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Matthew 23:1 - 23:4



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this speech, Steve Gregg discusses the book of Matthew, specifically chapter 23, where Jesus condemns the religious leaders of the time. Gregg explains that Jesus's words apply to the entire category of religious leaders, even if there may have been a few exceptions. He also emphasizes the importance of leaders following the Word of God and not just their own actions. Finally, he notes that Jesus called for repentance from sin, not just physical acts of burden.

Transcript

Today we'll be turning to Matthew chapter 23, which chapter is devoted almost entirely to a lengthy, we might say, tirade, as it were, of Jesus against the religious leaders of the prevailing religious system of his day, which was the Jewish synagogue and the Jewish temple. The leaders in this temple were, and in the Jewish system, were not only the chief priests but also the religious teachers, the rabbis. Many of them were Pharisees and scribes, which were experts in the law of Moses.

Most of what Jesus says here, he directs toward the Pharisees and the scribes and repeatedly pronounces woes upon them in this chapter. He does not do so immediately. He begins by instructing his disciples to beware of falling prey to the snare and the guiles of the scribes and Pharisees and tells them not to imitate them.

Then eventually he begins to address the scribes and Pharisees themselves. Let me begin reading at the opening of the chapter, Matthew 23. Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to his disciples, saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.

Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do. But do not do according to their works, for they say and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.

But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at the feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men Rabbi,

Rabbi.

But you do not be called Rabbi, for one is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father, for one is your Father, he who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers, for one is your Teacher, the Christ.

Now I'm going to stop right there, and I don't even know if we'll in this session be able to comment on all those verses, there's so much there, but I had to find a reasonable stopping point. Now what Jesus said here seems to be mostly directed to his disciples, but we are told that he said it in the hearing not only of his disciples, but also of the multitudes. In other words, this was a public statement, and if you could just put yourself in that situation, imagine yourself, you're in the crowd, and here's a guy who's got lots of people listening to him, and he is publicly denouncing the religious leaders of your church, and taking them to task, and pointing out all of the hypocrisy in their lives.

You can imagine how, I guess, I would imagine there'd be quite a stilted silence, and a stunned amazement on the part of the people that someone would begin to speak out openly like this, and saying such direct things against the religious leaders. Now, you know, there's some reason to question whether this would be a good practice generally. I personally don't like to just kind of lambaste leaders in general.

Actually, Jesus took them on as a category, the scribes and the Pharisees. I myself do believe there is a place for exposing the wickedness and the hypocrisy of some leaders, although I personally would rather make a distinction between those that I'm speaking about and those that I'm not. I'd rather name names, which is what Paul did, for example, when Paul named Hymenaeus and Alexander as wicked men not to be listened to, or when John wrote to Gaius in 3 John and warned him about diatrophies, who loved to have the preeminence.

To name names, of course, allows you to be more precise in your criticism, and not to broad brush a whole category. And yet, Jesus does broad brush a whole category, and even if there were maybe a few Pharisees of whom this statement would not apply, it must have been so generally the case that he just took on the whole lot of them and said, listen, this is what these guys are like. Now, what was he said in this setting? He said, the scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.

Therefore, whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do. But do not do according to their works, for they say and they do not do. He begins by pointing out that the scribes and Pharisees have a position of authority in the synagogue.

That's what's meant when it says they sit in Moses' seat. There was actually a chair in the synagogue referred to as Moses' seat, because from that chair, the rabbis would expound on the law of Moses. The typical way the synagogue service was conducted, the scriptures would be read by somebody standing up.

Standing up was the posture of reverence. And so as the scriptures were read, the speaker would be standing. But when he would be ready to expound and give his own views, he would sit down.

And partly, I think, to give the higher reverence to the scripture than to his own words. But when he sat down, he sat down in Moses' seat on the platform in the synagogue. And from there, he would expound how the law of Moses applies and what it would require for obedience.

Now, Jesus said, because these men are sitting in that position, go ahead and do what they tell you to do. Now, I don't think that he is... there is some reason to question this, but I don't think that what Jesus is saying is that anybody who's in a pulpit or anybody who's in a church office, that you should do everything they say to do, no matter how outrageous it may be, or how meddlesome or how beyond the range of their authority, or how mistaken and wrongheaded. And by the way, there have been many people in positions of church authority who were very mistaken and very wrongheaded, and in many cases, very corrupt.

We need only to think of the Middle Ages and some of the extremely corrupt clergy and popes and bishops that were sexually immoral and greedy and careless of people and making up doctrines to suit their own wishes. Certainly, these men were in positions in the church that resembled the positions of the scribes and Pharisees in the synagogue when Jesus spoke of them. Now, Jesus did not necessarily mean that whatever outrageous things these men might say should be followed because they are sitting in Moses' seat.

I believe what he is saying is that because they are sitting in Moses' seat, they are expounding the word of God. And therefore, even if you see hypocrisy in their own lives, even if you are disgusted by their own personal character, the fact that they are expounding the word of God is something to be respected, and what they tell you the word of God says to do, that's what you should do. Of course, the assumption is that they are expounding it correctly.

In those days, it was very different from our own. You see, today, because of the invention of the printing press and the abundance of bookstores and so forth, everybody can have his own Bible. And therefore, everyone can read the Bible and know for himself what it says.

In biblical times, and indeed until about the 16th century AD, very few people could have a Bible because there was no printing press. All books had to be written by hand. A Bible is an enormous tome, and it would be very costly and time-consuming to produce a copy.

And therefore, whatever copies existed largely were chained to the pulpits in the

churches, and the average person didn't have a Bible. Likewise, in the synagogue, the average Jew did not have a copy of the Bible of his own. Therefore, he depended on the teaching of the rabbis in the synagogue each Saturday to tell him what the Bible said, what Moses had said, and to apply it.

Now, in general, these expositions would be trustworthy. From time to time, there might be a difference of opinion among rabbis about the application of something. Nonetheless, the people, the general public, would have very little access to knowing even what the Word of God said, except through these teachers.

And the assumption was that these teachers generally were reliable in their presentation of what the Scripture said. And therefore, what lies behind Jesus' statement, I believe, is the fact that these people who sat in Moses' seat were expounding the Scriptures with a fair degree of reliability. And it was the only way that the Jewish people could learn the Scriptures, because they didn't have their own copies to study at home.

And that being so, Jesus is suggesting, I think, that these men, though their personal lives may turn you off, yet what they are expounding is Scripture. And out of respect to Scripture, you should do the Scriptures, you should obey the Scriptures, even if they are communicated to you through unworthy vessels, through unworthy men. Now, see, that's a different way of looking at this.

The Roman Catholic Church, actually, and frankly, some Protestant groups as well, have the opinion that if somebody holds ecclesiastical office, then they have authority, and you must obey their authority no matter what. I don't hold that view. I believe that the authority is in the Word of God, that Christians are answerable to God.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11, in verse 3, he said, The head of every man is Christ. It's not the head of every man is the church or the church officials, but the head of every man is Christ. And that means that the authority to which we submit is the authority of Christ Himself.

The leaders of the church have a task assigned to them, and that is to communicate to the church what Jesus said. That's what the apostles did. You know, the early Christians in Acts chapter 2 sat daily under the apostles' teaching.

Well, what were the apostles teaching them? We have no reason to doubt that they were teaching them what Jesus had said, because just a few days earlier, we read that Jesus had said to the apostles, Go into the world and teach all nations, and teach them to observe all things that I have commanded you. And since Jesus told the apostles to teach everyone to do what Jesus had said, and then we find that the apostles teaching the new Christians every day in the book of Acts, they must have been teaching what Jesus said to do. And that being so, it was understood that the leaders of the church who would teach are supposed to teach what Jesus said to do to the church, because it is not them

but Jesus and His words that have the authority in the life of the believer.

In Hebrews chapter 13, in verse 7, it says, Remember those who have the rule over you. He means in the Christian assembly, remember those who have the rule over you. By the way, a better translation would be those who lead you.

It's not so much that they rule over the congregation like kings rule over their subjects. It's rather they are leaders. Remember those who lead you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.

Now, ten verses later in Hebrews 13, 17, the writer says, Obey those who rule over you. Once again, the Greek word should be translated, who lead you. Obey those who lead you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls.

As those who must give account, let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. Now, notice, he says to obey those who lead you, and he means in the context of the church, the church leaders. Obey them and be submissive.

Now, I've known some church leaders to take this verse and impose it on Christians, generally, and say, you must obey me. I am in authority. However, they have missed the point.

He says, obey those who rule over you, and be submissive. But in verse 7, he said, remember those who rule over you, and who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow. In other words, what you are to do, with reference to your leaders, is follow the example of their faith, and obey them, because they are teaching you the word of God.

It doesn't mean that you obey them when they're not teaching the word of God. The description that the writer of Hebrews gives of those who rule over you, or who lead you, is that they are the ones who are teaching you the word of God. And therefore, obey them, not because they have inherent authority in themselves, but because there is authority in the word of God that they are teaching.

Likewise, when Jesus said, the scribes and the Pharisees said, and Moses said, therefore, whatever they tell you to do, observe that, and do it. He means, because they are teaching the word of God to you, you should obey what they say, because you should be obeying the word of God. There is no suggestion here that Jesus is giving every scribe, and every rabbi, who sat in the seat of Moses in the synagogue, some kind of carte blanche authority over the lives of every Jew.

Jesus did not teach such things. He would not approve that, and that can't be the meaning he had here. Nor is it the case that the writer of Hebrews is doing that with the church officials or leaders.

When he says, obey those who lead you, he says, because they have taught the word of God to you, they've spoken the word of God to you. Well, in other words, obey the word of God, which you've heard from these men. And that's what Jesus is saying here.

But he goes on to say, after he says, observe what these people tell you to do, he says, but do not do according to their works. In other words, don't imitate them. For they say and they do not do.

It's the old story of do as I say, not as I do. And it's basically a matter of having a double standard, one by which we judge other people and the other by which we judge ourselves. It's possible for a religious person, in this case it was Pharisees of the Jewish faith, it's possible for Christians to have the same problem, to affirm that certain behaviors are generally applicable and that everybody ought to do them.

But then when it comes to doing them oneself, there are fantastically ingenious ways in which we can think of reasons to exempt ourselves, reasons to apply a different standard to ourselves, and to be a little easier on ourselves. Someone might say, you know, I think every Christian ought to spend two hours a day in prayer. However, when it really gets down to it, I'm a little busy, and I didn't have time to spend two hours a day in prayer.

But that's understandable, of course, because what I'm doing is very important, etc., etc. And you see, we can very easily impose standards on people that we are not willing to keep ourselves. And that is what the Pharisees apparently routinely did.

And he said, the way Jesus put it, it was figurative, of course, in verse 4, he says, For they bind heavy burdens hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. Now, of course, this is a metaphor. They do not really take literal physical burden and bind them with ropes on people.

He is talking about burdening people with responsibilities, which they themselves are not willing to carry, nor help the others bear. You know, a burden can take many forms in metaphors. Sometimes a burden can be almost a positive thing.

If I say, I've really got a burden on my heart for somebody, and it's driving me to pray for them, then I'm thankful to have such a burden. But more often than not in Scripture, a burden is something that is grievous. It's something that is, you know, that a person wants to get rid of as quickly as possible.

Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew earlier, in chapter 11, he said, Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Now, what is this burden that these people were burdened with? Well, a person might be burdened with sin and guilt. It's possible.

Again, that's a figure of speech, but that's what we see illustrated in the story Pilgrim's

Progress, the man about whom the story is. At the beginning of the story, he's burdened with a great load on his back that's crushing him. And eventually he comes to the cross, and he loses his burden there.

And this represents the crushing weight of guilt on the conscience and of sin and alienation from God. And at the cross of Jesus, this burden is removed because God has reconciled us through the cross to himself and forgiven our sins and removed our guilt. So the burden in that parable is a burden of guilt.

And it's possible that that is the burden that Jesus refers to in the sense that the Pharisees and scribes make people feel guilty. They burdened them with all kinds of guilt trips because, of course, the scribes and Pharisees were self-righteous and indicated that the way they were living is the way everyone needed to live if they would please God. And everybody else who didn't live quite as religiously as they did or weren't as committed as they were is simply a lesser breed without the law and ought to be ashamed of themselves.

And probably God was angry at them. And it's possible that the whole style of leadership and teaching that the Pharisees lived and taught may have been such as would impose great guilt feelings on people. And now, by the way, guilt feelings are appropriate at times because a guilt feeling is simply registering the fact that there is guilt.

Just like if you feel cold, it's registering the fact that you're in a cold environment. I mean, if you had no feelings, you would never become aware if you were in a dangerously cold or dangerously hot place. Feelings can be good even if they're uncomfortable feelings because they can alert us to a condition that we would not otherwise discern.

If you are guilty, and therefore there is a breach between you and God, if you're guilty of sin, it is good that you feel guilty. The worst thing that can happen to you is that somebody will alleviate you of your guilt feelings because those guilt feelings are good for you to know that you have guilt. Now, it's not good to have guilt, but if you are guilty, it is to your advantage to know that you're guilty so that you might deal with it.

Now, these scribes and Pharisees may have loaded false guilt on people. Sometimes people do by making up rules that are not really rules that God cares anything about, and then you violate man-made rules and feel guilty even though you're not guilty before God of anything. In such a case, people are simply heaping up guilt feelings on you when you're not really guilty.

But of course, a person might make you feel guilty when you really are guilty, and in a sense, they do you a service. But if somebody makes you feel guilty, it would be nice of them to tell you how to be relieved. Jesus said the scribes and Pharisees, they heap great burdens upon people, but they don't lift a finger to lift them.

They don't move them with one of their fingers. This either means that they put a burden on others that they won't put on themselves, or, it seems more likely to me, they put a burden on people and don't offer any assistance in removing that burden. It is good to let people know when their behavior is wrong so that they can stop doing it.

It's also good to let people know when they're guilty so that they can do something about it. But if they don't know what to do about it, the best thing a religious leader can do is not just make them feel guilty, but let them know what to do about their guilt so that they can be freed from guilt. This the Pharisees and scribes did not do, possibly because they did not know how.

Well, what does a person do about his guilt? How can a person be freed from guilt? I'm sure many of our listeners have a burden of guilt, even as we speak, and they know the sense of that burden. Some of them have guilt and they don't know it. They don't have guilt feelings because they've been ignoring them, they've hardened themselves, they've become numb to them, they've rationalized everything.

But the fact is, if you are guilty, it is good that you feel guilty. But what do you do about that guilt? Well, you need to be forgiven. You need to come to God on His terms.

And the Bible says that if you come to Him on His terms, He will abundantly pardon you and He'll have mercy on you. He will wash you whiter than snow. He said, come and let us reason together.

Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as wool. And though they be red like crimson, they shall be as white as snow. God can cleanse you and will cleanse you if you come on His terms.

What terms are they? Well, you must repent of your sins. That means you truly are sorrowful and regretful and you change your mind and say, I don't want to live in sin anymore. I want to live to please God.

And then you put your faith in Jesus Christ as the one who died for your sins and who has cleansed every stain. And you trust in His death and His resurrection, which was on your behalf, that through that God forgives you. And then you go forth and live by faith in Him to live a life pleasing to God after that.

This is how guilt is alleviated. We'll talk more about Jesus' statements next time.