, though they knew where he was to be born.

The second feature of a bad leader is the lack of God’s grace in their teaching. Jesus describes it like this. **“They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger”** (v. 4). The heavy burdens Jesus is speaking of refers to the difficulty and challenge it sometimes is to keep God’s commands. God’s commands often require us to swim against the current and do difficult things. It is sometimes burdensome to love your neighbor as yourself, to honor your parents, to give of your firstfruits to the Lord, and on and on we could go. It would seem that these teachers were very good at preaching law, but not so good at preaching grace. It is the grace of God that eases our burdens, but such grace was never spoken of by these scribes. It is the grace of God that gives us a love for God and lightens the sometimes burdensome nature of God’s law. The grace of God produces in us something like Jacob’s love for Rachel, for which he worked for his cruel father-in-law, Laban, for seven years. He later described those years as years of affliction (Gen 31:42), in which the heat consumed him by day and the cold by night, to the point that he endured many a sleepless night (31:40). But these years **“seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her”** (Gen. 29:20). When a Bible teacher preaches only law, with no message of grace, that teacher is a bad leader. A good teacher doesn’t back off from speaking all of God’s word, including those laws that are difficult. But a good teacher always leaves his hearers with the message of grace, that there is no command God ever gives that he doesn’t also empower us to keep. And there is no command we may fail to keep that God doesn’t forgive when he come to him and humbly ask forgiveness.

The third feature of bad leaders is so important that Jesus devotes more attention to this one than the first two. It is summarized in the first sentence of verse 5: **“They do all their deeds to be seen by others.”** Jesus lays bare their deepest motive. They want to look good. They want others to see them and say, “What a great spiritual leader he is!” They don’t care if they are actually godly, but they sure do want to be seen as godly. So **“they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.”** As we noted last week, phylacteries were little

boxes into which small rolls of parchment would be placed onto which verses of Scripture had been written. These little boxes would then be tied to one's forehead and arm. This placement was symbolic of having God's word in your mind and doing it with your arm. The scribes and Pharisees wanted the biggest phylacteries, seeking to impress others with the size of their commitment to the Scriptures. The "fringes" spoken of were similar, referring to tassels that were commanded to be attached to the four corners of one's robe. According to Numbers 15:38-39, the purpose of these tassels was to remind the people to obey God's commandments. Again, the scribes and Pharisees, operating under the assumption that the bigger, the better, made their tassels longer than those of other people. Their motive wasn't to be great in obedience, but to be great in the eyes of other people.

They also longed to be honored by others. **"They love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others."** They always want to be viewed by others as the most important person in the room. There are two questions we need to ask ourselves about this longing for honor. What does it look like in our day and what's so wrong about it? Let's start with that first question. I don't see many people clamoring for places of honor at parties or the best seats in the church. There was a time many years ago in the American church when people were given pews in accordance with money contributed to the church. Everyone knew which were considered the best pews, so it would be easy to tell who gave the most money to the church. And it would be an easy thing to be motivated by that fact in one's giving, leading to giving not as unto the Lord but in order to be seen as generous by others. Thankfully, that is no longer a practice in the church.

It is not the case, however, that we have seen a basic change in human nature such that people no longer crave honor from others. So what is the currency of honor in our day? I think if Jesus were writing this in our day, he would say, "They long for more "likes" on their Facebook posts than others." "They crave compliments for their accomplishments or appearance." I remember reading a few years ago of a pastor who received a \$50,000 annual clothing allowance from his church. He reasoned that it was important that he always look good, and he couldn't be seen as wearing the same outfit in church more than once. Why is this seeking for honor so wrong? That brings us to our next point.

III. Replacing Bad Religious Leaders

The last five verses of our passage describe the ideal religious leader, the kind we ought to select to replace bad ones. It begins negatively with three names they are not to be called: rabbi, father and instructor or leader. The point here is not that there is anything wrong with using such names to refer

to our leaders. The apostle Paul refers to himself as a father in the faith to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:15). The point of these restrictions is to forbid seeking honor for ourselves that only God deserves. Notice how every one of these names makes that point. Don't be called rabbi, because God is our teacher. Don't be called father, because we have a heavenly Father. Don't be called instructor or leader because Jesus occupies that role. When we seek honor from other people, we are stealing it from Jesus.

Is it wrong, then, to seek honor? Notice the answer given in the last two verses. **“The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”** The kinds of leaders the church needs and has always needed are servant-leaders. These are the leaders who believe that the best honor is not that which comes from people, but the honor coming from God. There is an insatiable quality to seeking honor from people. Like drinking salt water to slake one's thirst, the more you seek honor from people, the more you crave honor. Other people will never meet that need. But God will. In the gospel, we learn that God has already honored us in Christ. We have been cleansed and we have been given the gift of Jesus' righteousness. God has elevated us because of Jesus' life and death on our behalf. If the Creator of the universe honors you like that, why do you still crave honor from others? There is only one reason: you don't really believe it. But it is true. You are sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ, and a child of God is honored by heaven itself and all those living there.

It is precisely this honor from God that empowers us to humble service. We have the honor we need from God, so we don't need to extract it from others. Instead, we can be freed up to serve others. These leaders are in a race to the bottom, to be the servant of as many as they can. Let me mention some practical evidences of this kind of humble, servant leader. First, he gives honor to others instead of seeking it himself. Second, she listens well because her heart is not marked by the kind of pride that always wants to be sharing one's opinions. Third, the servant leader is quick to give credit to others. Fourth, he is not envious of the success of others, even those who might be considered rivals. Fifth, she doesn't take offense easily because she knows she is just a sinner saved by grace, and she knows that the truth about her is worse than what anyone might say. Sixth, he gladly shares resources God has given, whether it be time, talent or treasure.

CONCLUSION:

These are the kinds of leaders the Church needs today. Let's pray that God would supply them in abundance, and that perhaps he would make you into such a leader.