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Matthew 23:15 - 23:22



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this message, Steve Gregg discusses the denunciations that Jesus made against the scribes and Pharisees, who were the religious leaders of their time. He highlights the irony of the Pharisees who traveled far and wide to win converts but ended up becoming bad role models themselves, leading their converts astray. Gregg emphasizes the importance of being truthful and honest in our dealings, reminding us that God expects us to act with integrity in all aspects of our lives.

Transcript

In Matthew chapter 23, there is this series of denunciations that Jesus makes against the scribes and Pharisees, who were the religious leaders and teachers in the synagogues of his day, and therefore they were looked up to not only as instructors but as role models by many of the common religious Jews. Only problem was, is that although some of these guys were not too bad as teachers in terms of the truthfulness of what they said, their lives were a lie. They were hypocrites, as Jesus kept saying, and the word hypocrite means an actor, a play actor.

Someone who's playing a role in order to convince somebody that he's somebody else other than who he really is. And there's quite a lot of these woes here in this chapter. The first was in verse 13, and we've looked at in our previous session 13 and 14, verses 13 and 14, and we come to verse 15.

But let me read those other two so that we can bring ourselves up to speed. When Jesus began to address these scribes and Pharisees in the crowd, he said, but woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men. For you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

Now, that's a really strong statement. He said that the Pharisees travel land and sea to

win one proselyte. Do you know what a proselyte is? The term proselytizing is a term that today refers to making converts, and the reason is because in the Jewish religion, a proselyte was a Gentile who was converted to the Jewish faith.

The Jewish faith, of course, was that which was defined in the law of Moses, and that law was given initially only to the Jewish people or the nation of Israel, but there were outside of the nation of Israel, there were people of other races that would sometimes hear of the Jewish religion, and they'd be impressed with the contents of it, and they'd believe in the God of Israel, and they'd want to join themselves to it. They'd see the virtue and the rightness of it, and so they would become Jews themselves. Now, they couldn't, of course, become Jews by race.

You can't change your genealogy and your ancestry, but they could become Jews by religion and by faith, and when a Gentile actually took this step, he was called a proselyte. There were, in Jesus' day, two kinds of Gentiles that had embraced Judaism to a certain extent. There were the proselytes, and they had gone all the way of becoming circumcised and embracing the whole law of Moses, and they were basically regarded as Jews, even though they were of Gentile background, and then there were what were called God-fearers, and they were Gentiles that had not become Jews.

They had not yet chosen to be circumcised or anything like that, but they still believed the God of Israel was a good God, and they were attracted to the morality of Judaism, and so there were proselytes and God-fearers who were born Gentiles and were somehow attached at various distances to the Jewish religion. Now, a proselyte, therefore, is a convert to another religion, and when Jesus said the scribes and Pharisees travel land and sea to win one proselyte, it means that they go to the Gentile lands where there are Gentiles, and they will go to great lengths and maybe great expense in order to convince one Gentile to become a Jew. That's a very nice thing to do, actually.

I mean, a lot of people want to, today, define proselytizing as a hate crime. Yes, that's true. There are, in some places, those who say that to try to convert someone to your religion is an expression of hatred toward them and toward their previous religion from which you're converting them.

Now, of course, this shows the idiocy of how words can be used and misconstrued. There is nothing hateful about trying to convert somebody. The very fact that you're trying to convert them to your own religion means that you think there's something good about your religion that would be good for them.

Now, of course, bad religions proselytize as well, but they do so because they think they are good religions, and since they are good, they're good for everybody. And when you think something is good for someone, and you offer it to them and try to persuade them to embrace it, it is not because you hate them, but because you care for them, because you're concerned for their well-being. And although there are many times, you know,

what shall we say, tactless and undiplomatic people who represent Christianity to unbelievers and try to get them to embrace it, and they sometimes will do so by stating what's wrong with the belief systems of the persons that they already hold, that does not mean that they hate the person.

It may be that they simply see that the religion the person already has is defective, and that the person would be much better off if they embrace truth. I know that's what motivates most Christians when they proselytize. I don't know what motivated the Jews when they proselytized the scribes and Pharisees.

It may be that they convinced themselves that they were doing a great favor to the Gentiles. I'm sure that is what they would have told themselves. Although, of course, there are other reasons and other motives that could lead someone to go out and make converts to one's religion.

One of them may be, one of the motives may be that you would be recognized among those in your religion as an effective winner of converts. It may be because that may tend to flatter your powers of persuasion or simply your devotion to your religion. The fact that you can win people and do win people over to your religion could get you quite a reputation.

And a desire for that reputation may be one of the things that motivates some people to do evangelism. Now, in my opinion, most of the people I know who do evangelism seem to do so out of genuine concern for those that they're reaching out to. But knowing human nature, it is not at all unthinkable that some would do evangelism in order to get good reputations among Christians.

As this man is an effective evangelist, an effective soul winner. Look at all the people, look at all the notches on his Bible of the people he's converted. And I can see easily how anyone, even a soul winner who reaches out and makes converts for the best of motives, may begin to have his motives erode a bit after he's had some success and after people start to be impressed.

That he now wants to go out and make more converts because he really appreciates the appreciation that he's receiving from the body of Christ out there. Another bad motive for doing evangelism could conceivably be that one is insecure. They may be a member of some really small minority cult or they might even be a member of a Christian denomination, but they feel they are outnumbered by the world out there.

And it's a very insecure feeling to be part of a group that is outnumbered by the people who disagree or even hate the group. So, the more converts you make, the more you've got on your side. I mean, if your group becomes the dominant group, then suddenly you feel much more secure.

I think, frankly, that there are some individuals who are that way simply about their church, vis-a-vis the churches in their town. It's not so much that their religion is a different religion. It may be that two different Baptist churches or two different Assembly of God churches or two different some other kind of churches in the same town might be rivals.

They might be striving, each of them, to be the biggest church of their denomination in that town. Or maybe they just want their denomination to be the most successful denomination in that town as opposed to other denominations. And so, winning people into their group is one of the ways in which they make their group stronger, bigger, and make themselves feel more important and more secure, really, knowing that they belong to the group that's growing fastest, and therefore that makes them feel good about the group they're in.

Well, whatever. I realize that that kind of motivation works inside of some hearts, but I don't know which of the motivations was working in the hearts of the Pharisees when they crossed land and sea to make one proselyte. One thing we can be sure of, their motives were not really very good, because Jesus condemns them for doing so.

Now, it's not that they were doing the wrong thing by seeking to convert Gentiles to Judaism. That was actually a decent thing to do. Gentiles were idol worshippers, and they were, therefore, enemies of the true God.

If somebody had won them over to the purest kind of Judaism, that would be simply introducing these Gentiles to the true God and bringing them out of their darkness into a greater light. That would be a positive thing to do. The problem was that the brand of Judaism that the Pharisees practiced was corrupt.

They were hypocrites themselves. They majored on minors. They strained at gnats and swallowed camels.

They neglected the weightier matters of the law, all the while imposing very condemning standards on minor ritual issues on people. These people had a very corrupt form of Judaism, and to make more converts to that corrupt Judaism was no great honor or no great service to perform. Jesus said that once they would make a convert, after going to great lengths to make one proselyte, they would turn him into twice a child of hell as themselves.

Now, this is probably a hyperbole. I mean, it's not necessarily the case that every convert they made would become twice as bad as them. But what he's saying is that whereas making a convert should be something that improves that person's life, I mean, if somebody is converted to a true faith from a false religion, that should be a tremendous improvement in their life.

But when the Pharisees converted somebody to Judaism, to their brand of Judaism, it made the person wicked, more wicked. It corrupted them. Now, what this illustrates is that not all soul winning is really going to result in desirable effects.

The religion or the type of religion that people are one to will determine whether it was good for them to be one or not. And, you know, A.W. Tozer points this out in one of his editorials. I think it was in his book, *Paths to Power*, actually.

He said that revival itself is not what we need most. We need reformation most. Reformation is cleaning house in the church, reforming the church so that it is not so corrupt, so that it doesn't have so many fruitless traditions, so that it's more loyal to the word of God and actually preaches the truth more and has the right motivations and so forth.

And once you've got the religious house clean, then to have many converts brought in is okay. But he said the present state of the church is so badly in need of reformation because it is so worldly, because it is so committed to doctrines of men rather than scripture and so forth, that to make converts to it is to do them no service. That a corrupt church makes converts of its own kind.

It propagates its own kind of religion. The Pharisees were a good example of that. They'd make converts, but those converts became just as bad or worse than the religious leaders who converted them.

And so what is necessary, of course, what would be necessary for the Pharisees would be that they become better Jews, that they become more sincere individuals, that they become godly. And then if they made converts, the converts they made could be made more godly by their instruction and their example. And this applies very much, I believe, to the modern church as well, because I agree with Dr. Tozer that the church today to a large extent has moved very far away from the word of God.

And I'm not talking about the liberal churches. I'm talking about evangelical churches to a very large extent. They have their institutionalized traditions, which puts them in competition with other churches, which causes them to value building projects and membership drives and the kinds of things, money drives, the kinds of things that create cynicism and onlookers for good cause.

I mean, it's ignoring all the things Jesus said in order to promote something else. Where did Jesus, for example, ever talk about the need to build a building or add to an existing building? It didn't happen. When did Jesus ever say that you had to make a lot of converts? He didn't.

As a matter of fact, he had a lot of followers, and he drove them away by his hard sayings. He had 5,000 men plus women and children following him. And he made a few

comments and ended up with only 12 left in John chapter 6. Jesus was not playing the numbers game.

There are so many things in which Jesus showed himself to be pure in his motives where modern churches do not resemble him. There is so much unlikeness to Jesus and to his teachings in modern evangelicalism that perhaps it is a mercy that God has not answered our prayers for revival, because if those prayers were answered, that would mean a tremendous influx of new converts, which would soon be made into replicas of the existing religious persons, which is not really very good. You can make a convert twice a child of hell as yourself.

What is desperately needed, of course, is for the churches to become Christ-like, to become true to the scriptures, to do what the Bible says, and to put away the kinds of traditions that corrupt religion. Institutionalized religion often becomes corrupt, and it has done so even in the better circles of evangelicalism to a certain extent. I'm not arguing that I'm exempt from this.

I'm not trying to be Mr. Holier-than-thou. I'm simply observing a trend. I'm sure I have my blind spots as well.

But what I'm saying is the Pharisees made this mistake. We shouldn't have to make the same one, and that is that making a convert isn't always an improvement, because if the persons doing the converting and influencing people are people whose own lives are not pleasing to God, they're simply going to multiply more of the same among their converts. And that was what the Pharisees did.

We desperately need to have a church that is pure and holy, so that when persons are converted to it, they aren't made into children of hell. They're made into children of God. Now, there's another woe here, very quickly.

Woe to you, blind guides, who say whoever swears by the temple it is nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obliged to perform it. Fools and blind, for which is greater the gold of the temple that sanctifies it? And they say whoever swears by the altar it is nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on it he is obliged to perform it. Fools and blind, for which is greater the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and all things on it.

He who swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits on it. Now, what is this all about? Jesus is talking about the very, very common practice in his day of sealing an agreement with an oath.

Today, because of cynicism about human nature, we, generally speaking, will not seal a deal with a handshake or an oath. We have to have it in writing so the lawyers can get

into it if there is any default. And so written contracts are pretty much demanded because we know human beings to be dishonest.

And when two parties are agreeing to do something that is going to cost something to each of them, there is always the possibility that one or the other or both are going to try to wiggle out of it somehow and cheat the other guy. And therefore, today, all things in such arrangements are written down legally in contracts that will bind both parties and define their duties and so forth. And if there is any default on it, there is a lawsuit to follow, etc., etc.

Well, back in days when people were a little less cynical about human nature, but they knew that men couldn't always be trusted, in Jewish society, for example, in Jesus' day, a deal would be settled with an oath. And what that meant was that a party, when agreeing to something and making a promise, would seal it by saying, I swear by... And the next word would be something that was respected by both parties. I swear by God, I swear by the temple, I swear by this, I swear by that.

The thing that was sworn by was something elevated and recognized and honored by both parties. As it says in Hebrews 6, when people make an oath, they always swear by something greater than themselves. And the reason for that was that by their words they were saying this, you may not trust my character, but you certainly will trust God's.

And therefore, I swear this by the name of God. And the implication is that if I turn out to be dishonest when I've sworn in the name of God, I am bringing reproach on the character of God himself, which it was assumed no one would dare to do. So by saying, I swear by God, and people still do this in a court of law when they're bearing witness, I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God.

The idea is you're swearing to God and swearing by God. The implication is you would never have so low a regard for God as to lie under oath like that. And so when people would take such an oath, it was as good as signing a contract.

I mean, people would take their word for it. Now, Jesus talked about oaths elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, and he told his disciples, don't even bother to use oaths. But here's why.

Because the Pharisees had made a whole system of oaths, some of them binding and some not binding. It would take a legal expert to know which ones were binding and which were not binding. But obviously, in ordinary transactions, the Pharisees would know which oaths were binding and which were not.

The person with whom they dealt might not know. And so they had decided that to swear by the altar, that was not binding. But if you swore by the gift on the altar, that would bind you.

If you swore by the temple, that would not bind you. But if you swore by the gold of the temple, that would bind you. This is the nitpicking little, you know, minutia of their tradition that they developed so that, you know, if you wanted to convince somebody that you were telling the truth, you could say, well, I swear by the temple.

And the person you're talking to would assume, oh, okay, well, you must be telling the truth. But then when you would default on your obligation, they'd say, hey, what's going on here? You swore by the temple. Why didn't you keep your deal? You would say, ah, but I didn't swear by the gold of the temple.

You should check that out. You know, swearing by the temple, that's not binding. But swearing by the gold of the temple is binding.

And Jesus says, you fools and blind. Don't you realize that if you swear by the gold of the temple or by the temple itself, it doesn't, it's still a swearing by God. Anything you swear by the temple or the altar or by your own head even or by the Jerusalem itself, you're swearing by God.

Because you are swearing in the sight of God. And God expects you to be honest in all your dealings. Now, the Pharisees, they were not honest.

They had turned the whole practice of using oaths into just another way of deceiving people. And that was something Jesus was very upset with. You know, it says in Ecclesiastes chapter 5, keep your foot when you come into the house of God.

And don't be quick to make oaths because God has no pleasure in fools. We're told there in Ecclesiastes 5 that it's better to make no oath at all than to make one and break it. And Jesus in Matthew chapter 5 said it's better just not even to make oaths at all.

Just say yes and keep your word as well as if you had made an oath. And say no and let it be really no. That is, tell the truth all the time.

So much so that no oath would make a difference. If you say yes, you mean yes. If you say no, you mean no.

And you would not be more honest if you made an oath than if you didn't because you're honest seamlessly and all the time. That would certainly be a good practice for religious leaders to be always honest. But that is hardly what we find in many cases.

And certainly the scribes and Pharisees were good examples of the wrong kind of rulers who would deceive if it was in their advantage to do so. This was another reason that Jesus pronounced woe upon them.