

# Matthew 23:13-39

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now, I imagine that there are not many occasions that preachers ask congregations to turn to Matthew 23.

! And that's partly because as it was read, I don't know whether you picked it up, it is a blistering passage. It is one of those times in the Gospels where Jesus speaks in an extraordinarily fiery way. And there are words at which you and I can't hide from them this morning. And we don't come to Matthew 23 with a sense of eagerness. Oh, I love this passage. This is one that really warms the heart.

Because these words burn and they scorch. And as we saw last week at the start of chapter 23, they're particularly aimed at religious leaders. Religious leaders.

And you'll notice how in verse 27, Jesus describes that religion. Can you just look down there with me? What's their religion like? He says, your religion is like a tomb full of dead men's bones.

[ 1 : 04 ] But dead religion is a perennial problem and it's always a problem. It's got a long history throughout the whole history of the Christian church. And dead religion reappears in different forms.

And so if I say dead religion, what do you think of? You probably think of, going to a church like this, a high degree of ceremonial. A really detailed liturgical correctness.

Maybe you think of those words, liberal theology. Ethically careless. But the Pharisees remind us that it is possible to be full of zeal.

Full of enthusiasm. To be a stickler for moral correctness. To be an orthodox believer. And yet still to represent dead religion.

Because dead religion is not a matter of the clothing that it wears. So it may well be high and ceremonial. It may be smells of bells.

[ 2 : 09 ] It may be very trendy. It might be real. It may be emotionally supercharged. It may be lively. It may be right-wing.

It might be left-wing. It might be evangelical and orthodox. But actually, if it's a dead body, it doesn't matter what it's dressed up on. I think it's it. Because if it's a dead body, no matter whether it's in a tracksuit or whether it's in a three-piece suit, it's still a court.

Heretical or orthodox. And dead religion may have many forms. It may have a form of godliness. But the New Testament tells us that it denies the power of that godliness.

Dead religion may defend the deity of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Son of God. But it never displays the glory and the beauty and the attractiveness of Jesus Christ.

Dead religion may speak the loaves of the Holy Spirit. But it never displays the fruit of the Holy Spirit. And in this chapter, which as I've said is a burning and blistering chapter, Jesus rails against the Pharisees.

[ 3 : 17 ] He treats dead religion with great seriousness. He exposes it openly. And you can't ignore it. His language is that of a funeral lament.

Do you notice that word that came up sometimes? Woe. Woe to you. And they kind of introduce what Jesus is saying. It's a word that expresses a kind of mourning for the dead.

One scholar has said there's a mix of compassion and condemnation as Jesus says it. And here it is probably Jesus pronouncing impending judgment.

Judgment is coming woe on you. And the word occurs seven times. But there are five, I think, identifiable emphasis that Jesus makes.

Where Jesus focuses on areas where dead religion shows itself. That I think is helpful for us. So let me touch on them. First of all, in verse 13. It focuses on the influence of this dead religion on the lives of others.

[ 4 : 22 ] Dead religion on the lives of others. In verse 13. Jesus is speaking about first of all.

What is the influence of dead religion on the lives of others? That spiritual influence. That spiritual impact upon the lives of other people.

These Pharisees, they are representatives of this dead religion. What is the effect that it has on other people? And so what he's saying here is that they are a hindrance, not a help.

He's saying that these people, they are very, very eager. They're very religious. And yet they have no spiritual experience themselves. Because they never truly entered the kingdom of heaven.

And you notice how he says it. You've never entered the kingdom yourselves. And you get in the way of those who want to get in. And it couldn't be more serious. So let's look. Let's see how they've done it.

[ 5 : 39 ] Let's go to Matthew chapter 12. And we've been there, remember? Matthew chapter 12. And look at verse 22. And you notice you get this great illustration of what Jesus is talking about.

And it's these very Pharisees who stand in the doorway and they block people from entering in. So Matthew 22. And verse 12.

No. Matthew 22. That is right, isn't it? Yeah. And I'm looking at Matthew chapter 23. So that's not very helpful, is it? But it's Matthew chapter 22. And verse 12. Is that right?

I've got two different verses written down here. That's very helpful, isn't it? Here we go. It's 22.

That's right the first time. Matthew 12, 22. You all there? Then a demon-possessed man who was blind and made to us brought him and Jesus healed him.

So the man spoke and saw. All the people were amazed and said, can this be the son of David?

But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, it is only by Beelzebul.

[ 6 : 44 ] It's only by the devil. The prince of demons. That this man casts out demons. Do you notice something that has awakened these people? They're pressing towards Christ.

They're asking, is this the Messiah? Should we not be going to him? Isn't this the man we've been expecting? And notice what happens. They say, no, he's done it by the devil. In other words, they stand in the door and they say, no, you will not come to Christ.

These people are beginning to wonder and ask, could this be the Messiah in front of them, as it were? And the Pharisees slam the door in their face. Because dead religion has a terrible influence on those who are genuinely seeking Christ.

Here's the second thing. The second thing is, it focuses on the effect of these people's witness. Just look at verse 15 of Matthew chapter 23.

Matthew chapter 15. Look at what it says. It says, and woe to you. Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. Because you travel across sea and land to make a single proselite.

[ 7 : 57 ] And when he becomes a proselite, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourself.

It's incredible, isn't it? It's so strong. And you have to tend to ask, what on earth can these people who've got dead religion, what can they witness to?

What can they speak about? Surely, these dead religion people, they have got no evangelistic zeal. But they do.

And these people are so eager to recruit, they travel over land and sea for a single convict. But of course, what do they want to win them to? What they want to win them to is a dead religion like their own.

They do not make them Christians, followers of the Lord Jesus. They make them Pharisees. And what often happens is that when people are won over to something, they become even more zealous, don't they?

None so zealous as a convert. And when these people are won over to the Pharisees, they become more pharisaical than the Pharisees themselves. You make them twice as much a son of hell, Jesus says.

[ 9 : 06 ] And so here's a lesson, and we can't avoid it. That if today you are a half-hearted Christian, if you're a Christian who lives with one foot in the world, with one foot in the kingdom of God, as it were, what you bear witness to is compromised Christianity.

If you've got reservations of the authority of the Bible, and your influence is brought to bear on other people who are seeking to know God, what you will do is you will make people like yourself.

We really hate to talk about this. But it's so true, isn't it? It's a law written into nature. The Bible teaches about it, right from the very start of the Bible, in the book of Genesis.

It's carried right the way through. You might not have spotted it. There's a law written into nature, and it's this. It's called the bringing forth law. Do you know that law? So you go to Genesis 1 and 2,

and you'll see that written into creation, is this.

They brought forth everyone after its kind. That's how it reads. And if you go through Genesis 1 and 2, do it this afternoon. Look at it. It reads again and again.

[10:27] They brought forth after their kind. So you see it in nature. Humans bring forth... Humans. Animals bring forth...

Animals. Apple trees bring forth... Apple trees. It's one of the great illustrations Jesus uses, doesn't he? He says, when does a man...

When he says, does a man gather figs from... grapes? Of course he doesn't. You don't go to a grape tree...

and get figs, do you? You don't go to your apple tree and pick off a pear. You've got to your apple tree, you get an apple. And Jesus is saying, everyone brings forth after its kind.

And that's really, really important. And if we wanted to, we could go over the recent history of this country, and we could see, what does dead religion bring forth? It brings forth dead religion.

[11:29] Dead religion produces specimen of itself. Half-hearted Christianity produces what? Half-hearted Christianity.

And the principle applies in all sorts of ways. The third area that Jesus concentrates on is the result of their teaching, the influence of their lives, the effect of their witness, and the third area that Jesus is the result of their teaching.

So that's in verses 16 to 22. Can you see it? The paragraph begins, woe to you blind guides. It's first of five times in the chapter that Jesus speaks about the Pharisees being blind.

And the serious thing about what Jesus is talking about is not their blindness itself. The serious issue is that these people are religious guides for other people.

You can imagine it, can't you? You want someone to guide you somewhere, and yet they're blind. They're unable to see. It's so dangerous, isn't it?

[12:39] It's like getting into the car and somebody was blind and saying, could you direct me the way to your house? There's no people that tell you, eh? It's exactly Jesus' point.

In verses 13 and again in 15, they're described not as Pharisees there, but as teachers of the law. Woe to you, verse 13, teachers of the law. 15, woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees.

And Jesus identifies a mark in verses 16 to 22 of dead religion. And it's simply this. It avoids the implications of the truth.

The implications of the truth. And more than once, you've come across it. The Pharisees played a game. And it was a dreadful and disastrous game.

It was a game with words. You can see it in our passage. Where they would enter into an oath, kind of serious pledge, a promise. And they would say, I swear.

[13:42] And you find out what we can swear by. So that what we swear by, we're not held to. So they worked out a whole lot of things. And they said, we swear by the temple.

But if we swear by the temple, it doesn't bind us. To keep true and keep faith. With what we promised. We don't have to keep it. But if on the other hand, we swear by the gold on the temple, well that does bind us.

And you think to yourself, as I said this week, this is madness. It's ludicrous. We laugh at it, don't we? How ridiculous this is. It's in verse 18.

They say, if anyone swears by the altar, he is nothing. But if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath. And she says, you blind men. Because the whole point of it was to avoid the implications of the truth and truth-telling.

And they used to teach this. And we said, how ridiculous. But then let me ask you, are there plain teachings of the Bible?

[14:50] And the implications of which you are determinedly avoiding in your life? Are there plain truths in the Bible?

The implications of which you are declining to take seriously? And by your word, and by your example, you teach other people the same.

Because a mark of dead religion is that it seeks to avoid the implications of the truth. And that is, isn't it, enormously solemn?

Because the blind guy who does that, Jesus elsewhere says, he will land in a ditch along with those who he leads. And it would be worthwhile, I think, spending a little time on this this week.

Because this is not some exercise that we're following that ends when we go through those doors. It would be worth our while this week pausing and saying to ourselves, before God, are there implications of the teaching of the Bible which I'm deliberately avoiding?

[16:06] And I'm avoiding them not because the Bible doesn't teach them, but because of cultural pressure. Or because I just don't want to obey them. It's a mark of dead religion.

Here's the fourth thing. It's the focus of their interests. Look at verses 23 to 28. And you notice there's two things that mark their religious hypocrisy. Number one, they major on minors.

They major on minors. Or to put it another way, they magnify, they magnify the insignificant and they minimize the essential. Do you notice that in verse 23?

Wote you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you tithe mint and dill and cumin. And yet you've neglected the weightier matters of the law.

Justice, mercy and faithfulness. You know about I'm tithing in the Old Testament where you give a tenth of what you have. And I've been willing to tithe all their possessions as part of their obligation.

[17:14] And she says to them, how much do spices take up of your life? How much part of your life do spices occupy?

What part of your wealth consists of spices? Unless you're really unusual. Spices don't play a major part in my life and even yours. But they were meticulous, these guys.

They were meticulous about mint and dill and cumin. She says, but you've neglected the weightier matters of the law.

Justice, mercy, faithfulness. And you should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former. You blind guides. You strain on a gnat.

A little gnat. But you swallow a massive camel. And again, it's Jesus' ridiculous illustration, isn't it? And it tells you that Jesus has a sense of the ridiculous in his teaching.

[18:19] You strain up a gnat, which is a tiny insect. You swallow a camel. You incline to major on minors to magnify the insignificant and minimize the essential.

It's a mark of dead religion. But you notice what Jesus speaks about. And we come to practicality. Here we come to the bread and butter. Verses 25 to 28.

They emphasize the external but they're careless about the hidden world of the heart. Woe to you, teachers of the law, verse 25, for you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they're full of greed and self-indulgence.

You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and the plate and then the outside also may be clean. Jesus uses this word so often, doesn't he?

Hypocrite. So many times. Hypocrite is just an actor who played a part. That's what it meant in Jesus' day. It was somebody who pretended to be somebody who he was not.

[19:29] Nobody was expecting him to be the person he was pretending to be. You go and see a play and you go round the back of the stage afterwards and speak to the actor, you don't expect him to still be playing the role he was playing on stage to you.

That would be ridiculous. You know very well it's not Hamlet who you've gone to see. It's Joe Glott. But he was pretending to be someone wasn't he on stage and the better his performance was the better hypocrite he was.

That's the sense. And it's a mark of your dead religion when your outward image is something different from what's underneath.

And God knows how much I need to apply this to my soul. When your outward image bears no relation to your inward states then you're spiritually dead. That's what Jesus is saying.

Ten religion has one more thing. So we've seen the influence of their lives, the effect of their witness, the result of their teaching, the focus of their interest and lastly the illusion of their self-assessment.

[20:43] Let me verse 29 to 36. He says woe to you teachers of the law. You say if we lived in the days of our fathers we would not have taken part with them and shed in the blood of the prophets.

They look at the tombs of the old prophets of the past the godly men of the past in the Old Testament whom God has sent and they say this is dreadful.

If we'd lived in their time we would have never done what people did then. And they were pretending themselves. They were so self-deluded weren't they?

Because we know through reading Matthew's Gospel that actually at this point they were plotting and planning the death of the one who was the greatest prophet of all. They were self-deluded.

And do you remember what we saw last week that really important point that hypocrisy it begins by deceiving others but it ends with us deceiving ourselves.

[ 21 : 54 ] And here is an example of it. They deluded themselves. And dead religion hypocrisy produces not just blindness in other spheres but it produces blindness in how we view ourselves.

And Jesus points that out doesn't he in verse 34 he says therefore I send you prophets and wise men as scribes some of whom you will kill and crucify some of which you will flog in your synagogues and pierce from town to town.

And you read the book of Acts and you see that's exactly what happened. What were they doing? They were doing exactly what their forefathers were doing which was a mark of dead religion in most generations.

It's very simple isn't it? You can tell me they're trying to silence God. That's what they were doing. And so there is dead religion so how will Jesus respond to it?

By flaying them with words? Well not really ultimately. There's that word woe isn't there? A sense of infinite sadness but it's crystallised in verse 37 look at Jesus response in verse 37.

[ 23 : 05 ] He says O Jerusalem Jerusalem the city that has killed the prophets and stoned those who sent to it.

And here it is he says how often will I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings but you were not willing.

That's all for the first time this week. The repetition there. Can you see it? Verse 37. O Jerusalem Jerusalem And you've heard that repetition before haven't you?

I've heard it in some of your homes and at your families in times of heartbreak and you could see some family and something has happened and they say don't they O whatever the name is O whatever the name is and they repeat the name and they say what have you done?

Jesus used that again and again to me he said O Martha Martha he said O Simon Simon and the risen glorified Christ says O Saul Saul and maybe this morning in verse 37 you need to put your own name in there and maybe you need to put your name in there and Jesus says how often would I have gathered you but you were not willing and so by God's grace and the Lord Jesus outstretched arms that great cry of his soul intends that this morning you should lay aside all your unwillingness and all your stubbornness and all your hypocrisy and let him gather you under the shadow of his wings and find reality not deadness there let's pray a