

False religion unmasked, truth revealed

The scripture for our sermon today is Matthew 23:1-3.

“1 Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, 2 Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: 3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, [that] observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not” (Matt. 23:1-3).

This was the last time Jesus spoke to the multitudes before His death. He addressed the multitudes and His disciples to guard them against the false religion that was in the world while Jesus was on earth, in His day, and throughout time. His purpose was to expose false religion, to expose the lies we all naturally believe, deadly lies. He exposes the false that He might establish the truth to His people, not only then, but throughout time. He teaches the truth by stating what it is not true and by stating what is true. In so doing, He feeds and protects His sheep.

I've therefore entitled this message, “**False religion unmasked; truth revealed.**” I would like to consider three points in this message.

1. **First**, the false religion and hypocrisy that Jesus exposed and condemned. What the Pharisees believed and practiced is common to all false religion. It is present throughout history, not only in Jesus' day.
2. **Second**, how we are not saved, how we are not justified, how we are not right before God. God tells us first how we are not justified before Him. Then He first tells us how we are justified before Him.
3. **Third**, I would like to consider How we are justified before God. Thankfully, God does not leave His people in their sin and unbelief. Thankfully, He not only tells us what is not true, not only tells us how men are not saved, but He also tells us what is true. He tell us how sinners truly are saved.

False religion exposed and condemned

First then, consider the false religion and hypocrisy that Jesus exposed and condemned. Listen again to what Jesus said in these three verses: “*Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, 2 Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: 3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not*” (Matt. 23:1-3).

The message of these three verses is this: Believe what Moses taught, but do not believe the false doctrine of the Pharisees, and do not practice their false religion. The Pharisees occupied the God-ordained position of teaching the truth that Moses taught. Jesus said, “*All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not*” (v3). But the Pharisees did not believe the truth that Moses taught. They knew what the scriptures said, just as we might be familiar with the Bible. But they refused the doctrine taught in the scripture. Jesus said, “*Had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for **he wrote of me***” (John 5:46). The Pharisees did not believe what Moses taught, because they did not believe Christ. Moses taught about Christ (John 5:39; Luke 24:44-47; 1 Pet. 1:10-11). The Pharisees did not teach the people what Moses taught, even though they sat in Moses’ seat. Therefore, the people were not to do what they did.

Evil men twist scripture for their own advantage. Let me give you several examples, which are prominent in our day. Jehovah’s Witnesses re-translate the Bible in an attempt to remove all references that teach that Jesus is God and that our salvation is by His blood and righteousness alone. They deny the trinity. They deny that the Lord Jesus Christ is “*God manifest in the flesh*” (1 Tim. 3:16; John 1:14). They deny salvation by grace alone (Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 11:6; Rom. 3:24; John 1:17). They deny that God justifies sinners by the blood and righteousness of Christ alone (Jer. 23:5-6; Isa. 12:1-3; 2 Cor. 5:21). They deny the necessity of the irresistible, life-giving power of the Spirit of God (John 6:44-45; 10:16; Eph. 2:1-6). They deny that He gives life and faith to those God chose and gave to Christ in eternity, those Christ redeemed by His precious blood (1 Pet. 1:20).

Jehovah's Witnesses claim that they will be blessed by God because of their good works. All religions essentially do the same thing. Mormons add to and contradict scripture. They deny there is one God. They claim men become gods through persistent moral strivings. Mormons claim their good works make a difference between them and others. Catholics believe the same thing. Catholics claim the men in their church have authority over scripture and determine what scripture says. Catholics trust ceremonies, such as baptism and communion and feast days and prayers. They pray to dead saints, contrary to scripture. They worship idols. They teach that God justifies men by the grace which He works in them, rather than the work Christ performed outside of their personal experience. But all modern evangelical churches are essentially the same. Evangelical churches today have several fatal errors. They teach an attempt on God's part so save all men. They teach God loves everybody. They teach Jesus died for everybody. They teach the Spirit of God calls all men to eternal life equally. And they teach that man's act of faith, or the act of his will, or his decision, causes God to save him. Evangelical religions today, such as Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, Nazarenes, Church of Christ, Seventh Day Adventists, and many others, trust their act of "accepting Jesus." They look back to that time in their life when they accepted Jesus or asked Jesus to come into their heart. All such things are false religion. All of these trust their experience as a reason why God will give them eternal life. Reformed churches also hold many of these same errors. Reformed churches have two deadly errors. They teach that salvation is what God does in response to man's act of believing¹. They teach that God saves sinners when the sinner believes. They teach that God justifies sinners through an act of faith (instrument) on man's part. And reformed churches teach that men become holier by works that they do.

Now, all of these errors have a common theme. All false religions, whether Muslim or Jewish or Catholic or Protestant, have one common error. They all believe that God will accept them based on something they do. They believe God will save them when they exercise their free will. They believe God will consider their works, or their faith, or the ceremonies they keep, or their confessions, or their

¹ "Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification" See Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 11).

tears, or their spiritual gifts, and in consideration of these things that man does or is enabled to do by God's grace, God will accept them. Both Muslim and Jew believe God will accept them by their works. Catholics believe God will justify them because of the work of His grace in them. Baptists believe God will justify them because they accept Jesus. Reformed churches believe God will justify them when they exercise faith in Christ. But all false religion comes down to this: all false religion believes man can do what God requires, whether an act of faith or act of will or religious works, and they believe that God will accept him for it. All false religion believes and teaches that God will accept a person and give them eternal life by what He finds in them, even when they admit it must be a work of His grace. But the Gospel denies all that false religion teaches and condemns those who teach it (Gal. 1:8-9)!

Consider the most widely taught error of evangelical churches today. Almost every preacher and teacher today says that God loves everybody, Christ died for everybody, the Spirit of God draws all men, yet some men will go to hell and others will go to heaven because they accepted Jesus, or made a profession of faith. But consider what this means. If God loves all men alike, if He wills the salvation of all men, if Christ suffered and died for the sins of all men, and if the Spirit of God draws all men the same, yet if only some have eternal life, then who or what makes the difference in man's salvation? What difference did anything God do make?! If God chooses all men alike, the difference could not have been the electing love and choice of God the Father before the foundation of the world, for most whom He chose die in their sins! And if Christ died for all men alike, the difference could not be Christ's atoning work, because most for whom He died will go to hell. And if the Spirit of God draws all men alike, the difference could not be the drawing power of the Spirit of God, because most reject Christ in unbelief. Therefore, in false religion it must be man who makes the difference. In false religion, man gets glory in his salvation! This is the deadly lie promoted by satan throughout time. When you really get it down, and draw the string tight, in false religion it all ultimately comes down to what man does! In false religion, man makes the difference. Do you see that this is fatal? If man makes the difference,

who gets the glory? Man must have it! But nothing could be further from the truth of scripture!

Not by works

Now, consider the second point: how God says men are not saved. The Bible starts here. The first three chapters of Romans establish how sinners are NOT saved. We are naturally inclined to believe that we are saved by something that we do. But in God's amazing grace, He has told us with unmistakable clarity that we are NOT saved this way! He says we are NOT made right by what we do. We are NOT accepted by God because we do our part (Gal. 4:21-31)!

First, consider Romans 3: "*We know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. 20 Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin*" (Romans 3:19-20).

This scripture establishes three vitally important facts. First, all men are guilty. Second, it is God's law that finds them guilty (therefore, personal obedience to God's law cannot be the basis of our justification - Gal. 3). Third, by our own personal obedience, no one will be declared just before God. No one will be found righteous before God by what he does, not even if what he does is only the smallest part in his salvation, as the weakest link in a chain.

Consider this scripture in Galatians 2. "*Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified*" (Gal. 2:16).

Three times in this one verse God says (by the mouth of the apostle Paul) "*a man is not justified by the works of the law,*" "*not by the works of the law,*" "*by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.*" It is repeated three times!

Therefore, it is undeniably clear that scripture says we are not, not, **not justified before God**, we are not righteous, we are not accepted before Him, by anything that we do. Our personal obedience counts for nothing in our justification and in our salvation! We are not saved by keeping the moral law of God. We are not saved by keeping the ceremonial law. We are not saved by our personal obedience to any of God's requirements! Do you find this to immediately raise concerns? Or do you, as a guilty, helpless sinner, long and hunger to know that this is the very truth of God, because you have no righteousness of your own?! Real sinners love to learn that they are saved by the sovereign will and eternal choice of God who cannot lie, who cannot change and who cannot fail! Real sinners love to learn that they are saved by what God provided and received from Christ alone! Real sinners love to know that the Spirit of God will not fail to give them life because Christ who put away the sins of His people and established their everlasting righteousness sits on the throne of glory and sends His Holy Spirit to give them life, irresistibly calling them to Himself, and so giving them faith (John 10:16; Eph. 2:8-9; Acts 3:16; Heb. 12:2; Php. 1:29; Rom. 10:8-17)!

Justified by Christ

Now, third, from scripture, we want to understand what God says about how we are justified. Given that we are naturally inclined to believe the lie of false religion -- that we are justified before God by something we do, that something we do causes God to justify us -- given this evil propensity that is in us, and given that God has said with unmistakable clarity that we are not justified by anything we do, let us now consider exactly what scripture says about how God justifies sinners.

First, what does it mean to be "justified?" It is similar to how judges on earth justify. They examine the evidence against the accused. And then they declare their decision of "guilty" or "not guilty." When God justifies, He **declares** a sinner **to be righteous** in His eyes. But that sounds contradictory! How can God, who is holy, declare a sinner to be righteous? Proverbs 17:15 even says, "*He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the LORD*" (Prov. 17:15)! How then can God justify a sinner?

Listen to Romans 3:24: “*Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 3:24). This is scripture. This is God’s word! We know we are NOT justified by our works! We are not justified for anything we do (Gal. 3:11)! How does God justify?

God says, first, that He justifies sinners **freely**. That little word “freely” means “undeservedly.” It means “without any cause found in us.” Jesus used this word in John 15:25. He said, “*they hated me without cause.*” “Without cause” is the same word translated “freely” in Rom. 3:24. There was no cause found in Christ that justified man’s hatred towards Him. Man hated Him undeservedly; without any cause found in Christ. Man’s hatred arose from his own heart. But this is how God justifies sinners! He justifies them “without cause,” “freely,” “undeservedly” for anything found in them. The cause to justify sinners must arise from God’s own heart, without any cause in man. We are sinners, entirely undeserving. We are incapable of doing one thing of all that God requires. Yet God justifies His people without any cause found in them. He justifies them freely, for no cause in them, but only for causes found in Himself.

Second, in Rom. 3:24 God says we are “*justified freely, by His grace*” (Rom. 3:24a). Now, scripture always sets God’s grace in contrast to man’s work. God’s grace is always in opposition to all that may be called man’s. Grace excludes our works in salvation. And man’s work excludes God’s grace. “*If by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work*” (Rom. 11:6). Grace is always given without any contribution from man. Grace is either grace alone, or it is not grace! Therefore, salvation must be all of grace, because only when salvation is by grace alone does God get all of the glory. Only salvation by grace alone credits God with everything in salvation. And God will have all the glory in salvation or no man will be saved (1 Cor. 1:31)! And salvation must be by grace alone, because it is only possible for a sinner to be saved if God does all that is required, because sinful man will not and cannot do one thing to save himself! And salvation must be by grace alone because God’s word says so. “*Being justified freely by His grace.*”

But thirdly, Romans 3:24 also says we are justified “*through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*” (Rom. 3:24). The redemption that is in Christ Jesus is the ground of our justification. It is the only basis on which God justifies sinners. How can God be just and justify the ungodly? As Job said, “*How then can man be justified with God*” (Job 25:4; 9:2)?

If my son were accused of a crime, I might want the judge to declare him “not guilty.” But a crime once committed cannot be undone. I cannot compensate justice. I cannot change the law. I cannot influence the judge. I am inclined to be gracious to my son. The judge may even be inclined to be gracious to him. But neither I nor the judge are able to justify the guilty! But God, out of His infinite wisdom found a way to be both just and justify the ungodly (Rom. 4:5)! He found no cause in the sinner to be gracious (Ps. 14:2-3). His law required perfect obedience. His justice demanded the sinner be cursed. Yet in Himself He determined to be gracious. His grace moved Him to provide the only just grounds by which He could justify the ungodly. How?! How did He do it?! He made His only begotten Son a Substitute for those He justified! Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He gave His life a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). He redeemed them from the curse that His own law required! The death of Christ enabled God to be both just and the justifier of His people (Rom. 3:26).

Therefore, God justifies by His grace, through the redemption He provided and which Christ accomplished by His death, and which God received for His people. Christ satisfied God’s justice. Now, God’s justice, God’s justice(!) releases all for whom Christ died from the debt of their sins for Christ’s sake (Eph. 1:7; 4:32; Heb. 1:3)!

Consider how the apostle Paul put it in Galatians 2: “*Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified*” (Gal. 2:16).

I would like to point out three things from this scripture.

First, as we already established, no man is justified by the works of the law. No man is right with God by what he does. No man does or can do what God requires. All have failed. God's law curses all of us. Three times, God says not, **not**, not by the works of the law! I cannot be saved by my own personal obedience.

Secondly, though not by our own works, we are justified by God because of Christ's work. "*Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ.*" Though no man is justified by his own works, yet we are justified "*by the faith of Christ!*" But what does that mean? What is "*the faith of Jesus Christ?*" Whatever it is, it must be the reason, it must be the basis, the just ground on which God can be just and justify ungodly sinners! Remember, Rom. 3:24 said we are justified "*through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*"

Understand that **redemption is freedom obtained on the basis of a ransom paid.** God's law requires continuous, perfect obedience. It curses all for the smallest failure. But by the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, God, the Judge of all, did not change His law. Rather, He fulfilled His own law in the obedience and sufferings and death of His own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:4). He magnified His law. He made it honorable (Isa. 42:21). Christ's obedience and sufferings in death amount to full satisfaction and perfect fulfillment of all God requires of all those He chose and ordained to eternal life before the foundation of the world (1 Pet. 1:18-20). God the Father "*hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love*" (Eph. 1:4). God chose His people in Christ to be holy and to be without blame. That is, He chose and gave His people to Christ to justify them. He appointed Christ to be their representative head and Substitute. The Lord Jesus perfectly fulfilled all of God's law in their place. He endured the curse of the law and satisfied God's justice. He fulfilled the obedience of the law and established their everlasting righteousness.

Galatians 2:16 says "*we are not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ.*" But God often uses this expression, "the faith of the Gospel" to mean the truth that is taught in the Gospel. Therefore, "the faith of Christ" is the

truth, the very fact of how God saved His people. It was by what Christ did. The faith of Jesus Christ, by which we are justified, is the work of Jesus Christ, which is the truth revealed in scripture and declared in the Gospel. What Jesus Christ did to justify His people by His suffering and death in obedience to God, is the truth that is witness in the law and the prophets (Rom. 3:21-22). This is the truth we believe.

[deleted from sermon...

To understand what “*the faith of Jesus Christ*”, realize that God often calls the Gospel “*the faith*” (Php. 1:27). That is, “the faith of Christ” is the entire doctrine of how Christ saved His people to the glory of God. God justified all for whom Christ died. “*He was delivered for our offenses and was raised again for our justification*” (Rom. 4:25). Therefore, “the faith of Jesus Christ” by which we are justified, is what Christ did, the truth God revealed and declared in the Gospel, and which is witnessed by the law and the prophets, the truth we believe (Ex. 12:13; Jer. 31:34; 23:5-6; Isa. 53; Isa. 12; Ps. 85; Ps. 22; 29; 31; 38; 69; 89; 1 Tim. 3:16).]

Contrary to what is almost universally taught today, we are not justified by an act of our faith. We are not justified by an act of our faith! Nor are we justified by the work of God’s grace in us, no matter how loving and kind and giving and nice it makes us. We know this with certainty for several reasons. First, we are guilty (Rom. 3:19). Second, God says we are not justified by what we do (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:16). Third, God says the just live by faith, and righteousness by our personal obedience is contrary to faith (Hab. 2:4; Gal. 3:11). Fourth, both the law and prophets speak of the righteousness of God in Christ (Ex. 12:13; 21:2-6; Num. 23:21; Ps. 85:1-10; 103:3,12; Isa. 12:1-3; 53:4-12; Jer. 23:5-6; 50:20; Hosea 3:2; 13:9; 14:1-6; Rom. 3:21-22). Fifth, faith neither satisfies God’s law against sin nor fulfills the obedience God’s law requires. Faith is always imperfect. Faith is a gift of God that He gives after we are given spiritual life (Eph. 2:8-9; John 3:8-15). Faith is temporary; it will not last forever. When Christ returns, it will end in sight (1 Cor. 13). Most importantly, if our faith were the grounds of justification, then Christ’s death would be unnecessary and His eternal achievements would be empty.

Therefore, we are not justified by an act of our faith. Our faith in Christ is not “*the faith of Jesus Christ,*” spoken of in Gal. 2:16. Our faith does not cause God to justify us, contrary to what is almost universally taught today. No! **It is not our act of faith that justifies, but Christ, the One faith believes** (x2). The obedience unto death of Jesus Christ fulfilled God’s law for righteousness. Therefore, **Christ, the object of our faith, is the One who justifies**. And this is what is meant by “*the faith of Jesus Christ*” (Gal. 2:16,20; Rom. 3:22; Gal. 3:22).

This is vitally important. Jesus told the people that because the Pharisees were in Moses’ seat they were to do all they said. But they were not to do as the Pharisees did. Men take what is true and twist it into a lie. They masquerade lies in the truth. They poison the pure water of the Gospel of God’s grace with man’s works. Faith as an act does not justify, but the One God holds up to us in the Gospel justifies; not my act of faith, but the One faith believes; not my faith but Christ my Savior justifies!

“*Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ*” (Gal. 2:16). No, it is not my act of faith that justifies, but it is Christ, the One I believe who justifies! We are justified “*through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*” (Rom. 3:24)! Our faith is the work of the Spirit of Christ in our heart. He is the Author and Finisher of faith. “*We through the Spirit to wait for the hope of righteousness by faith*” (Gal. 4:4-6; 5:5; 2 Cor. 4:6; John 3:9-15; Acts 16:14; Gal. 5:22). Faith is the work of the Spirit of God. Therefore, with God-given faith, we wait for what Christ earned, believing the Gospel over what our eyes (sense, experience) see. We believe in Christ, not to procure our justification before God, but we believe in Christ that we might receive in our own conscience, and enjoy the spiritual peace and comfort which results from believing that He is all of our righteousness, all of our justification before God. Just as “by faith we understand...” (Heb. 11:3), so also, by faith we understand, are persuaded, embrace and rest in what Christ accomplished as all of our salvation.

May God give us this precious faith in Christ!