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Identifying Spiritual Leaders; Matt 23:1-12
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Introduction – With these opening verses of ch23, we are now only 6 chapters away from studying an entire gospel account together, word by word, verse by verse, a detailed investigation into the person and work of our Savior, Jesus Christ. In this way, we have joined hands, so to speak, with those first recipients of Matthew’s gospel. Can you imagine being one of those first churches and the only NT book you had was one copy of Matthew? I can imagine they read and studied each and every word just as we have had the privilege of doing as well.

Ch23 is a lesson from Jesus to His disciples and to the crowds regarding the dangerous teaching and path of false religion dressed up as genuine faith. Before He goes to the cross and leaves the earth, He leaves His followers with a message of dire warning – be careful of who you allow to be a spiritual influence. Beware of imposters. Don’t follow those who are not actually following God. It’s a lesson that very naturally flows from ch22 which contains the final words of confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders of the day. Why were they so hostile to Jesus’ miracles and message? Why were they His greatest opposition? In simple terms, they were not true believers. They couldn’t stomach the truth that Jesus was the Messiah, or that they too, along with the rest of Israel, were sinners in need of repentance and saving faith.

It's also a very natural lesson for us today. We are surrounded by voices in churches and media across the world, all claiming to be guides to truth. Whether it be a sermon, a podcast, a blog, or a conversation. How do we identify the ones who are counseling us in the way of the Lord and those who would detour us away from the path of truth? In our text today Jesus gives us some characteristics of those who are imposters and those who are authentic spiritual helpers and guides.

- I. How to Spot Spiritual Imposters
 - a. The first thing we need to do is understand the context of what Jesus is saying in vv2-3. First He acknowledges that when the Pharisees teach from Moses’ seat, that is, when they are speaking in an official

capacity in the synagogue, they are conveying what is found in the writings of Moses.

- i. Second, He instructs His listeners to do and observe whatever they tell you. Notice, He doesn't say do and observe any and everything they tell you because in the rest of the passage Jesus warns of their hypocrisy, false teaching, and leading others astray.
 - ii. So He's not saying do what they tell you in v3 and then don't do what they tell you in the rest of the chapter.
 - iii. So what does He mean? Whenever they are teaching you from Scripture clearly what the Scripture teaches, then do and observe whatever they tell you. But when it comes to everything else they say and do, do not allow them to be your spiritual leaders. If it's Scripture, listen. If it's not, don't.
 - iv. Then Jesus gives us 3 identification markers of spiritual imposters.
- b. Number one, a spiritual imposter doesn't practice what he preaches. His walk does not match his talk.
- i. V3 – "For they preach, but do not practice"
 - ii. V4 Jesus illustrates His point. We've seen examples of this in Matt. In ch12 the Pharisees charged Jesus' disciples with breaking the Sabbath because they plucked grain to eat when they were hungry. In the same ch they charged Jesus with breaking the Sabbath for healing a man who need help. In ch15 they charge the disciples again for not going through a ritual cleansing before eating. Rule after rule that disregarded the needs and ordinary life of ordinary people. Knowing good and well the only reason they could project keeping these laws was because their basic needs of life were met.
 - iii. The laws of God are not an adding of hardship to hardship. The laws of God free us from the consequences of sin by directing us to lives of purity and holiness. There is a world of difference between man's additional law "don't pluck grain even if you are hungry" and God's law "don't commit adultery it will destroy your life!"
 - iv. Pastors are not perfect people! Pastors are just like all other believers. We are in a process of sanctification in our lives as

well. The closer you get to me, the more imperfection you'll see. The same holds true the closer I get to you. We're here to pray for one another, serve one another, encourage one another, help one another grow. We're not here to pick out each other's warts and criticize and grumble.

- v. Beware of the spiritual leader that projects oneself as flawless. That's a sure sign of an imposter. The Apostle Paul himself wrote, "I am the chief of sinners!"
- c. Number two, a spiritual imposter will make much of himself and very little of God.
 - i. V5 – a phylactery is a small container connected to either the front of headwear, close to the mind, or on the left sleeve close to the heart. It contained a piece of parchment with scripture written on it. Usually Deut 6.
 - ii. The fringe is like a tassel attached to the bottom of a robe and was used as reminders of prayer.
 - iii. So broad phylacteries and long fringes were meant to communicate – "Look how much I love the Word and how much I pray." And that is an indication of a spiritual imposter. Always drawing attention to his spiritual accomplishments. Always making much of himself and failing to make much of God. It's look at me instead of "Look to God!"
 - iv. When you hear a spiritual imposter you leave thinking how great he is. When you hear a genuine spiritual leader you leave thinking how great God is. Spiritual imposters desire that you be impressed with them. True spiritual guides desire that you be impressed with God!
- d. Number three, a spiritual imposter desires to be praised rather than give praise to God.
 - i. Vv6-7 – They lust for admiration. They seek applause. They thirst for a following. Under the guise of Christianity, they work to build their own empire. It's all about them instead of being all about God!
 - ii. A true spiritual leader will not seek for others to praise him but he will labor that others may praise God!
 - iii. I've had people tell me before "Pastor Wil, I wish you'd tell us more about yourself when you're preaching." I realize what

they mean is that they would enjoy knowing more about the man who preaches to them every week, but I'd rather talk about Jesus! He's far more interesting than me. And He can do far more for you than I ever could. I don't mind you getting to know me, but I really want you to get to know Jesus!!

- iv. An imposter leads you to him, the true guide leads you to Christ to find your joy, peace, and salvation.

II. How to Find Faithful Leaders

- a. Vv8-10 – a true spiritual leader is not self-seeking.
 - i. Jesus is saying don't seek a place of notoriety and authority and don't seek to give undue notoriety and authority where it doesn't belong. Jesus is not saying don't look to anyone as a spiritual father in the faith – Paul considered Timothy to be his son in the faith. He's not saying don't have teachers or don't be teachers – Paul says in Ephesians God gives teachers to the church. He's saying – don't seek to elevate yourself in the eyes of others.
 - 1. Don't seek to be the sole spiritual influence of others and don't grant sole spiritual authority to others – that belongs to Christ.
 - ii. True spiritual leaders are not self-seeking. They don't seek their advancement among others, they seek for others to advance in their walk with the Lord.
- b. V11 – a true spiritual leader is self-denying.
 - i. So they will be great ones among us, they just won't be great in the world's terms but rather in the kingdom's terms. In the kingdom's terms greatness is not the one who clawing his way to the top but rather who serving those at the bottom.
- c. V12 – a true spiritual leader is not self-promoting
 - i. An imposter will promote himself but as with all man-made devices that platform will eventually crumble and fall. The true spiritual leader will be promoted by God without seeking it.
 - ii. An imposter will force doors to open – leader walks through open doors.

Conclusion – In other words, genuine humility surrounds genuine spiritual leaders. You know why? Someone who has truly experienced the grace of God will always know they are undeserving sinners lavished with God’s unmerited saving grace. A true spiritual leader knows this more than he knows anything else. If God didn’t save me by grace, I wouldn’t be saved. And that humility will flavor his entire life and ministry. But that’s just not for leaders; that’s for every believer! The Apostle Paul testified, “I am what I am by the grace of God!”