



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Religion as a burden

By Rev Dr Keith Garner

23 November 2014

Matthew 23:1–12

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 2 "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. 4 They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. 5 "Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; 7 they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them 'Rabbi.' 8 "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. 9 And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

We come to the final Sunday of the Christian year and, before we begin to explore some of those great themes of the Advent season, I have chosen a passage that grants us insight into a conflict that has been building between the religious leaders of the day and Jesus.

In short, we have Jesus warning the disciples and the crowd against religious hypocrisy. Their attention is being drawn to the ethical teachings of the scribes and Pharisees. This would be familiar ground for those being addressed by Jesus. We keep in mind that the audience is clearly distinguished as being both the crowds and the disciples (v.1).

In a nutshell, the advice appears to be to take seriously what the religious leaders say, but not necessarily to do what they do. Jesus' criticism of the religious leaders is because they make religion a burden—put simply, hedging people in by a plethora of rules and regulations made it difficult to live out a godly life.

It appears that these leaders are being accused of practising their piety in such a way that the people see their intention as generating praise for themselves. What we are talking about are not acts of worship, but rather ostentation and show.

Jesus acknowledged that the Pharisees sat in an important line of teaching (the seat of Moses), and he did not seek to undermine their respected teaching role in the synagogue. He had much more to say about the underlying motivation and the religious fripperies which surrounded so much of what they did.

When we examine the criticism of the Pharisees' failure to live truly to what they taught, we must be careful not to exclude ourselves. What is true for them can also apply to us, for there is a danger that the spirit which infected the Pharisees may creep into our own Christian discipleship.

When Michael Green wrote *Matthew for Today*, he identified five characteristics which are ever-present for Christians. He identified the sources of rebuke as:

- We do not practise what we preach (23:3)
- We are unwilling to undertake what we prescribe for others (23:4)
- We love to show off (23:5)
- We revel in respect (23:6-10)
- We misunderstand the focus of our work (23:11-12)

Jesus saw the teaching of religious leaders as laying heavy burdens onto the shoulders of the people—and this is demonstrated in our text:

“They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.” (Matthew 23:4)

I referred to this verse just a few months ago when I explored those earlier words in Matthew where Jesus called for people to offer their lives to him in a way that is much easier than the way of the law. We can chart a clear link with the words, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”* (Matthew 11:28-30)

Essentially, what Jesus says to both the crowd and the disciples is that true religion frees people from burdens—or, at least, makes it easier to carry them. Very often in our Christian living, it involves the latter ... which necessitates building spiritual resilience.

The coming of Christ was not intended to make life more difficult for people by overlaying an already onerous religious life with more rules and regulations. He came to help us carry our load and to be able to face the many challenges that life presents to us. This would be heard with sharpness by those who were the religious leaders of the day.

In addition, this theme touches on the openness with which Jesus criticises the scribes and the Pharisees for making a spectacle of religion. It is helpful to have some understanding of the religious symbols such as ‘phylacteries and fringes’ in order to grasp what Jesus was actually saying.

The phylacteries are little leather boxes that are strapped to the person—one on the wrist and one on the forehead of the Pharisees. The one on the wrist contains a single parchment roll with four passages of scripture from Exodus and Deuteronomy. The one on the forehead contains the four passages in four separate compartments. The intention was to draw attention to the Pharisees’ exemplary obedience to the law and, therefore, became a symbol of piety.

The tassels or fringes displayed on the border of garments originate in Numbers and Deuteronomy and were meant to draw people’s attention to the commandments of God. When these tassels were of extraordinarily length, they became an ostentatious display of piety which drew more attention to the wearer than to the law.

The most important point is not that the phylacteries and tassels are wrong in themselves, but *“They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long...”* (v.5)

In the light of this passage, we might helpfully ask whether the practise of our faith is a burden or a blessing for us.

Douglas Hare suggests that the whole of Chapter 23 serves as a kind of Valedictory Address where “the evangelist draws on his various sources to make a connected whole.” It is also important to ensure that we don’t allow ourselves to be drawn into a modern support of anti-Semitism. We can guard against this by receiving the words as a critique within our own Christian context.

RELIGION CAN BECOME A GREAT BURDEN BECAUSE OF LEGALISTIC REGULATION

It is of more than passing interest that the arguments in the final chapters of Matthew are focused on tradition. If you have ever seen a performance of *Fiddler on the Roof*, you will remember it includes a very powerful song entitled “Tradition”. In the Jewish religion, tradition holds a significant position.

Jesus Christ sought to take nothing away from the religious leaders of the day—and, as we have already established, that is made clear in his recognition that they sat “in Moses’ seat”. The unique role that these religious leaders played is in the field of interpretation.

- They were understood as having authority to rightly divide or interpret and create tradition
- All of scripture is actually tradition in the best sense, as it is lovingly remembered
- But Jesus saw how this tradition was now being used against the people.

Craig Keener, in his commentary, introduces an interesting perspective by suggesting that the final discourse in Chapters 23 to 25 approximately balances what we know as the Sermon on the Mount in Chapters 5 to 7—and concludes with a very similar summing up: “*When Jesus had finished saying all these things ...*” (Matthew 26:1).

Whereas first sermon in Matthew opens with blessings for the meek, his last opens with woes for the religious elite.

It could be said that while teachers imposed heavy burdens upon others, they found numerous ways of avoiding the same burdens themselves.

Stephen Dray pointed out that “Perverted religion has a defective view of the godly life. It seeks power, honour and prestige (v.v.5-11). By way of contrast, however, Jesus points to the characteristic attitude of a true believer. As the servant of a Heavenly Father and of the Christ (v.v.9-10), humility should characterise all a person does.”

Commenting on scripture, F F Bruce said that, according to Paul, the Christian is not under law as a rule of life. “It is the ongoing course of the Christian life that he has in view, not simply the initial justification by faith.”

JESUS CHRIST OFFERS A WAY WHICH LIFTS BURDENS AND OPENS THE DOOR TO BLESSING

Jesus exposes the faulty attitudes of religious leaders and Dray sums it up in the following way, “It resolves itself into a long list of dos and don’ts but it offers nothing to lighten the load.”

It is important to note that, when Jesus takes on the role of interpretation, he expresses an aspect of his Messiahship—and is severely critical of those who make religion something other than a blessing.

In the mid-part of this section in Matthew 23, we have an interesting picture of people seeking the best seats.

There is nothing more sure to make people feel jealous than to see someone in a better seat. If I can indulge you with a personal story ... I recall being with friends many years ago in London in the opening few weeks of *Oliver* at the London Palladium in Argyll Street.

The group was a hastily gathered together and, when we went to the box office, were told there were no seats left. Then, just as I turned around, the young woman at the desk asked, "Just how many are you?" I answered, "Twelve." And she said, "I have a box and you can have that." So we had seats in the box overlooking the stage, but only paid the price of seats at the back of the circle.

When it came to the interval, we saw people looking at us and I imagine they were thinking we had the better seats because we had paid an exorbitant price for them!

Jesus said that some of the religious leaders really enjoyed being taken to the most important seats in the place.

The importance of humility is the pathway to blessing. Charles Schultz illustrated it well in one of his *Peanuts* cartoons. Lucy is playing the role of a doctor. She sits in her booth with a sign that reads: "Medical Help – 5 cents." The sign below says: "The Doctor is in". Lucy says to Charlie Brown with a certain kind of profound attitude, "Your life is like a house."

In the next frame, she says reflectively, "You want your house to have a solid foundation, don't you?" Charlie Brown has a kind of blank look on his face. Lucy confirmed, "Of course you do."

Charlie Brown remains silent—says nothing. Then in the fourth frame, Lucy says, "So don't build your house on the sand, Charlie Brown." About that time, a huge wind blows the booth down. Lucy, sitting in the rubble, says, "Or use cheap nails." The humility of an honest answer!

The only way to blessing is not to be found in rules and regulations, but in the call of God to open our hearts and lives to him.

IS OUR FAITH A BURDEN OR A BLESSING?

It would be very easy for us to be tempted into passing some kind of Christian verdict upon the Pharisees, as though we were doing something of which they themselves were ignorant.

The Talmud is the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and had already passed a clear verdict upon such matters by distinguishing seven different kinds of Pharisee:

- There was the *shoulder* Pharisee. Such a person was a meticulous observer of the law. He obeyed the law but did so to be seen by others.
- There was a *wait-a-little* Pharisee. This person professed the creed of the strictest Pharisees and could always find a reason for allowing practice to lag behind.
- There was the *bruised or bleeding* Pharisee. The Talmud speaks of the plague of self-afflicting Pharisees. The Pharisees of the day were men and they would never be seen even talking to or even looking at women on the street. They would close their eyes and bump into walls to damage their own bodies.
- There was the *tumbling* Pharisee. They were so keen for others to acknowledge their humility that they bent over. Their humility was a self-advertising ploy.
- There was the *ever-reckoning* Pharisee. They knew about the power of compounding interest and they were forever adding up their good deeds. Religion was always seen in terms of profit and loss.

- There was the *timid* Pharisee. This is the kind of Pharisee who always lived in dread of divine punishment. It was this take on religion that led to constantly cleaning the utensils for usage at the meal table.

In a typically Jewish way, it was noted that there were six bad types to one good—and the final type, which is good, is the *God-fearing* Pharisee.

- There was the *God-fearing* Pharisee— the one who really and truly loved God and found great delight in obeying the law, however difficult it was.

As our Christian year draws to a close, it is good to examine ourselves to see whether we can identify with the situation that Jesus was addressing as he spoke to the crowd and his disciples.

Even to this day, we have allowed the term Pharisee to become synonymous with sham, show and hypocrisy. This, of course, is not totally accurate, but it does help us to contrast the gospel and our understanding of it with many of the modern manifestations of religion.

Quincy Jones, who is now in his early 80s, was a remarkable performer in his day, a great composer, producer, director, and so much more. Towards the end of his career, he was best known for his ability to draw people together who don't usually perform and all for a good cause: Diana Ross, Kenny Rogers, Michael Bolton, Lionel Richie, and many others have used their powerful artistic skills in moving expressions of music.

In my own estimation, Jones became best known for *We are the World*, which featured the combined talents of a large number of performers who together created a great song. I am told that he put a sign up in the recording studio which everyone saw as they walked from their dressing rooms. It simply said, "Check your ego at the door!"

Jesus calls the disciples to consider very carefully what genuine religion is about—and lifts their vision above religious rules and regulations to the place of real blessing.

This saying comes from an anonymous source: "What a world this would be if we could forget our troubles as easily as we forget our blessings."