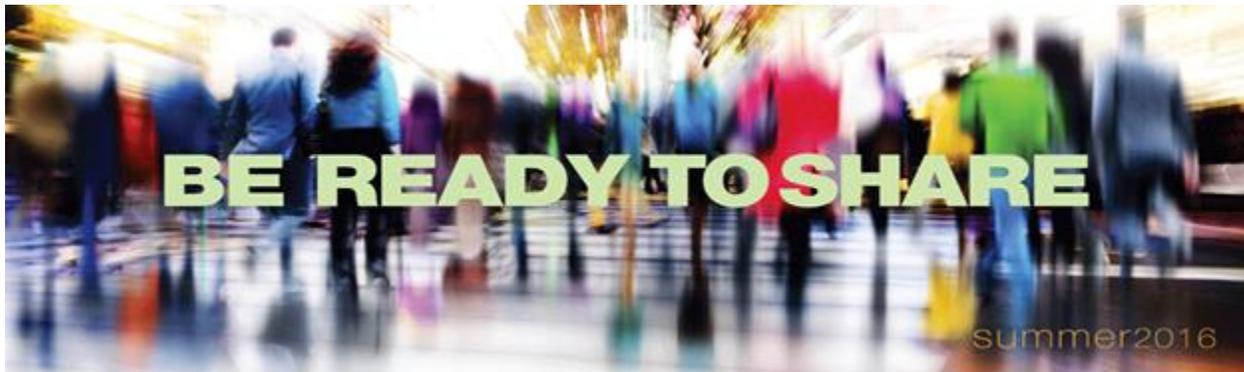


***Why Are Christians Such Hypocrites?***  
**Be Ready to Share** 2016 Summer Sermon Series  
Matthew 23:1-15  
Kenwood Baptist Church  
Pastor David Palmer  
August 7, 2016

**TEXT:** Matthew 23:1-15



We continue this morning in our summer series on *Being Ready to Share Christ*. We have been listening all summer to questions that we hear around us from the culture, perceptions or misperceptions of Christianity, theological questions that are asked, and this morning we look at another specific question that many raise. The question is simply: Why are Christians such hypocrites? To many people, the strongest evidence for them not to be Christians is the lives of Christians. Many people have had a negative experience in church. Some have experienced a profound disappointment through the collapse or moral failure of a supposedly Christian leader. In *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask*, the book that were reading together trying to equip ourselves, Mark Mittelberg lists several examples, some of which may touch closer to home than others, such as a Bible study leader who teaches moral purity, but walks out on the family; a respected priest who preaches piety, but covers up a pattern of abuse; a charismatic youth pastor who calls students to biblical faith and fidelity, but is caught in a secret life; a perfect soccer mom or dad who sits in church every Sunday, but goes home to a habit and lifestyle of alcohol or domestic violence; or a religious neighbor who pretends in front of others that "Every day with Jesus is sweeter than before," but in reality is filled with fear, resentment, and jealousy. You can set your own living examples forward, but most people experience or meet Christians that in some way are profoundly disappointing and are poor evidence of the transformed life that is offered to us in the gospel. So the question can be raised as to why is this the case. A simple answer could be what we are all sinful and just move on and ask what the afternoon plans are. A more profound answer, though, is to engage the topic seriously and listen to the specific hurts, objections, or misperceptions, and then respond.

I want to tell you the conclusion of the sermon right at the beginning. The conclusion of the sermon that we will reach the end is that whenever someone asks the question: "Why are Christians such hypocrites because this moves me away from Jesus?" my basic reply is: "When you see hypocrisy, you are actually standing with Jesus, because no one is more upset with hypocrisy than Jesus Himself." The simple conclusion is very profound. It's like the problem of suffering that we asked earlier in the summer. Whenever someone seriously asks the question, "Doesn't God do something about the problem of evil?" I see that as a slippery slope that you are sliding towards faith in Christ, because it is only the God of the Bible who actually does something about suffering, and He solves it at the cross. Jesus is more against hypocrisy than anyone will ever be.

So, we look at our text this morning, Matthew 23. This is a significant and important chapter in the Bible. We are diving right into the midst of a very public debate, and when we start Matthew 23, Jesus has been teaching in the temple courts after riding into the city on Palm Sunday. This is a very public moment, not a private moment. Jesus has been tested, critiqued. There has been a back-and-forth going on a very public way, and Jesus answers His critics with a Scripture question at the end of Matthew 22, and then we turn to Matthew 23 and Jesus' response and critique of the religious leaders of this day. Jesus addresses both the crowds and His disciples. He introduces His critique of the religious leadership of his day, and he says in Matthew 23:2:

*"The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat."*

The seat of Moses is a very concrete image that Jesus is invoking. It would have been known by all of His hearers, and yet is unknown to most of us. The image of sitting on Moses' seat is to occupy the position of teaching authority. It is to stand visibly in the role in the community of the person who is explaining and interpreting God's Word. The danger of hypocrisy is not carried out with full force when it is conducted in private. Our private sins don't really draw people away from Christ; it is when we are in public. It is when we are seated, if you will, in the seat of Moses and claiming to represent the Lord and communicate His will. It is when we tell other people how they are to live and then people see this great discrepancy in our own lives.

The seat of Moses is something known. There have been three seats of Moses found by archaeologists. The seat of Moses was a seat that was placed in the synagogue, much as many churches have seats of prominence. The first church I ever served in New England was a small Congregational church, and they had two really fancy seats in the front for the really important people. I am not a very tall man, and those seats were designed for tall important people, and so it was a little humiliating to sit in one of those seats as the associate pastor with my feet dangling like a child's trying to find where that red carpet was. But, the seat of Moses was an

ornately carved seat. It was placed in the synagogue, and it identifies the person who has teaching authority and who was standing in front of the community to explain God's Word. The seat of Moses that was found in the synagogue at Chorazin and is the best-preserved one. It is contemporary with the ministry of Jesus. The seat is about one and a half feet high and two feet wide. The seat was built and dedicated by a certain Judah ben Ishmael, and this prayer is inscribed on the base of the seat: "May Judah ben Ishmael be remembered for good who made this



seat and the staircase of the synagogue, and may he have a share with the righteous." Seats of Moses have been found the synagogue of Chorazin, as well as in the synagogue in Tiberias. They have been found in the Greek island of Delos in the synagogue there. And yet, do many of us desire or aspire to take that seat, this place that identifies the public teacher in people's lives? I pulled a couple pictures off the Internet of people aspiring to the seat of Moses, and you can see the different postures. I call this first man "the reluctant interpreter." You see, he is getting up on the seat of Moses somewhat hesitantly. His feet are dangling, and he is unsure. He is a younger man, not totally confident in his skills of interpretation. The middle one is a more



confident seater in the seat of Moses. I call him "the experienced interpreter." This man is looking straight at

you. He is in the synagogue of Chorazim, in the seat, firmly planted, and he is ready to explain God's Word and will to you. On the left is a younger man on some archaeological tour. I call him "the aspiring interpreter." This is the man who knows just enough theology to be dangerous. He is maybe a first or second year seminary student. But in whatever place in life you are, all of us, whether we know it

or not, presume on taking this seat, and when you take the seat of authority or influence or

explaining to someone who Christ is, what His ways are, what He expects of you, that is something of supreme importance, and Jesus recognizes the importance of this role. We influence one another spiritually in profound ways, and in Matthew 23:3a, Jesus says of those seated in the seat of Moses:

*“So practice and observe whatever they tell you . . . ”*

For some of us, this strikes us as jarring, but it really shouldn't, because those who are actually communicating God's Word, the image of someone sitting in the seat of Moses and communicating God's Word, Jesus says that what the Word of God tells us to do, we actually should do. God's Word, His will, reveals to us a pattern of life that is the blueprint of our Creator, and Jesus says to practice and observe, keep and obey. These terms are paired in Scripture dozens of times, so do what God's Word tells us to do. Those who are speaking and teaching the Word of God to the extent they are speak you the truth, do it. But Jesus says, and this is a gigantic *BUT* in Matthew 23:3b:

*“ . . . **but** do not do what they do.”*

That raises the question: What is the problem? What is the problem for the people sitting in the seat of Moses, if you will, in our lives, communicating the Scripture: *keep and obey the Scripture, **but** don't do what they do.* What's the specific problem? It is in the last phrase of the verse. The ESV renders this in the last part of Matthew 23:3:

*“For they preach, **but** do not practice.”*

This is a nice alliteration in English, but literally Jesus says: “They speak and don't act.” There's lots of talking and very little doing; lots of advice, lots of counsel, lots of statements, but very little observable action, and this is a major problem. It is a major problem if our Christian faith is expressed only in telling other people how to live and then their not seeing the transformed life, or the life characterized by obedience, in our own. “*They preach, but do not practice,*” and this is Jesus' fundamental critique.

Jesus continues, and He gives two very broad ways that this is observed ~~by~~ *in* the religious leaders of the day. In Matthew 23:4, Jesus makes this concrete. He says:

*“They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.”*

Jesus was a master communicator. He was very skilled at using hyperbole and irony, and I think we see this here. It is a very ironic image, tying up a big load and then not moving it with your finger. It is like the image Jesus uses of how we see the sin in someone else's life. We see the splinter, but we do not see the log in our own eye. Jesus says that they are constructing or tying up large loads, putting them on other people, and yet they are not willing to do them, and

there is the discrepancy between speaking and very little acting in our own lives. Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30:

*“Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.”*

The yoke for us today is not that flattering of an image, so that's probably why we need to use it more. It's a biblical image of conversion. In the first century, to convert, to become a follower of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was described as taking on the yoke of the Kingdom. Sometimes we call ourselves sheep. That seems good. Sheep are fuzzy. We can make sweaters and all kinds of good things from their wool. Very few churches use the image of an ox: “So you want to come follow Jesus? Just saddle up and get hitched to the wagon and start pulling the kingdom with the rest of us.” Head down, it's not very flattering, but again, it's a powerful image in Scripture of the yoke, and it's an image of being controlled by God's Word. We are not supposed to be free-range, organic disciples just roaming around, discovering God's will that suits our fancy. We are to cut furrows, if you will, in the path that God sets out. Take the yoke. Yet Jesus says that His yoke actually fits. He says: “My yoke is easy; my burden is light.” 1 John 5:3 says:

*“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.”*

Sin is burdensome. It seems so pleasant initially, but it brings with it a train of regrets and problems, and you've got to repeat yourself. You've got to cover your tracks. It is so much simpler just to go God's way, and that is what Jesus describes. He critiques the religious leaders, though, of making God's ways, God's Word, complicated and difficult and burdensome.

In His second critique of the religious leaders of His day, He says in Matthew 23:5:

*“They do all their deeds to be seen by others.”*

This is another big problem. It's the problem, if you will, of the stage. The original expression in Matthew 23:5 literally says: “All their works are done to be visible,” and it's the same word from which we get *theater*. They are play-acting. The word *hypocrite* comes from the stage. I remember as a boy, my older sisters liked to watch soap operas. I figured out pretty early on that the plot line of these is somewhat predictable, but they would watch, and whenever they had to miss their favorite shows, they would record them. They would weep as the breakup came, and to my astonishment, they would rewind the show, play it again, and cry again. I remember telling my older sister: “You know, they're not really going through a breakup. These are actors, and those tears aren't real.”

Jesus' critique is that they're doing what they are doing so that others will see them, and this is manifested in six very concrete ways. Jesus says in Matthew 23:5:

- 1) *They make their phylacteries broad*
- 2) *and their fringes long.*

These are two practices in Jesus' day. The Hebrew word for phylacteries is *tefillin*. These are the black leather bands that are tied around the arm, and then there's a second one that is placed on the head. Devout Jews even to this day tie the *tefillin* on their arm and on their head in a well-prescribed manner at the beginning of morning prayer. On the *tefillin* is a small leather box, and inside the box there are four pieces of Scripture, written quotations from the Bible applied very literally:



Exodus 13:9: *“This will be a sign for you upon your head and a memorial between your eyes that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth.”*

Exodus 13:16: *“It will be a sign on your hand and a frontlet between your eyes.”*

Deuteronomy 6:8: *“You shall bind these words as a sign on your arm and a frontlet between your eyes.”*

Deuteronomy 11:18: *“You shall put these words of Mine on your heart and soul. You shall tie them for a sign on your arm, and they shall be between your eyes.”*

The practice of making *tefillin* is an ancient practice. The first *tefillin* we have were actually found among the Dead Sea Scroll community. It is a very literal application of keeping God's Word central, and yet Jesus' critique is not against keeping God's Word central, but it's against pretending or enlarging or posturing your devotion. He says that some of those in His day were making their *tefillin* extra wide. It is like having the Jesus T-shirt with the really neon colors. It is like taking extra care to be noticed. They also make the tassels of the prayer shawl extra-long so that people can see them. It is a little like today how lots of Christian leaders feel pressure to get tattoos, so they have a Scripture verses in Hebrew, whether they know Hebrew or not, on their bicep. Whatever you do to posture a religiosity, Jesus is against that. Whatever you are doing to try to gather attention and appear to be something more than you are, He is against that. Not only do they enlarge their visible manifestations of piety, Jesus says in Matthew 23:6:

- 3) *They conduct themselves in a way that seeks honor. They love the place of honor at feasts,*
- 4) *the best seats in the synagogue.*

Throughout church history, there been many times when pews had names on them, and you found out who's who by whose name is on the pew. Jesus says to watch out for honor-seeking.

He says in Matthew 23:7:

5) *They love greetings in the marketplace*

6) *and being called rabbi by others.*

Jesus is against this posturing of greatness, of taking first place, loving honor, and seeking after it. He calls His disciples to a radically different way of living beginning in Matthew 23:8. He says:

*“But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.”*

*Rab* in Hebrew means *great one*, and *Rabbi* means *teacher*. It literally means *my great one*, the person who really has a big influence in my life. Jesus says: “Don't call anyone that because you have one teacher, that is God.” Then He says, astonishingly: “You are all brothers.” We have the same teacher. We are equal before Him as learners. Jesus says in Matthew 23:9:

*“And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.”*

This doesn't mean that you can't go home and call your dad “Dad.” Instead, Jesus is referring to the honorific title of *Father* that many churches practice. It is a sign of respect and spiritual authority. The great sages in rabbinic Judaism are called *Fathers of the World*. Many Christian groups today still retain this language even though Jesus explicitly tells us not to. You have one Father, in heaven. Matthew 23:10 tells us:

*“Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.”*

The word used here for instructor or teacher is the word used today in modern Greek for *professor*. You have one instructor, that is Christ. So, beware of embracing honorific professional titles. It's interesting how we tend to collect these titles, and we like to use them and make ourselves feel valuable by them. In the academic world, there is a whole litany of titles that you have to get like rungs on a ladder. We have to be careful of these titles. One of my mentors, Dr. Gordon Hugenberger, a very brilliant man, asked everyone to call him Gordon, and we all stumbled that. He was the professor of the class, and we weren't comfortable calling him *Gordon*. He said: “Well, I'm teaching the class; I'm grading your papers, and I want you to call me Gordon!” It was this verse that motivated that. I don't like it when people call me Senior Pastor, but I do love it when they call me *Pastor* and it's a self-selected choice that describes a shepherding relationship. That I love. Jesus redefines greatness in Matthew 23:11. He says:

*“The greatest among you shall be your servant.”*

This is so counterintuitive. Jesus Himself embodies this. He's the reigning Son of God, and here He has walked the earth in humility and service. Jesus gives us a paradigm that will contend for your soul and your life and mine in Matthew 23:12. Jesus says:

*“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”*

There are just two ways. If you exalt yourself and posture greatness and seek titles and

demonstrate your piety in visible ways, that has a bad ending. But, if you humble yourself, follow the way of Christ, take the posture of one who serves, seek the good of those around you, lay down your life in sacrificial service, that has a good ending. That is something that the Lord notices and will reward.

Matthew 23 moves on from verse 13 to the end of the chapter with a series of seven woes. One word that you never want to hear Jesus say about you is *woe*. It is a word of covenant judgment. This is not the ‘Whoa, that was awesome!’ This is *woe* with an *E*. This is something that stirs and provokes His wrath, and there are seven of them. I will talk about just two very briefly. Jesus pronounces a woe on the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy, for posturing to be something that they are not. The real woe and judgment in this statement is the consequence of their hypocrisy. The consequence of their hypocrisy is that they are blocking the Kingdom from other people. Hypocrisy is not just a private sin. It is played out in public, and hypocrisy blocks other people from entering Jesus' Kingdom. Jesus says in Matthew 23:13:

*“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces.”*

When people see a hypocritical Christian, they turn away, and Jesus rightly pronounces judgment of woe.

The second woe that He declares is in Matthew 23:15, and this is even stronger. He says:

*“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”*

No one has that verse on his refrigerator! Jesus condemns them for their hypocrisy and he exposes their religious zeal as phony. Jesus sees through the hypocrisy, and He says that if you bring people to follow you, then you are going to lead them into condemnation, the very condemnation in which you stand.

How do we answer this question when we face it: Why are Christians such hypocrites? When those around us ask that, I think the best way to respond is to say that being distressed and upset by hypocrisy actually puts you on the side of Jesus, not against Him. It is important for us who claim to follow Christ to realize the high-stakes of our discipleship. The manner in which we serve and follow is not perfect, and we need to be real and honest and vulnerable about that. It is not our sin that is the hypocrisy. It is the pretending that there is none that is so devastating. I thank God for the vulnerability and transparency that we've heard all summer in the testimonies that have been shared with us. It is not our perfection that draws people to Christ. It is the grace of Christ on ungodly people like you and me that announces the gospel.

Hypocrisy moves people away from the Kingdom and blocks the path, and Jesus is the most against it of anyone.

I came to know Christ towards the end of high school, and when I was in the middle of college, I had come off of the 'honeymoon' of following Christ. I started to notice that some people who claim to be Christians, their lives weren't that attractive. Their conduct was not that admirable, and I started to question how to make sense of this. I remember God's helping me in a very concrete and vivid way. I was studying in Europe over the summer. My program had ended, and I was traveling around Europe on a Eurail pass, which was later stolen and I was stranded. That, however is another story. While I still had the pass, I was moving through Hungary. I was really wrestling with the authenticity among those who follow Christ. As I was sitting on this train, a woman came. She was probably in her late 50s. We were going past Budapest, and we struck up a conversation. We talked about this very issue, and this mature, godly woman, who seemed to come from nowhere and then almost disappear, said to me: "You know, there are times when you have to separate the conduct of those who claim to follow Christ from the Person of Christ." That was very life-giving to me. Jesus is the only one without hypocrisy. He condemns it. He doesn't seek it in his followers, and when we critique it ourselves, we take our stand with Him.

Jesus' faithfulness to the Father's will is climactically expressed here in this table. This is a table of faithfulness. This is a table of truth in action. This is a table of God's fulfilling all of His promises and being true to His every word. This is a table of the faithfulness of the Son of God, but it is also a table that hypocrites can come to and find forgiveness. This is a table for sinners. If this morning you find no hypocrisy in your soul, you probably should let this pass by. But, if you search your soul and you say: "Oh, Lord Jesus, there is a gap between who You are and who I am," then this table is for you, because the gap between His righteousness and our unrighteousness is remedied right here.

Jesus spoke to His disciples on the night in which He was betrayed, and He said: "This bread is My body broken for you." It is a costly price to redeem us from our hypocrisy. Jesus says: "This cup is the New Covenant in My blood poured out for you." I would invite you now to prepare your heart, confess your hypocrisy to Him, and let Him fill you, forgive you, and renew you today. Let's pray.

Lord God, we trust in You. We thank You that Your Word is reliable. We thank You, Lord, that Your Word exposes us and our need for You. Lord, we thank You that hypocrisy does not just reside over there, but right in here, and we ask Your forgiveness now for wherever we have blocked the way for others to enter and find You. We thank You, Lord, that it is an expression of

Your righteousness that You are the most against hypocrisy of anyone. We ask You now to cleanse us, to forgive us, and to renew us with the power of Your shed blood on the cross.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.