

Matthew 23:1-7

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6 They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7 and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi (NRSV).

Last week we had a lesson on hypocrisy where the poor were judged by the privileged and looked down upon when they were oppressed by the very people that judged them. Jesus taught that the true value is in the heart of the giver that is given in proportion to what they have to give. Today is also a lesson on hypocrisy. Jesus condemns hypocrisy more than any other offense.

Jesus addresses the crowds and the disciples. The Sermon on Mount began with blessings. This lesson from Jesus is also on a mount but now, near the end, he teaches what he needs to emphasize. So, he begins the lesson with woes. The scribes are a professional class of people with formal training. The Pharisees are a denomination with strict religious rules. Together, they represent the religious leadership of the day. The seat of Moses was a place within the Synagogue. This term is a metaphor for synagogue leadership. But it could be that Jesus intended to use the terminology as an euphemism, since he was referring to the unpleasantness of the religious leaders. Jesus encouraged the people to do what they teach but not what they do because they do not practice what they teach. Jesus condemns their practice not their teaching. The scribes and the Pharisees are the recognized experts. However, their lifestyle was not approved of. They valued power and position which was a direct contradiction to their teaching. Jesus then gave examples of their hypocrisy as evidence to support his claim. They placed burden on the people but refused to help them. They showed off and took the best positions in order to be honored and respected in public.

The biblical problem that Jesus addressed was that the religious leaders had placed a higher value on human tradition than the law of God and they emphasized external signs of piety. Followers of God follow the word of God. They are to have divine characteristics. They are to be humble, seek to live according to God's laws, and not live for recognition or honor. When humble followers of God are in the wrong, they seek repentance and immediately change to do what is right. The problem Jesus faced with the derailed religious institution is that the leaders of the system were not only off track from will of God, they blamed sin on other people and saw themselves as being the ones that are righteous. When Jesus addressed this, they failed to repent. Instead of repenting and changing to do what is right, they claimed to be righteous. Therefore, they rejected the word and the person that called out their hypocrisy.

The following case study on the article *30 Reasons People Leave Organized Religion*, is a good example of some of the hypocrisy that is applicable within the realm of contemporary society.

I was a sound engineer for Sunday services at a church I attended. Multiple respected clergy members were having affairs. They stood before the congregation condemning these actions yet they were leading a double life and breaking their own preaching.

The problem of the sound engineer's experience with clergy is an obvious problem of hypocrisy. The problem is that they are not following their own teaching and the violations are to their oath, to God, to the church, and to their respective spouses. The sin is condemned numerous times in the Bible. The problem the sound engineer faced was similar to what Jesus observed and criticized. But, as often is the case, the sound engineer was stuck on the problem instead of the solution. He got offensive and took it to the extreme by giving up on organized religion all together. He chose to leave, thereby avoiding and criticizing the problem instead of making an effort to fix the problem. This action is actually the root cause of the problem as the perpetrators are allowed to continue with the offense unchecked. This is not what Jesus did. If people actually follow Jesus we would not have these problems. The sound engineer ran from the problems that he saw. Jesus addressed the problems that he saw.

The same consequence was addressed last week where the person that was offended gave up entirely. The sound engineer had several options. He could have taken a break from it for a while. He could find another ministry as most other ministries do not have this problem. He could have followed the example of Jesus and address the problem. However, he was offended, responded according to his emotions, and gave up completely. In the Parable of the Sower, this is the seed that fell on rocky ground. The seed represents someone that gladly receives the word but does not have strong root so it does not last. Having a weak faith formation, they quickly fall away when problems occur.

How that impacts us is that all religion is blamed and avoided for the sins of one. Instead of addressing the guilty party and fixing the broken system that tolerates such transgression, many people choose to give up on religion all together. They blame all of organized religion instead of considering the fact that not all religion is to blame. Jesus is an alternative to our burdens. Jesus is oriented in a different direction and sees the world from the perspective of the kingdom of God. He sees what is broken and fixes it.