

OpenTheo

Matthew 23:5



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discourse, Steve Gregg delves into the Book of Matthew, chapter 23, verse 5. He begins by highlighting the difference between what God requires and what man imposes on others. He stresses that the essence of Christianity lies in loving God and one's neighbors and that good works should be done for the sake of glorifying God and not for gaining recognition or seeking praise from others. Using examples, Steve emphasizes the importance of acting with sincerity and avoiding hypocrisy in our everyday lives.

Transcript

We're picking up our study in the Gospel of Matthew today at Matthew chapter 23, and we're going to begin reading at verse 5. Last time we looked at the first four verses, and there Jesus was speaking to the multitudes and to his disciples and exposing the kind of people that the religious leaders of that day were. The scribes and the Pharisees, they were the religious teachers and leaders. Many people really looked up to them.

I'm sure other people who were more discerning recognized the hypocrisy of these people and merely found them disgusting. But Jesus said that these men do sit in a place where they do expound on the Scriptures in the synagogues, and therefore, however odious you may find the individuals, do not reject the Scriptures that they teach and do the things that they tell you. But he says don't imitate them.

He said they tell you what to do, and they tell you correctly what God's word says, but they don't do it themselves. And they are like men who would put heavy burdens on people's backs but won't lift them at all. And as we ran out of time last time, I was commenting that these heavy burdens could be a way of speaking of the guilt that can be put upon someone when a teacher of God's word tells them all the things they've done wrong, but does nothing to alleviate the burden, does nothing to tell them about the mercy of God and how to be right with God and how to be rid of that heavy burden of guilt.

Certainly we need to let people know if they are in violation of God's laws, and it is not bad for them to feel guilty if they are guilty. But once we have let them know of their

guilt, we need to also let them know of how to be relieved of that burden of guilt. We need to lift it by allowing them to be aware of God's mercy and his eagerness to forgive.

There is another possibility here, and that is that Jesus might be referring not so much to the burden of guilt, but just the burden of legalism that the Pharisees put upon people. You see, God has required a certain thing of people, but religious leaders sometimes require more than God does. And as such, they burden people down with a great number of rules and regulations that make their lives harder.

And, you know, God's rules and regulations are really not all that numerous. It may seem like there's a lot of them in the Old Testament, but the Old Testament itself, in Micah 6, 8, tells us that what God requires of us are really just three things, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. And all the other rules are just ways of expounding on what it means to do the just and right thing, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.

If you remember to do the just thing, if you remember to be merciful and to be humble and walk with God, there's not much more to remember than that, and you will do what God requires of you. However, there are many religious leaders who want you to do many other things besides. Now, Jesus indicated that all God's requiring is that you love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and that you love your neighbor as yourself.

And again, the rest of the teachings of the New Testament are there to show us how it is that we love God and how it is that we love our neighbor in our actual behavior. Again, it's quite simple, just do the thing that is loving. But sometimes we don't know naturally or don't think about what's loving, and therefore the other instructions in the New Testament bring this command down to the nitty-gritty, down-to-earth decisions of everyday life and ordinary relationships.

But the point here is there are some things that religions require people that aren't anything to do with love. I have known churches that require people to promise to attend regularly. Or if they don't require a promise, at least they put a guilt trip on them if they don't attend regularly, as if there's some command of Scripture that says you must go to this church or that church on a regular basis.

There is no such command of Scripture, although of course anybody who loves God will love to get together with God's people. It will not be a burden to do so. In fact, it will be a burden to not do so.

All the people I know who really love God are always looking for opportunities to be in fellowship with other Christians, real Christians, of course. It's not surprising, however, if such a person decides that going to a certain church is not meeting any kind of a spiritual need. There are so many churches these days that have departed from the

Word of God.

It's not surprising if people say, well, this church is not doing anything to meet the spiritual needs of my family and to be irregular in attendance is not necessarily a sign of spiritual ill health in every case. But sometimes, I've known churches that require people to make a covenant with the church, which is absolutely unscriptural. There are all kinds of things people are required to do by religious teachers in many cases, and a lot of them are not scriptural at all.

And the Pharisees had a lot of teachings like that too. They had followed the teachings of the rabbis who put all kinds of traditional restrictions on people that God did not place on them. And, of course, whenever you've got a religious system that imposes rule after rule after rule after rule, that is a great burden.

And Jesus could have been referring to this fact when he said that the scribes and the Pharisees bind heavy burdens on men's backs that are grievous to be born. In any case, Jesus himself said earlier, come unto me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. You see, the scribes and the Pharisees, with their style of religion, did not give any rest to those who had such burdens.

But he said, I will give you rest. When you come to Jesus, he does not impose thousands of rules. He simply expects you to do what is loving toward your fellow man and loving toward God.

If you are not very good at that or you haven't ever given much thought to it, then his teachings, of course, illustrate and illuminate that for you. But he has not come to impose a bunch of meaningless rules or to put you under guilt trips. He has not come to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.

We need to, however, acknowledge that even Jesus' teaching illustrates that before we can be saved, we must know that we are lost. We must be aware of our own guilt. But whereas Jesus' teachings do often point out the guilt of sin in people's lives, he nonetheless says, but I do not condemn you to those who repent.

And he does point the way of relief from that burden. And that is, of course, what he came essentially to do. Now, having talked about those first four verses in Matthew 23, we continue on to verse 5. Jesus is still speaking of the scribes and the Pharisees, and he says, but all their works they do to be seen by men.

Now, this tells us beyond question who Jesus had in mind back in Matthew 6 when he told his disciples, do not be like the hypocrites. He did not specify at that time the scribes and Pharisees, but he kept making reference to the hypocrites. He said in Matthew 6, 1, take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men to be seen by them.

Otherwise, you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I tell you, they have their reward.

In verse 5, he says, and when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand praying in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

And in verse 18, he said, moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

Now, in all these places in Matthew 6, he mentions the hypocrites. He does not say who he has in mind specifically. Who are the hypocrites? They are the ones who do their charitable deeds and who pray and fast in such a way as to get attention from men.

These things which ought to be done as an act of devotion to God are done in an entirely different spirit by these hypocrites. They are, of course, doing things that onlookers will take to be evidences of devotion to God. And therefore, they're getting a reputation for themselves that they are very holy and very godly.

But he says it's just a play act. That's what the word hypocrite means, acting out a role in a play. And so, here they are acting a role, and they're doing it for the eyes of men.

And thus, Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23, 5, all their works they do to be seen by men. Then he gives some examples of what they do. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments.

Now, what is a phylactery, and what do the borders of garments have to do with anything? Well, a phylactery is actually a little container. Usually, it might be made of leather or some other substance. It's a little container that could contain small portions of Scripture written on parchment.

And so, they would actually have little pages with Scripture written on them, and they'd put them in these things called phylacteries. Now, these phylacteries were constructed so that they could be worn on the body, particularly on the forehead or on the hand. Now, the reason that the Jewish religious leaders did this kind of thing was because there was a command earlier in Scripture in Deuteronomy that the law of God should be, as it were, bound to the hand and to the forehead.

It's over in Deuteronomy 6, and it says, verse 6, it says, These words, which Moses says, which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on

your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.

In other words, on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Now, the Jews took this quite literally.

He's talking about the laws that Moses had given, and he says, You shall bind them on your hand, and they shall be like frontlets between your eyes. Now, in order to carry this out, the Jews sometimes would wear these phylacteries, which were these boxes or pouches that contained Scripture portions, and they'd bind them onto their foreheads or on their hands so that they could be obedient to this command of Deuteronomy. Now, let me just say this.

Jesus was not impressed, and I think one of the reasons that Jesus was not impressed was that they were missing the point. Before God said to them in Deuteronomy to bind them to their hand as a frontlet between their eyes, he specifically said in the verse we're reading, he said, These laws that I tell you today shall be in your heart. The idea is not that you have them strapped onto some outer part of your body, but that they are in your heart, that his laws are in your heart in the sense that you love his law, and that heart is the part of you that dictates behavior, that your behavior is dictated by God's word, that is, you do the things he said.

Now, why then does he talk about binding them to your hand or your forehead? I believe that this represents something. Having your hand bound to the law represents your works. You work with your hands.

What you do, you do with your hands. And to have the law bound to your hand or your hand bound to the law would suggest that your hand is, as it were, governed by the dictates of the law. And to have these laws as frontlets between your eyes, right in front of your face, right on your forehead, speaks of your thoughts being governed.

You keep your attention on them. They are right before your eyes. And therefore, this language, figurative though it is, about binding the law in your hand and your forehead, really means, I think, that the law is to dictate your behavior and your thoughts and to be always present in your mind and your attention always upon it.

And this idea of binding it literally to your hand and forehead, I seriously doubt if Moses had any such thing in mind. In any case, as I say, Jesus was not impressed with it. But it was something that was an outward show of religiosity.

And the Pharisees, Jesus said, what did he say? He said they make their phylacteries broad. That means that they're not content just to have phylacteries, which practice is questionable in itself, but they make very large phylacteries. It must be assumed that if a phylactery can contain Scripture portions, then a very large phylactery can contain many Scripture portions.

And obviously, a man who carries around many Scripture portions on his forehead has got to be a more spiritual man than one who carries only a few Scripture portions on his forehead. This is the way that the Pharisees reasoned, entirely external, entirely for show. They made big phylacteries for themselves, and he says they also enlarged the borders of their garments.

Now, this reference to the borders of their garments comes from a law that God gave back in Exodus that the Jews were supposed to put a blue band around the bottom border of their garment. It is never explained exactly why this was so, but it is believed that the purpose of it was to remind them whenever they looked down at their feet or at the lower border of their garment to see a blue band there. It's sort of like tying a string around your finger.

The string itself doesn't communicate anything, but it reminds you that you're supposed to remember something. You have to use some other way of remembering what it was you were supposed to remember. But a string around your finger reminds you that you're supposed to remember something.

And a blue band or a blue border around the garment was to remind them that they were supposed to remember something, and that was that they are God's people. So when they would see this, they'd say, oh yeah, I'm supposed to remember I'm one of God's people. And so that's what they were told to do.

Now, the Pharisees apparently not only did they put a blue band around the bottom of their garment, they made very broad borders, blue borders around their garments. They have nothing wrong with doing that, any more than there's nothing wrong with big phylacteries. It's just that they did this so that people could see them.

I mean, if the border around my garment is too narrow, it's possible people will not notice it. But if I make a very broad blue band around the bottom and have a very large phylactery on my head, then I can be quite sure that everyone will notice those. And that is what Jesus is saying.

They do everything they do to be seen by men. Now, there's nothing wrong with men recognizing that you are spiritual, if you are, or that you are godly, if you are. As a matter of fact, they should notice it.

Jesus said this back in Matthew chapter 5, and he's talked about how his disciples are the light of the world. Now, the world light is something that is visible, and the world is supposed to be seeing that which is visible. And Jesus said in Matthew chapter 5, he said in verse 16, he said, Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

Now, obviously, there's nothing wrong with people seeing your good behavior, which is

what Jesus said. They should see your good behavior, and they should glorify your Father which is in heaven. Now, that means that whatever good things you do should be so artless, so unselfconscious, so God-glorifying that people don't give you the credit, and you're not seeking credit from people.

You're not even concerned that men would see how good you are and give you credit for being good. You're just doing what God wants without paying all that much attention to yourself and not seeking credit for yourself. People will notice.

If you are serving God, your life will look different than theirs, and your life will be better than theirs. And they can glorify God for you. But there is a certain way of doing religious actions, which are not necessarily in themselves good works.

For example, a blue border around your garment or a phylactery in your head is not particularly a good deed. It doesn't help anyone. It's just a religious ritual.

Jesus never taught us to do religious rituals. He told us to do good works. He told us to do acts of kindness, acts of love and service to others.

When this is done, obviously there is a possibility we could even do that to be seen by men. But he said that that's not how we're supposed to do them. When you do your charitable deeds, do not do it to be seen by men.

However, if men see, and men do see because you can hardly hide your whole life, if you are a person who continuously is doing the right thing and good things and kind things, you can't be secretive completely. You're not invisible. It should be that when people see you, what they see are good things, good works.

And when they see those good works, they will have to acknowledge the truthfulness and the sincerity of your religion and therefore give God the glory that he deserves for being a true God who inspires good things. You know, God experiences reproach today because people who claim to be his followers are found to be dishonest in business. They're found to be disloyal to their wives.

They're found to be negligent parents. They're found to be, in many ways, not good people at all. And this does not only bring reproach upon them but on the God they profess to serve so that onlookers often get the impression religion is just a bunch of hypocrites.

Religion is, there's no real God there that changes anyone's lives. Look at all these phony baloney Christians, you see, and that is not the way it should be. It is in some respects and it always has been to some degree.

There's always been hypocrites in the church as well as in Judaism or any religion. You know, there's even hypocritical atheists. Some people say, I won't go to church because

there's a bunch of hypocrites there.

Actually, that's a little inconsistent. They'll go to their job even though there's hypocrites there. They'll go to the bar even though there's hypocrites there.

They'll go to parties even though there's hypocrites there. The reason they're not going to church has nothing to do with the hypocrites there, obviously. It has to do with the fact that they may be confronted with their own sin and their need to get right with God.

That's why people try to avoid churches. But it certainly isn't because there's hypocrites there. Because people go home when there's hypocrites there.

I mean, they go all kinds of places where there are hypocrites. It's just they don't go to the church because there's hypocrites there. Well, there are hypocrites there, as there are everywhere else.

Wherever there are human beings in any large number, there are going to be some of them that are hypocrites. But there are also true men there. There are also people in church who really love God and who do govern their lives according to the dictates of Christ.

As a matter of fact, the one who says, I won't go to church because of the hypocrites probably would feel more comfortable with the hypocrites than he would with the true Christians. Because if he was around the true Christians, it would make it clear to him that he is the hypocrite and they are real. And he'd probably be much more comfortable being around other people that he can point to and say, see, everything about them is phony.

That way his own conscience isn't bothered too much about his own phoniness and his own sinfulness. Well, listen, to do your things to be seen by men, that is not the way religion is to be done. It's true that men will see you.

And what they see should be good works that lead them to glorify your Father. But you should not be doing these good works in order to be seen by men. As soon as you become too much aware of how your behavior is being received, admired, you know, given attention by men, there is that sneaky little pride thing that creeps in there and says, yes, people are starting to notice, people are starting to admire me.

And there's something in human nature, very corrupt and very wicked, that begins to enjoy that. And once it is enjoyed, then it is something that is often cultivated. And once we begin to cultivate it, we lose credibility, we lose integrity.

We need to guard very carefully against being like the Pharisees, who do what they do in order that men may see and admire them for their religiosity. That's what Jesus said was wrong with the scribes and the Pharisees. There's other things wrong too.

And he's got a whole chapter here saying what they are. And we'll have to come back to it next time because it's a very long chapter and we were only able to take a few verses at a time. But we don't have any deadline, we have to finish by.

So I hope you'll tune in again next time. And we will continue our study through Matthew chapter 23, where Jesus makes some of his boldest and most denunciatory statements ever in Scripture. Tune in again next time.

We'll continue.