

Encounters with Jesus in Matthew: The Teachers of the Law and the Hypocrites

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 23:13-37

Here is a hard truth: Of all the people Jesus encounters, he has the most trouble with people like us. In all the gospels Jesus has the sharpest conflicts with the serious religious people. The sinners and the beggars and the broken people love Jesus, they flock to him, he heals them, preaches to them, he eats with them. Yes, he calls them to repentance and new life, but his encounter is loving and hopeful and full of grace. But Jesus clashes with the religious leaders. In multiple places in the gospel, Jesus does a great miracle, but while the people react with joy, but the religious leaders sit off in the corner and fume. They accuse him of blasphemy and being aligned with the devil.

The tension builds throughout the gospel until it comes to a head in our passage. In Matthew 23 Jesus unloads upon the religious professionals. And when he does that we should pay attention because we are most like them. We are the religiously serious, and I am a religious professional. So when Jesus confronts the Pharisees with the 7 woes, we should pay attention, because the sins that Jesus attributes to the Pharisees are probably the sins we are susceptible to. I don't mean that we are committing them right now necessarily, but these are the sins most likely to lead us astray. So we would do well to pay close attention to Jesus' 7 woes because they are an opportunity for self-examination.

Before we look at Jesus' woes, let me ask a more general question. Jesus accuses the leaders of being religious pretenders, of being frauds. Do you think the Pharisees thought of themselves that way? There's a kind of fraud that people commit where they know they are faking it. Like when you get that email from the person who claims to be a Nigerian Prince and he says that if you give him your banking information, he'll send you a million dollars. That guy knows he's faking it. But do the Pharisees think they're part of a scam? NO. Almost certainly not. They thought of themselves as real believers. They were zealous for God. They wrote books, they tithed, they said their prayers, they read their Bible, according to verse 15, they even went on missionary trips trying to win converts. It's impossible to know for sure, but I seriously doubt that they were self-conscious con-artists; they were people who thought they were doing God's will, but in that they were completely self-deceived.

That should give us pause. If people as religiously serious and outwardly committed as the Pharisees could be self-deceived, how do we know that we're not self-deceived too? I'm in church every Sunday, I say daily prayers, but if the Pharisees were self-deceived about their faith, how do I know that I'm not self-deceived? How do I know I'm not a hypocrite?

Hypocrisy. That's really Jesus central accusation in this passage. Jesus has 7 woes for the Pharisees here, but the overall accusation, the accusation he keeps coming back to is hypocrisy. 'Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!' Jesus says that 6 times in our passage. Serious religious professionals like us and religious professionals like me need to be on the lookout for, need to guard ourselves against, the spiritual danger of hypocrisy. This morning, I want to consider the danger of hypocrisy for us serious Christians. I want to do that by looking at just two places where Jesus accuses the Pharisees of hypocrisy. Let's see how they might help us examine our own hearts and guard ourselves against hypocrisy.

First, in verse 24 Jesus accuses the Pharisees of straining out a gnat, but swallowing a camel. One of the commentaries I read suggested that straining a gnat refers to an actual practice of the Pharisees. Leviticus 11 condemns eating flying insects. They are unclean. So to display their moral seriousness, before they drank their chianti, the Pharisees would pour their wine through a strainer to filter out the gnats before they imbibed. It's an action that said, "We are serious about following the laws of God!" But Jesus pointed out that while they were straining out the gnats, they were swallowing a camel. The camel was also unclean, and the camel was much bigger than a gnat. It was the biggest of all the unclean animals in Israel. So you see the rebuke. "You Pharisees are so scrupulous about avoiding this small sin over here, and making a show of it besides, meanwhile you are gulping down a camel's worth of corruption in your other actions! You are tithing on your dill mint and cumin, but you are ignoring justice mercy and faithfulness! What difference does it make if your wine is gnat-free, if while you drink your wine your conversation is full of gossip and hatred? What difference does it make if you

tithe your dill, but ignore the cries of the poor and treat your servants like dirt?" One of the ways to perpetuate hypocrisy is to pay great attention to small acts of obedience that people see, while ignoring the larger, more central themes of the Bible which Jesus himself identifies as 'justice, mercy, and faithfulness.'

Notice the difference between the two kinds of actions. Straining gnats to keep your wine pure and tithing on your dill and cumin are both impersonal and performative. They are impersonal; they don't involve nurturing a relationship with another human being. They are performative. Neither of these actions are strictly required by Jewish law, they are actions designed to display what a serious believer you are. Justice, mercy and faithfulness on the other hand, are not performative; they are interior character traits. They are dispositions of your heart. They are inclinations of your soul. And they are all deeply personal, they are dispositions that involve your relationships with other people and your relationship with God. A dangerous form of hypocrisy for morally serious people is to major in the minors, to focus on small external matters of faith and ignore the cultivation of the deep fruit of the Spirit that most clearly show love of God and love of neighbor.

Where does this tendency show itself in our world? A place where I feel convicted about Jesus' words about the gnats and the camel is in the way I've trained myself to deal with neighbors. When I first got to LaGrave and people would come up to me in the parking lot and try to panhandle some money from me, I was really torn up by that. I would always stop and talk to them. I would hear their story. I would struggle about whether or not to give them money. Sometimes I would buy them a sandwich, or give them a ride somewhere. Sometimes I would give them money.

I've since learned that all the experts say, don't give money to panhandlers; give it to agencies instead. So that's what I've done. I make a donation to Degage at the end of the year. I sit down and write a check in my nice warm re-decorated kitchen. And now, you know what I'm really good at just blowing by the panhandlers. I look straight ahead. If they talk to me, I say: no. Nope. Sorry" and keep walking. But I wonder, am I straining a gnat and swallowing a camel when I do that? My help for these people has become impersonal. Yes, I give a check, and yes I'm not giving them money which everyone tells me is bad, but I'm treating these people like they barely exist. I don't know their names or their stories. I think back to the way Jesus healed. Remember we talked about how when Jesus healed the leper he didn't just take away the leprosy; he first acknowledged the leper's value and worth. It wasn't just healing power he gave him; it was love. Am I doing my impersonal duty, but then ignoring the larger categories of justice and mercy. I don't know the answer to this, but when I hear Jesus, I'm pretty sure I'm supposed to struggle with it.

So one danger we morally serious people face is focusing on small, impersonal things while ignoring larger matters like justice mercy and faithfulness. That's a road to hypocrisy. The second way we morally serious people might be tempted towards hypocrisy is through polishing up our outward visible righteousness, while ignoring the state of our insides. Jesus is worried enough about this temptation that he warns us twice. Verse 27: You Pharisees are like whitewashed tombs. Outside you slap on a fresh coat of paint, but underneath is all rot. And then verse 23: You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and self-indulgence." This is so clearly the message of Jesus, and the rest of the New Testament when it comes to our moral life. It's not first of all about a collection of outer moral behaviors, a life renewed by Jesus is about a heart that is being transformed by the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ.

How do we do this, for ourselves, for the children of the church, how do we cultivate righteousness that is a matter of the heart, and not just a matter of display? I remember when I was starting out in seminary, I went to hear Dave Beelen give a talk at the seminary student retreat. Dave was the long-time pastor at Madison, now retired. He had been in ministry for 5 or six years at that point. I still remember how he started his talk: "For the first 5 years of ministry, when I got up on the pulpit to preach, I was just trying not to fall flat on my face." I loved that. That piece of truth was so important to me for a long time.

Up till then all the people I heard talk about preaching made it sound like real preachers were swept along by the Spirit, filled with confidence and completely convicted of their call. 'Bathe your sermon in prayer, trust in the Lord, then go out and speak boldly!' When these men talked it seemed they always knew God wanted them to be a preacher and they mounted the pulpit secure in the bright certainty of their call. That wasn't me. I was scared of preaching. I was scared I'd fall flat on my face. I was scared that I'd say something wrong. I was scared that I would make eternal things dull. But as far as I could tell, none of these preachers felt any of these fears, so how could I ever be a preacher. But then Dave Beelen said what he said and proceeded to

talk about how with God's help he managed to keep preaching, how he managed to do this week after week in spite of his weakness.

I don't think those other guys who talked about preaching were any different. I think they were scared too. I think they worried about falling flat on their face just as much as Dave, but they didn't want to admit that fear. They wanted to encourage fearlessness and faith! They wanted to appear bold and unafraid so that I would feel bold and unafraid. So they polished the outside of their cup. Is that serious hypocrisy? No. Everything they said about the power of the word and the power of prayer and the power of the Spirit is true, but by leaving out part of the story they sowed seeds that could have grown into hypocrisy. They made me feel like there was something wrong with me, like I wasn't cut out for this, like I was a failure. And under those circumstances the temptation is to push down your fear, and your uncertainties and pretend. Pretend that you're not afraid, pretend that your oozing with confidence. Do that often enough and your whole life becomes a show. An exhausting performance. It is exhausting to spend your whole life pretending that you are strong and fearless and untainted by self-doubt. Exhausting and lonely.

Here's where there is some good advice for religiously serious parents and grandparents. When you are training your children, by all means teach them the virtues of strength. Teach them to stand up to evil. Teach them to be strong and courageous. And, of course, model those strengths. Show those strengths yourself. But don't just show strength, tell your children your stories of fear, your stories of failure, your stories of weakness. Tell them how God held you together and how Jesus brought you through those seasons. Don't just let kids see the outside of the bowl, let them see the inside of your bowl. Because these young ones are going to struggle, they are going to have questions, they are going to have doubts, and for those times they are going to need to see the inside of our bowl and how God helped us through our struggles, our questions, our doubts.

When you spend a little time on these woes and you don't just think of them as a Pharisee problem, but you turn them on yourself, when you use them as an occasion for self-examination, it's pretty sobering. You realize how easy it is for us to fool ourselves. You realize how easy it is for our righteousness to become a performance. You realize how easy it is to let hypocrisy slip into our lives. That's good in a way, but terrible in a way too. Because we see how much Jesus hates hypocrisy and how it grieves him, and we can read the terrible judgment he prophesies upon the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. "You snakes! You brood of vipers! Upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth!" And Jesus' prophecy comes true of course. In 70 AD the Romans will burn Jerusalem to the ground and the temple with it, a terrible judgment.

When I think about that judgment, and when I think about how pervasive hypocrisy still is in the church and in me and in you, Jesus' question in verse 33 hits me in a different way. "You snakes; you brood of vipers. How will you escape being condemned to hell?" It was much more comfortable to tell myself, I'm not like those Pharisees! That question is not for us! But of course if we do that, then we are self-deceived in exactly the same ways as the Pharisees themselves who looked at their ancestors who killed the prophets and said, we're not like them! We're not like those hypocrites! But we are. Of course we are. That question is absolutely for us.

So what will save us? Where does our help come from? From the heart of Jesus. From the heart of God. After his scathing word upon the Pharisee's hypocrisy and ours, Jesus shows us where that anger comes from, Jesus shows us the engine of his frustration. It all comes from a heart of love. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have longed to gather your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing, but you were not willing." Jerusalem, Jerusalem you hopeless, hypocritical people, do you have any idea how much I have loved you. I love you with all the tenderness of a mother for her children. I want you to hear the scathing words of Jesus so that we may become aware of our hypocrisies, but I need you to hear and see and feel and know the deep heart of God for his people, even the ones who make him so angry.

How far will that love go? Where will it lead Jesus? To the cross of course. To Calvary, and in that place it won't be the Pharisees upon whom will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, it will be him. He will take all of that on himself for us and for our salvation. When I hear Jesus calling me to clean the inside of my cup, I know that our determination and our good intentions are not a strong enough cleanser. They won't get the job done. Only the blood of Jesus can wash this inside clean. So Jesus we give you our cups, our lives. Wash them inside and out. Wash them with your blood. Renew our hearts and make them whole.

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