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The Gospel of Matthew

Christ's Words to False Shepherds

February 9, 2020

Sermon Text: Matthew 23:1-15

Scripture Reading: Nehemiah 8:1-8

Matthew 23:1-15 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, (2) “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, (3) so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.

(4) 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.

(5) They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes

long, (6) and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues (7) and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.

(8) But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. (9) And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. (10) Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.

(11) The greatest among you shall be your servant. (12) Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

(13) “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.

(15) 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.

Why are Scriptures like this in the Bible? And there are lots of them, right? The Gospels are filled with Jesus' rebuke and condemnation of the religious leaders in Jerusalem and the Epistles have large sections in which the Apostles expose evil leaders creeping into the churches. You can go back to the Old Testament and find even more sections doing the very same thing (Look at Jeremiah and Ezekiel and the other prophets for instance).

Why? Why are these verses which we have before us this morning in the Bible? Are they a mere historic record? Are they given to us so that we can say something like "man, those Pharisees were rotten. Jesus sure nailed them!"? Certainly those are reasons in part. But....

If we stop here in our application, let me tell you with confidence that we will have missed the chief and major purpose the Lord has for us as we read this Scripture and others like it.

Consider this:

Jude 1:3-4 Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our

common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. (4) For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

The Apostles learned well from the Lord. He taught them and warned them about these creeps who creep in among us, whose goal is to obtain power over us by perverting the gospel of Christ and bringing us into bondage. Why do we not heed these warnings?

The chief purpose then of the verses before us here in Matthew 23 is this:

To teach US about the constant danger of our churches being taken over by these very same kinds of people as the false shepherds of Jesus' day were. To show us the devilish qualities and wicked tactics we can be certain they will use against us.

Think it through. If you know anything about the history of the Christian church, you know that this history is largely about *Rome*. Correct? Yes, the history also includes assaults upon Christ's body from Islam, from Caesar, from other wicked tyrants – from the

world in other words. But the most wicked and damaging attacks *have come from within, by people who claim to be Christians*. This is indisputable and we are very foolish if we do not recognize this is the same today.

Not only are we going to see evil exposed here by our Lord's own words, but we will see the Good Shepherd's intense love of His sheep – of us! This is the Good Shepherd in action against wolves!

John 10:7-9 So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. (8) All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. (9) I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

What kind of a shepherd is “nice” to wolves who are abusing the sheep? Unfortunately that is precisely what is happening in our day most commonly in the churches.

Hear the Scriptures, Not the Counterfeits

Matthew 23:1-3 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, (2) “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, (3) so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they

do. For they preach, but do not practice.

Right away I think we can all see that if we are going to understand Jesus' words here, we are first of all going to have to find out what this “sitting on the seat of Moses” is. The scribes and Pharisees sat on the “seat of Moses.” What is that?

Let's call on William Hendriksen once again and let him explain it [New Testament Commentary, Gospel of Matthew, Eerdmans]:

...the scribes were the acknowledged expounders and teachers of the Old Testament. The Pharisees professed to follow their teaching. Scribes, too, were generally Pharisees, but by no means every Pharisee was a scribe....

The increasing hostility of scribes and Pharisees toward Jesus is clear....They considered Jesus to be in league with Beelzebul, to be a blasphemer, one who was deceiving the multitudes and should not be allowed to live.

Because of this situation it may seem somewhat strange that Jesus is now telling the assembled crowds and his disciples that they should do whatever the scribes and Pharisees tell them to do.

I almost always agree with Hendriksen and to this point I do. But as he goes on to explain Jesus' meaning, I don't agree with him in this case. And similarly I don't think J.C. Ryle got it right either:

“...we see firstly, the duty of distinguishing between the office of a false teacher and his example. The Scribes and Pharisees sat in Moses' seat. Rightly or wrongly, they occupied the position of the chief public teachers of religion among the Jews. However unworthily they filled the place of authority, their office entitled them to respect. But while their office was respected, their bad lives were not to be copied. And although their teaching was to be adhered to, so long as it was Scriptural, it was not to be observed when it contradicted the Word of God.”
[Expository Thoughts on the Gospels]

Hendriksen was a Presbyterian and Ryle was a Church of England man. Both held the office of pastor, priest, or elder in high regard. In this case however I believe their view of what they call the office or position caused them to go wrong – and to go too softly on the scribes and Pharisees and on false shepherds in general. I cannot conclude that Jesus' meaning was that we are to respect the office and the teaching of that office when the office

is held by a counterfeit, which is what these Pharisees and scribes were. Think it through – this chapter goes on telling us how Jesus pronounced all these “woes” on them, exposing their evils. I do not hear a single word of commendation – only condemnation.

It is then, my conclusion, that it is absolutely wrong and foolish for us today to maintain that we must respect the office of pastor or elder or teacher for the sake of some supposed sanctity of that position, *even if it is held by someone whose life is a denial of what God's Word says!* And let me point out to you that is particular notion is wisely taught and held in local churches today. “Well, he's the pastor. No one is perfect. We respect him for his position as pastor even though we know that he _____ and you fill in the blanks with a list of his ongoing sins. I know of cases where pastors are wickedly abusing their wives, the elders of the church know about it, but they retain him as pastor and excuse it for these kinds of reasons.

So I reject the idea that Jesus is telling the people, and us, to “do and observe whatever a pastor preaches when standing in the pulpit” but don't imitate his sins in his daily life. That cannot be it. By the way, do you know what that sounds like? Here it is. I think Wikipedia has it correct-

Papal infallibility is a dogma of the Catholic Church that states that, in virtue of the promise of Jesus to Peter, the Pope is preserved from the possibility of error "when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church." [1]

Infallibility is, according to the New Catholic Encyclopedia, "more than a simple, de facto absence of error. It is a positive perfection, ruling out the possibility of error". [2]

This doctrine was defined dogmatically at the First Ecumenical Council of the Vatican of 1869–1870 in the document *Pastor aeternus*, but had been defended before that, existing already in medieval theology and being the majority opinion at the time of the Counter-Reformation. [3]

According to Catholic theology, there are several concepts important to the understanding of infallible, divine revelation: Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the Sacred Magisterium (Teaching Authority).

The infallible teachings of the Pope are part of the Sacred Magisterium, which also consists of ecumenical councils and the "ordinary and universal magisterium". In Catholic theology, papal infallibility is one of the channels of the infallibility of the Church. The infallible teachings of the Pope must be based on, or at least not contradict, Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture.

The doctrine of infallibility relies on one of

the cornerstones of Catholic dogma: that of Petrine supremacy of the pope, and his authority as the ruling agent who decides what are accepted as formal beliefs in the Roman Catholic Church. [4] The use of this power is referred to as speaking *ex cathedra*. [5] The solemn declaration of papal infallibility by Vatican I took place on 18 July 1870. Since that time, the only example of an *ex cathedra* decree took place in 1950, when Pope Pius XII defined the Assumption of Mary as an article of faith. [6]

I would not doubt that Matthew 23:1-2 is cited by Rome in support of this false doctrine.

What then did Jesus mean?

“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, (3) so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.

I think the answer is seen in the common practice of the synagogue:

Luke 4:16-21 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. (17) And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, (18) “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He

has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, (19) to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (20) And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. (21) And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

In other words, the practice was that the teachers would “sit on the seat of Moses” and *read the Scriptures*. They might then even *explain* the meaning of the letter, and do so correctly. You have it back in Nehemiah which we read from already this morning:

Nehemiah 8:8 They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

Of course Ezra not only faithfully read and explained the Scriptures, he practiced them himself and was a man to be imitated. But do you understand?

A person can read and accurately explain the meaning of a Bible text and yet have no intention of obeying it himself. We see this all the time in theological academians who can write lengthy, detailed commentaries on the Bible and yet who are unregenerate

and wicked. Therefore, what Jesus is telling the people and what He is telling us is this:

Hear and obey what the Bible is saying. When you hear it read in the church service, hear it. If some pastor or teacher or author correctly explains the Bible, let that explanation help you. But do not automatically and without thought imitate someone who does not practice what the Word of God preaches.

Good old Matthew Henry gets it right here:

As far as they sit in Moses' seat [ie, read and expound upon Moses' Law], that is read and preach the law that was given by Moses, and judge according to that Law...The scribes and Pharisees made it their business to study the scriptures, and were well acquainted with the language, history, and customs of it, and its style and phraseology. Now Christ would have the people to make use of the helps they gave them for the understanding of the scripture, and do accordingly. As long as their comments did illustrate the text and not pervert it; did make plain and not make void the commandment of God, so far they must be observed and obeyed but with caution and a judgment of discretion.

In our day of course, in our Protestant churches, we have an option that the Jews in Jesus' day did not have and which people in the Roman church do not have. *We can and must expel wicked people from our pulpits and leadership positions in the church.* No matter how much knowledge they have, even correct knowledge, about the Bible. If their lives show that they are not obeying and living out God's Word, they are to be removed.

This requires serious and sober thought by each of us because the thing is so subtle and because evil is sooo deceptive. And yet Jesus provides us with some discernment tools:

Matthew 23:4-7 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.

(5) They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long,

(6) and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues

(7) and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.

These are some of the identifiers by which we are to be on guard against. These are examples of *not doing what the Scriptures say, and in the church they are dis-qualifiers for the shepherding and teaching ministry.* And of course, they are very, very common in church leaders.

We will plan next time hear exactly what Christ thinks of these false shepherds. Woe, Woe, Woe, SEVEN times He pronounces Woe upon them. God's full fury and wrath. That is what the Lord thinks of such types today.

We find not Christ, in all his preaching, so severe upon any sort of people as upon these scribes and Pharisees; for the truth is, nothing is more directly opposite to the spirit of the gospel than the temper and practice of that generation of men, who were made up of pride, worldliness, and tyranny, under a cloak and pretence of religion; yet these were the idols and darlings of the people, who thought if but two men went to heaven, one would be Pharisee....It is good to know the true characters of men, that we may not be imposed upon by great and mighty names, titles, and pretensions to power. People must be told of the wolves, the dogs, and the deceitful workers so that they may know to stand upon their guard. Good men are

*apt to have their eyes dazzled with
worldly pomp. [Matthew Henry]*