

WHEN RELIGION GOES BAD (Matthew 23:1-12)

Twenty-five years ago, my family and I were living in Hinton, OK. Hinton is an hour west of OKC, just a few miles south of I-40. My daughter was a little girl, and my son was just over a year-old. On the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, we drove to my in-law's house for the holiday. Before we left Hinton, I drove to a local restaurant where I picked up some hamburgers. I brought them home for lunch. Everybody had hamburgers except my son. That night everybody got sick except my son. We concluded we had gotten hold of some bad burgers.

Have you ever consumed soured milk, spoiled eggs, tainted meat? It is never a good thing when you eat food that has gone bad.

I was one of three people who was up a good part of that night. I was up because the contents of my stomach wouldn't stay down. The next day, Thanksgiving Day, I wasn't the least bit interested in eating turkey or stuffing with gravy or cranberry salad or even pie. That is the only holiday of my life that I can remember not being able or even wanting to partake in the feast.

Fortunately, my total disinterest in food only lasted a day or two, and my brush with food poisoning after eating a bad hamburger hasn't poisoned me against hamburgers. They are still one of my favorite meals. Sometimes, however, when people get sick after eating a certain food, they no longer care to eat that particular food.

Food is not the only thing in our world that can go bad. Mankind has gone bad. Genesis 3 tells us about Adam and Eve sinning against God by taking of the fruit that God had forbidden them to eat. That act of disobedience did not just have negative consequences for our first parents. It has had disastrous results on all of their children including you and me. When Adam and Even fell, we fell, too. We are no longer what we were originally meant to be. We are a sinful people. **We are not sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners.** We have gone bad. We have a sin nature.

Now, whatever we touch has a tendency to go bad, as well. Marriage is a good thing, but because it takes place between two sinners, a marriage can go bad. The political structure of our government is a good thing but because the sinful voters, you and me, elect sinners to office who appoint sinful people to serve in various capacities, it is possible for this good country to go bad.

Nowhere is the good going bad truer than in the area of religion. Religion is meant to be a good thing, but it seems to always go bad. It goes bad because it is led by sinful leaders and is followed by sinful followers.

Today, we enter Matthew 23. This chapter reveals that Jesus was a man of conviction and courage. He told it like it was, and He did so without fear or compromise. We are going to look at the first 12 verses and learn what happens when religion goes bad.

I. RELIGION GOES BAD WHEN IT BECOMES A BURDEN.

Based on v. 1, we see that Jesus has turned His attention from the Pharisees to His disciples and to the crowds of people who had gathered. Beginning in v. 13 and through v. 36, He will be addressing the Pharisees while He dresses them down. In vv. 2-12,

however, He is talking to the people in the hearing of their leaders.

You have heard it said that you should never say anything about someone else that you would not be willing to say to their face. Well, Jesus talks about scribes and Pharisees to the people, and then when He talks directly to those religious leaders, it doesn't get any better for them. It gets worse.

Jesus said that these leaders sit on Moses' seat. There are two ways to take this verse. You could take it metaphorically.

When I lived in Stillwater, I knew a man named Robert Cate who occupied the Phoebe Schertz Young Chair of Religion at OSU. That chair was established by a businessman named Raymond Young. How many of you remember the old T.G. & Y. stores? Mr. Young was the Y of T.G. & Y. He grew up at the FBC of Stillwater, and he established the chair of religion at OSU in honor of his godly mother.

Now, my friend was not given an actual, physical chair in which to sit and from which to teach his classes. It was an honorary title signifying the trust he had been given to teach religion classes at OSU.

The Moses' seat could be understood in much the same way. To sit on Moses' seat meant you were a person of standing and competence and had been given authority to teach the word of God to God's people. That phrase could be understood metaphorically.

Archaeological digs, however, have revealed that there was an actual chair that was placed at the front of a typical, Jewish synagogue facing the people. It was usually a chair carved from stone, and the Rabbi would sit in that seat as he taught the people. Of course, this was not a stone chair in which Moses ever sat, but whoever sat in it was recognized as the authority to teach the Law of Moses to the people.

So, the term, Moses' seat, could be viewed as having both a metaphorical and a literal meaning because the Rabbi sat in an actual seat called the Moses' seat even though Moses never actually used it.

You have heard the saying, "Do as I say not as I do." It comes right from this passage in Matthew 23. Look at what Jesus told the people in v. 3. The religious teachers did not practice what they preached. Insofar as they taught God's word correctly, they were to be obeyed, but they were not worthy examples to follow because they didn't live out what they taught to the people.

Look at v. 4. The religious leaders made the Jewish faith burdensome. It was a heavy load to carry for those who truly sought to live by the faith they were taught. There seemed to be an endless list of do's and don'ts.

We better understand what Jesus said here when we look back at something Jesus said earlier. At the end of Matthew 11, Jesus issued an invitation. Listen to what He said in vv. 28-30. If you listened to v. 28 only, you might think that Jesus was talking about a person who works a lot of over time hours or a busy housewife who is trying to keep things going while looking after little ones. What Jesus has in mind gets clearer when you read the beginning of v. 29.

When Jesus uses the phrase, "Take my yoke upon you," He is not using an agricultural metaphor. He is actually using a religious one. In the Jewish religion of Jesus' day, there were many rabbis, but they could not all agree on the interpretation and application of various biblical passages.

Consider the explanation Rob Bell gives:

Different rabbis had different sets of rules, which were really different lists of what they forbade and what they permitted. A rabbi's set of rules and lists, which was really that rabbi's interpretation of how to live the Torah (the Law), was called that rabbi's yoke. When you followed a certain rabbi, you were following him because you believed that rabbi's set of interpretations were the closest to what God intended through the Scriptures. And when you followed the rabbi, you were taking up that rabbi's yoke.

Jesus was saying, "You have been following the yoke of these Jewish teachers, and their yoke is heavy. They have weighed you down, and you are straining to carry the load you have been given. Throw off their yoke. Take on mine. My yoke is easy, and My burden is light."

True religion is meant to bear you up. It is not meant to weigh you down. If you are constantly on the go, if you forever hurrying from one thing to the next, I can tell you one thing: You have not taken Christ's yoke upon you. It is more likely you have adopted the yoke of 21st century, American life, and that yoke will wear you out—both physically and spiritually. You need to change your yoke.

In his book, *The Rest of God: Stopping to Find What's Missing*, Mark Buchanan wrote:

Someone asked me recently what was my biggest regret in life. I thought a moment, surveying the vast and cluttered landscape of my blunders and losses, the evil I have done, and the evil that's been done against me.

"Being in a hurry," I said.

"Pardon?"

"Being in a hurry. Getting to the next thing without fully entering the thing in front of me. I cannot think of a single advantage I've ever gained from being in a hurry. But a thousand broken and missed things, tens of thousands, lie in the wake of all that rushing."

Through all that haste, I thought I was making up time. It turns out I was throwing it away. The Chinese join two characters to form a single pictograph for busyness: heart and killing. That is stunningly incisive. The heart is the place the busy life exacts its steepest toll.

Friend, slow down. Eliminate hurry from your life. For years, motorists have been reminded that "speed kills." The faster motorists drive, the more accidents there are, and the more lethal those accidents become.

Speeding through life also kills. It kills our heart. It kills our ability to hear and follow the Lord. Slow down and live.

II. RELIGION GOES BAD WHEN IT PUTS ON A MERE SHOW.

Look at what Jesus said in Matthew 23:5. Jesus has already discussed the matter of doing religious deeds to be seen and noticed. In Matthew 6, Jesus taught us to give secretly, and the Father who sees in secret will reward us. He taught us to pray in secret, but the hypocrite prays where he can be seen and noticed by others. He said that when we

fast, we must not make it a performance. Don't make a show of your religious devotion because if you do, you will forfeit your heavenly reward. The only reward you will get is the silent applause of others. That applause will die quickly unlike heaven's rewards that are eternal. Play to an audience of one.

Verse 5 contains a word with which you may not be familiar. In our culture we do not use phylacteries. A phylactery was a little leather box that could be worn on either the forehead of the wrist or even both. Inside the box were little slips of quotes from the OT law. You could think of a phylactery as a Scripture memory box that you wore. This practice was commanded in Deuteronomy 11:18 where we are told, "You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes."

The most important part of that passage is that God's word is to be in our heart and our soul. Jesus took issue with the Jewish teachers because they made their phylacteries really big so that no one could miss seeing them. For them, being seen was what it was all about. They were putting on a religious fashion show.

Speaking of fashion show, Jesus mentions how they made "their fringes long." What is that all about? Let's look at Numbers 15:37-41. The people were to put tassels on the hems of their robes to remind them to follow the commands of God.

Here is something interesting. A few weeks ago, as we ended our study of the Minor Prophets, I read from Malachi 4:2 in which we find a promise that for those who fear God, "the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings." We said that the wings of the sun are like the rays of the sun. Here is the interesting thing, the Hebrew word for *wings* is the same word that is used for the hem of a garment, the hem to which those tassels were to be sewn.

A legend grew up that when the Messiah came, there would be special healing power in the tassels of either his robe or his prayer shawl.

Do you remember the story of the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years? Not a single physician could heal her. One day she heard that Jesus was coming through town. She elbowed her way through the crowd, and when she got close enough to Jesus, she reached down and touched the hem of His robe. She likely touched one of His tassels. Immediately, she was healed.

What gave the tassels the power to heal was not the color of the tassels or the number of the tassels, or the length of the tassels. What gave them power was the one who was wearing the tassels, and that power was activated by the faith of the woman who reached out to Jesus.

She was not making a show of her faith. She quietly and unobtrusively reached out to Jesus trusting that He would heal her, and He did.

The Pharisees made their tassels long so that no one would miss them, but there was no power in those tassels. They were just there for show.

Up until now, Jesus has not yet used the word, but six times between vv. 13 and 29, Jesus refers to the Pharisees as *hypocrites*. That word, hypocrite, is found no less than 17 times in the NT, and every single time it is used by Jesus. He is the only one qualified to call someone a hypocrite because He is the only one who is not one.

Hypokritas is the Greek word for *actor*. It refers to someone who wears a mask and plays a part. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be someone he or she is not.

David Dykes said:

Some people wear a religious mask on Sunday. They have their Sunday clothes, their Sunday vocabulary, and their Sunday smile. But when they leave the parking lot, they take off the mask. Then next Sunday, they put their mask back on and play the role of good, little Christian again. The most dangerous potential consequence of being a religious performer is it can keep others out of heaven.

Don't be a religious actor. Don't pretend to be someone you are not.

III. RELIGION GOES BAD WHEN IT APPEALS TO OUR PRIDE.

Look at how Jesus describes these religious men in vv. 6-10. The position these men occupied afforded them the opportunity to be honored at feasts. They never had to sit in the cheap seats. They got front-row status. They were greeted by others and were called *Rabbi*, which means, *Master*.

For some people, ministry is a means by which they can have their ego stroked. People call them *Reverend* or *Doctor*. In many churches, the pastor sits up front. Of course, when he speaks, he stands up front, and all eyes are fastened on him.

Years ago, the preacher was referred to as the *parson*. It came from the word *person* because there was a day when the preacher was **the** person in the community. He was the person with the most education. He was the person with influence and respect.

I wonder if Catholics have read Matthew 23:9. A priest is called *father*, and the word Pope comes the Latin word for father. Don't call me Reverend or Doctor. I'm just Matt, or Brother Matt or Pastor Matt.

Religion has gone bad when there is cult of personality. People often choose a church based on who the pastor is. There are many big-name preachers who have a following. People buy their books, and watch their podcasts, and read their blogs. We need to be careful.

Notice what Jesus says in vv. 11-12. If your religion exalts anyone except God—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, then it is a religion that has gone bad.

We need to cultivate the spirit of service and the attitude of humility. We would do well to follow the example of Booker T. Washington.

In 1881, Booker T. Washington became the President of Tuskegee Institute in the little town of Tuskegee, Alabama. Washington, who had been born as a slave, was already famous around the nation as an orator, educator, and author. He was a devout Christian and had even attended seminary at one time.

In his autobiography entitled *Up from Slavery*, he tells about an encounter he had shortly after he became the President of Tuskegee. One day, while taking a stroll through an elite section of Tuskegee, a wealthy white woman saw him and asked him if he wanted to make a few dollars by chopping her firewood. She didn't recognize him as the famous Booker T. Washington. Having no other pressing business, Professor Washington smiled, rolled up his sleeves, and proceeded with the humble chore she had requested. When he finished, he carried the firewood into the house and stacked it by the fireplace. When she tried to pay him, he politely refused and continued his walk through the town.

As he left her house, the lady's neighbor recognized Professor Washington and revealed his identity to her.

The next morning, the embarrassed lady visited Mr. Washington in his office on campus. She apologized profusely for her mistake. He replied, "It's perfectly all right, Madam. I always enjoy manual labor. Besides it's always a delight to do something for a friend." She shook his hand and assured him that his meek and gracious attitude had made an impact on her.

Not long afterwards she demonstrated her gratitude by persuading some of her wealthy neighbors to join her in donating thousands of dollars to the Tuskegee Institute.

If you were the president of a prestigious university, how would you respond if someone asked you if you would like to make a few bucks chopping firewood?

Professor Washington demonstrated something extremely rare. By the way, the rarer something is, the more valuable it is. That is why humility and selflessness are of great worth—they are quite rare in our present culture.

Let's keep our faith from going bad. Take God seriously. Take others seriously, but don't take yourself too seriously.

We can usually tell when milk or food goes bad by using the smell test and sometimes the eye test. It doesn't smell right; it doesn't look right.

We can tell when religion goes bad by sniffing and by looking closely. Does it impose a burden, put on a show, and appeal to pride? If so, don't ingest it; it will make you sick.