Pitfalls of Religion

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[0:00] Please open up your Bibles to Matthew chapter 23. For those of you who are new, this is a very hard-hitting passage.

I didn't just decide one day, you know, I really want to preach this passage to my church. We've been going through, although it has great things in there for us, we go through the entire book of Matthew.
We've been going through it in order. And this is where we are. And we do it that way because I believe, we believe as an eldership that God knows better than we do what we need to hear.
So we don't skip passages, we go through the whole thing. And we're in chapter 23, verses 1 to 36.
Let me pray for the reading and preaching of God's word.
Heavenly Father, even when it comes to following you, worshiping you, obeying you, left to our own devices, we turn our obedience into idolatry, self-worship, self-promotion, self-advancement.
[1:37] And we need your grace. we need Christ and your spirit to renew us and transform us from the inside out so we can offer you true worship.

So we ask for your help this morning. Turn all, everyone here who finds your commands burdensome.
Everyone here who has been religious without the freeing power of the Holy Spirit that you would make this a day when it changes for them, a turning point where they live in light of the power of the gospel, in the freedom of the spirit.
Meet with us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Please stand, if you are able, to honor God as we read from his word. Matthew chapter 23, verses 1 to 36.
Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, the scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat.
[3:11] So do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do, for they preach but do not practice. 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. They do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.
And they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.
And call no man your father on earth, for you have one father who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.
The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. 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.
[4:31] 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.

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, if anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing. But if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.
You blind fools, for which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, if anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing.
But if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath. You blind men, for which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred.

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So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.
[5:31] Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you tithe mint and dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness.

These you ought to have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.
You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and the plate, then that outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.
So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, if we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.
Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murder the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?
[7:02] Therefore, I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. This is God's holy and authoritative word. Please be seated. I'm sure you've heard the critics of religion say that religion makes people insufferably overbearing, self-righteous, legalistic, sectarian, persecutory, to the point of religious violence.
Think of the Crusades or the Islamic terrorism. Of course, they're wrong in thinking that religion is the root issue.
Think of the aggressively atheistic Khmer Rouge regime that caused the Cambodian genocide, killing up to three million people. Humans of all stripes, regardless of religion, are capable of such atrocities.
And that's because at the core, at the root, in our hearts, we are sinners. However, what these critics do get right is that sometimes when people are fully convinced of the absolute truth claims of religion, they do become sometimes insufferably overbearing, self-righteous, legalistic, sectarian, and persecutory to the point of religious violence.
[8:52] Jesus says to himself in this very passage, and sometimes this charge is true even of self-professing Christians. But shouldn't religion and Christianity in particular, whose greatest commandment, as we talked about last week, is to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbors as ourselves, shouldn't that make us more humble and more loving people?

Yes, of course, it should. The problem is not that these professing Christians are too religious or too Christian. The problem is that they are not religious enough, not Christian enough.
They emulate Christ's authority, but not his humility. They emulate Christ's zeal, but not his compassion and forgiveness. They are halfway Christians.
They're not Christian enough. religion without Christ leads to hypocrisy because only Christ has the power to give us new hearts and transform us from the inside out.
This passage contains Jesus' most severe critique and denunciation of the Jewish religious leaders of his day and it warns us against the pitfalls of religion where religions without Christ inevitably end up.
[10:19] So first we're going to talk about blindness, spiritual blindness, then about legalism, hypocrisy, hubris, and finally bloodshed. What an exciting slate of main points here.

Dreadful, really, but may the spirit convict us. Throughout chapter 22, Jesus passed all the tests of the Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes with flying colors and the conclusion of it was in chapter 22 verse 46, no one was able to answer Jesus a word nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

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Here in chapter 23, Jesus turns the tables on his interrogators and then he shares his unflinching critique of them. In verses 1 to 12, Jesus says to the crowds and his disciples, he warns the crowds and the disciples about the various vices of these scribes and the Pharisees and then in verses 13 to 36, he pivots to addressing the scribes and the Pharisees directly and denouncing them by pronouncing seven woes against them with specific examples of the vices that he summarized to the crowds and the disciples in verses 1 to 12.
The main theme is the Pharisees' pride, self-exaltation and hypocrisy but before he launches into his rebuke of the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus affirms their teaching authority in verses 2 to 3, which is odd but important.
He says, the scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do, for they preach but do not practice.
[11:59] In light of the rest of the chapter that we just read, it's really shocking that Jesus says this at the onset of this chapter. The scribes and the Pharisees are guilty as charged of overweening pride and spiritual blindness and back-breaking legalism and two-faced hypocrisy and murder.

And yet, Jesus affirms their teaching authority. They sit on Moses' seat. People in those days usually sat down to teach.
Sometimes when I go along, I think it'd be nice to switch that, bring that back, right? Jesus does this. He sits down to teach. And so a seat came to represent teaching authority or teaching office. And this is true in our day, department heads of various higher education institutions are called what? They're called chairs. It's a vestige of medieval times when the universities, the lecturers, actually taught from an elevated chair.
That's how they came to be known as chairs. The chair represents the authoritative teaching office. And it's an example of a figure of speech called metonymy where a closely related object or a concept is used to represent something.
[13:28] The idea of Moses' seat functions in the same way. Ever since Moses received the law of God from the Lord and then related to the people of Israel, it says in Nehemiah 8.8 that there were people who read from the law of God clearly and gave the sense so that people understood the reading.

In every generation of God's people, there have been people who read the law of God to his people and explained and gave the sense so people understood it. And the scribes and the Pharisees occupied that teaching office.
For this reason, despite their rampant hypocrisy, Jesus says, do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do, for they preach but do not practice.
Do as they say, not as they do. Don't follow their example because they don't practice what they preach. Jesus is showing remarkable restraint here by expressing deference to their teaching authority.
It's an extension of the principle that Jesus taught earlier in Matthew 22, verse 21. Therefore, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. Why? Because there is no authority except from God and those that exist, the authorities that exist have been instituted by God.
[14:45] So God's word teaches us to be subject to our human governing authorities even when they are unjust and hypocritical. That's why in 1 Samuel 24 to 26, David refuses to kill King Saul who's a murderer after him, trying to kill him because he says, I will not raise my hand up against the Lord's anointed.

In 1 Peter 2.13, Apostle Peter tells Christians to be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution including even to a corrupt emperor like Nero who was reigning at the time the letter was written.
Jesus is not dismissive of the Pharisees' teaching office and we should learn from his example. Jesus' acknowledgement here that there are people who do the wrong things and yet teach the right things is helpful for us.
Maybe you've learned valuable truths from a pastor or a teacher who is now disgraced or disqualified from ministry because of some glaring sin. It probably would be wise for you to double check what you learned from that person and their hypocrisy probably did color their perspective and created some distorted emphasis so you should double check that.
But don't dismiss everything they taught you outright because sometimes people do the wrong things but still say the right things. If God can speak through Balaam's donkey then he can speak

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even through hypocrites.
[16:11] Likewise if we are teachers if any of you aspire to be teachers then this is a solitary warning. Just because you teach God's word correctly does not mean that you are living your life rightly.

The fact that you are acclaimed as a preacher or a teacher does not necessarily mean that you are approved by God. That's why 1 Timothy 4 16 says keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching.
Persist in this for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. It's possible for those who preach to others to themselves be disqualified.
The scribes and the Pharisees were just such people. They did not keep a close watch on themselves and for that reason they fail to save both themselves and their hearers.
Notwithstanding their office and authority and status the scribes and the Pharisees were spiritually blind. They were armchair quarterbacks or backseat drivers who judged and offered much advice and much critique to the people of God and yet had never actually done the thing.
[17:24] They didn't have any real life experience because they didn't practice what they preached. In one of his sermons 18th century American pastor Jonathan Edwards talks about the difference between knowing rationally that honey is sweet and having an actual sense of honey sweetness.

That explosion of sweetness that coats your tongue with its viscosity and leaves floral notes of lavender and earthly molasses.
If you've tasted it you know it. There's a big difference between knowing that honey is sweet and having tasted its sweetness. Likewise there's a big difference between knowing that God is holy in your head and having an actual sense of the holiness of God so you fear him and tremble before him.
These scribes and the Pharisees were theorists not practitioners. They did not practice what they preached. 19th century Spurgeon, Charles Spurgeon, pastor, compares such religious leaders to a blind man elected to a profession of optics.
philosophizing upon light and vision, distinguishing to others the nice shades and delicate blending of the prismatic colors while he himself is in absolute darkness.
[18:52] He is a dumb man elevated to the chair of music, a deaf man fluent upon symphonies and harmonies. But you see, it's much easier to learn optometry and philosophize about light and vision than than to make people see.

Because only God can open the eyes of the blind. That's why religion without Christ leads to hypocrisy. The first pair of woes that Jesus promises in verses 13 to 15 are related to this, the spiritual blindness.
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. The word woe is an interjection of pain, of grief, and displeasure.
It means something like, how dreadful, how unfortunate, how dreadful for you, scribes and Pharisees, that you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces.
They didn't do this intentionally. They didn't do this because they're selfish and want to keep the kingdom of heaven to themselves. Jesus tells us why they shut the doors to the kingdom of heaven in people's faces.
[20:10] For, because, you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. They shut the door on people's faces because they themselves don't know how to get in.

They've never been there. They don't know the way to the kingdom of heaven. The second woe is similar. 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.
In their zeal, they're not lacking in zeal. In their zeal, they'll go as cross-cultural missionaries. They'll go and travel across sea and land to make one single proselyte.
They'll dedicate their life journey and go through those arduous journeys to make one proselyte. Proselyte. And when they get one convert, that convert does not become a child of heaven. Alas, they make him twice as much a child of hell as themselves.

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Why do they do that? Because they themselves are children of hell. Jesus says later in verse 33, you serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?
[21:25] That's what child of hell means. Someone who is sentenced to hell, destined for hell. They are children of the serpent, Satan, rather than children of God. Brood of vipers.

It's harsh language, right? How many times have you heard me call people that? How many of you guys have called people that? Brood of vipers. But it's not unduly harsh.
Why? Because the scribes and Pharisees are leaders. And their spiritual blindness is leading people who follow them to the doorsteps of hell.
Jesus said of the Pharisees early in Matthew 15, 14, they are blind guides.
And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into the pit. And these scribes and Pharisees were literally leading people to the pit of hell. No wonder Jesus is upset.
[22:33] The level of Jesus' righteous indignation toward the scribes and the Pharisees is directly proportional to the depth of Jesus' love and compassion for the people that they are leading astray.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus reserves his severest rebukes for the leaders among the people because of their outsized influence on the eternal fate of people.
As an old proverb says, a fish rots from the head down. I think technically they start rotting from the gut, but you don't see that first.
The first rotting you see is the eyes, the gills. That's when you first, the stink comes out of it.
The cloudy, sunken eyes, discolored gills of the fish. The fish rots from the head down. Similarly, unsaved, graceless leaders produce an unsaved and graceless people.
[23:45] This is what Jeremiah 5.31 observed. The prophets prophesy falsely and the priests rule at their direction and my people love to have it so. False prophets lead to false priests to lead them in the wrong direction and the people gladly follow them.

Spiritual corruption trickles downward. This is why God warns us in James 3 verse 1, not many of you should become teachers for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. It's a fearful thing to teach the people of God. If you teach or disciple anyone, whether you're a parent with young kids or a children's ministry volunteer or a Sunday school teacher or if you're on the pastoral staff in our church or you're a lay member discipling a fellow member, ask yourself, am I a child of heaven?
a true Christian? Am I speaking of God in the abstract, in theory? Or do I actually know him personally?
Do I have a sense, a taste of his holiness, his love, his grace, his mercy? If your children followed your priorities in life, would they turn out to be children of heaven?
[25:18] If people in the church studied scripture the way you do, would they know God better or worse than they do now? If people in the church pray the way you do, would they have a deeper or shallower relationship with God than they do now?

The second thing that Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees for is their legalism. He says in verse 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.
One of the clearest instances of this was their Sabbath regulations that I've talked about in the past. Exodus 28, 10 commands us to observe the Sabbath, remember the Sabbath day, and to keep it holy.
Work six days, rest on the Sabbath day. But the scribes and the Pharisees took this simple command and then attached dozens of other prickly rules to it. For example, on the Sabbath, they said, if you carry your pack in your hand, if you have a bag, a handbag, a backpack, you carry it in your hand on the Sabbath day, then you've broken the Sabbath.
But if you carry your pack on the back of your hand or on your elbow, you did not violate the Sabbath. You can literally find that in the Mishnah, in the rabbinical commentary on the Torah.
[26:48] And remember the fuss that the Jewish leaders made in chapter 12. When they saw Jesus' disciples picking heads of grain as they were walking through a grain field and they started eating it, they're just poor itinerant preachers.

They're not farmers coming with a sickle and trying to steal people's or work on the Sabbath day for some extra income. They're hungry. They're just taking a few grains and eating them on the Sabbath. And they're like, oh, you picked the grain.

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You're reaping. And then they'd rub the grain to get the chaff up so they could eat the grain. They're like, oh, I saw you doing that. You're threshing.
You're harvesting. That's forbidden. It was harvest, the reaping, and threshing were two of the 39 forbidden activities on the Sabbath.
But how is that, I mean, eating that on the, how does that constitute harvesting? That's like accusing a person who picked up a lost penny from the ground of stealing. Jesus' disciples were not breaking the Sabbath.
[27:57] moreover, Deuteronomy 23 specified that poor people are allowed to eat grains from other people's fields as long as they're not putting a sickle to it.

That's why Jesus cited the example of David, King David, when he was fleeing from King Saul who was trying to kill him, entered the tabernacle and ate the bread of presence, not the current, the fresh one, but the used one that was moved out of the table.
But only priests were allowed to eat that. But an exception was made for David and his men because of their dire, extraordinary circumstances and their hunger.
And Jesus, basically, Charles describes the Pharisees of being legalistic and too rigoristic, and so he rebuked them saying, if you had known what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltless.
These leaders forgot that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. They turned a commandment that was intended to give people rest and refreshment and turned it into a most onerous and heavy and burdensome commandment.
[29:15] They cared more about external conformity to the law than about internal transformation. They cared more about the letter of the law than the spirit of the law, so they tied up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and then they lay them on people's shoulders while they would not lift a finger to help them.

The Greek word behind that word, burden, only occurs twice in all of Matthew. You can probably guess the other time it was used. Matthew 11, 28 to 30, where Jesus says, 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.
Jesus is the compassionate teacher and master who assigns to people a light burden because he himself carries the heavy burden of the law that we can never bear by dying on the cross for our sins.
But these scribes and the Pharisees are not willing to lift the finger to help people carry their heavy burdens that they themselves have tied upon their shoulders. Jesus provides specific examples of this in the third and fourth woes in verses 16 to 22.
[30:32] Woe to you blind guides who say, if anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath. You blind fools, for which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?

And you say, if anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath. You blind men, for which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?
So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears by it and by him who dwells in it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.
Jesus addressed this issue of oaths earlier in chapter 5 in the Sermon on the Mount. And because the Jews rightly took taking oaths very seriously because they didn't want to take God's name in vain, invoke God's name and swear by God, his name, they were very hesitant to do that.
However, they wrongly believed that by taking oaths of sacred things that are not quiet, the same as the name of God himself, that they could get themselves off the hook without consequences of breaking the oaths they've made.
[31:47] They would say, I swear by heaven that I did not steal your fattened cow and slaughter it for my birthday the other week. I swear to heaven.

And then, they'll be caught later, be exposed that they did indeed steal that neighbor's fattened calf and slaughtered it for his birthday. And then they'll say, you swore to God.

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God's gonna hold you to account for that. You swore to God that you didn't do that. Oh, no, no. I never swore to God. I swore to heaven. That's very different.
That's the dwelling place of God. That's not God. It's legalistic casuistry. And it's specious, deceptive, over-subtle reasoning.
Whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it. The other two examples are like further downstream from that, in chapter 23.
[32:51] They would swear by the temple and then circumstances would change and it would be no longer advantageous for them to keep the oaths that they made. And then they would say, oh, you know, if you swear by the temple, it doesn't really work.

If you swear by the gold that's in the temple, then you're bound by your oath and I didn't do that. That's ridiculous.
Why is the gold inside the temple sacred? Because of the temple. The temple is sacred because, and why is the temple sacred? Because it's the dwelling place of God. And why were the scribes and the Pharisees engaging in this kind of over-subtle reasoning?
If you've ever played tag with kids, you know exactly what I'm talking about. They have a tendency to modify the rules on the fly. I've done this.
I've heard this from kids in our church. I'll be chasing them for tag and then they'll say, oh, this is my home base. You can't tag me while I'm here. They'll say it, of course, they'll say it right after I tag them.
[33:58] And then after patient waiting, when they finally come out of their home base and I'm about to tag them again, they'll say, time out. If I do time out, you can't tag me.

They keep changing the rules of the game to ensure that they always win and you always lose. That's essentially how the Pharisees and the scribes were gaming the system of oaths.
Much like the social swearing of our day where people say, I swear to God, I saw a UFO. Why do people say that? Because they want you to really believe them that they saw a UFO.
It's a form of manipulation to enhance their credibility and to make their claims more believable. But when time comes for people to cash their checks and the checks bounce, then they would use this kind of over-subtle specification to free themselves from the oath.
Oh, I swore by the altar but I didn't swear by the gift that's on the altar so this is, no, it doesn't work. It's nothing.
[35:10] Oaths in the Old Testament used to be simple. You'd make an oath by the name of God, you'd make a vow to God and then you'd have to keep it. But now, because of the legalism of the scribes and the Pharisees, every time people wanted to make an oath, they had to consult a long oath-making handbook.

What was I supposed to swear by again? Oh, here we go, page 92. I can't swear by God. It's by God's temple. Oh, no, no, that's not, the altar within the temple, no, no, no, that's not, that was 10 years ago.
Oh, now you have to swear by the gift that's on top of the altar that's inside the temple where God dwells in. Whew, I almost got that wrong again. Contrast this superficial teaching of the scribes and the Pharisees with the substantive teaching of Jesus early in Matthew 5, 34 to 37.
But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king.
And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply yes or no, anything more than this comes from evil. Vows and oaths are concessions to the hardness of the human heart.
[36:29] There are ways to mitigate and contain human evil and wickedness and lies, deception. If all of humanity practiced complete transparency and honesty in all their speech, then vows and oaths would become immediately unnecessary.

That is God's ideal, ultimate standard. Christians ought to be known for their integrity and honesty so that people believe them when they say something without having to resort to oaths.
Weighty words that land with an oomph like heavy dumbbells instead of flighty, fleety words like feathers. But you see, that requires a heart that fears God.
And cultivating a heart that fears God is way harder than making a hundred page oath making handbook.

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Because only God can give us new hearts and transform us from the inside out. And this is why religion without Christ leads to hypocrisy. You can't change the heart, so you focus on changing what you can change, external behavior.
[37:39] And that always leads to a really long list of do's and don'ts. And when the rule book gets too long, it inevitably leads to imbalances and disproportionate emphases.

Jesus pronounces the fourth woe in verse 23. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you tithe the mint and dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness.
These you ought to have done without neglecting the others. Following the Old Testament law, the Pharisees gave a tenth of all their material possessions to God to be used for the worship of God and the ministry of God's people.
However, as they did to everything else, they took this to the nth degree, to the extreme. They would measure and cut an exact tenth of the smallest herbs like mint and dill.
Have you used dill before? You see how small that is? They'd count every tiny seed of cumin to tie the exact amount to the decimal point, the last penny.
[38:46] But even as they obeyed this commandment to the minutest detail, they neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness. It's essentially the great command.

Love God, love your neighbor. Jesus says in verse 24, you blind guides straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. A gnat is the smallest of unclean insects that cause ceremonial uncleanness in the Old Testament and a camel is the largest animal that causes uncleanness in the Bible that was readily available in Palestine.
So Jesus is using a humorous illustration to drive home his point, not that they were actually swallowing a camel. Imagine the Pharisees and the scribes using a fine sieve to filter out a gnat from their water because they, oh, that's unclean animal, we can't have that.
Use a sieve to filter out the gnat. Only to realize that their next course, their main meal is a camel. Eating the whole camel.
The biggest unclean animal. Tidying mint and dill and cumin is easy.
[40:01] It's doable. It's manageable. It's a smart goal. S-M-A-R-T. You guys have heard that before? Yeah. Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.

Your work managers would be proud. But what about justice and mercy and faithfulness? Jesus, that's so broad.
That's a sprawling, unmeasurable, comprehensive, unachievable, and not time-bound standard. When can you ever say of yourself, let's look at, catalog my date today, justice and mercy and faithfulness.
Oh, I did that. Check. Finished. You can now see the appeal of legalism. It's measurable.
It's manageable. It's easier to evaluate the performance and assign grades. No wonder the scribes and the Pharisees loved it. Tithing 10% to church is easy.
[41:17] It's measurable and manageable. But making sure that everything you do and every penny you spend is for the love of God and for the love of neighbor, for justice and mercy and faithfulness, that's hard.

That requires total, comprehensive, never-ending commitment. Don't neglect tithing, knowledge, but don't reduce your stewardship to that by-size law either.
Make sure that you're loving God with all that you have. Perhaps you're extremely concerned with theological minutiae or overly eager to point out people's sins and in the name of theological precision and holiness you sinfully judge and tear down your brother or sister in Christ.
Don't neglect knowledge. Fine-tune your theology about the nature of God. Get the details right, but don't stop there. Make sure that you love God with all your heart and soul and mind.
Make sure that you love your neighbor as yourself and make sure that that love is communicated when you bring any kind of correction. Getting the theology right in your head is way easier than getting the theology right in your heart.
[42:35] And it's impossible to get it right in your heart unless God makes you a new creation in Christ Jesus. That's why religion without Christ leads to hypocrisy.

The scribes and the Pharisees spiritual blindness and legalism, their focus on outward conformity rather than inward transformation naturally produced hypocrisy and produced imposters.

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Jesus says in verse 5, they do all their deeds to be seen by others for they make their philacteries broad and their fringes long. They are true hypocrites which comes from the Greek word for actors. Actors only act like they do when they are on the screen, when they know people are watching them. They pretend to be something that they are not in real life.
Jesus detailed what hypocrites are like in the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 6. They're the ones who give to the poor but only when they're sure that their charitable giving will be noticed by others. [43:36] They don't care a whit about the poor. They care only about being thought of by others as being charitable. The hypocrites are those who go to prayer meetings and say long pretentious prayers when people are watching but people who never pray in secret when no one is watching.

They couldn't care less about praying to God. They only care that other people think that they pray and that they are pious. This is why they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.
I mentioned to you guys the phylacteries are these leather boxes that the Jews wear with a band around their forehead on their arm. It contained the Shema Deuteronomy 6, 4-8. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.
Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength. One of the most important passages for Jews, they tied it. Even though the original command in Deuteronomy 6-8 was figurative.
It means keep the word of God always with you. Keep the commandments of God always with you. But they took it literally and put on parchment the command and literally wore it on their forehead and arms.
[44:49] Likewise, the tassels, the fringes, it refers to these tassels that are commanded in Numbers 15, 38-39. On the four corners of their garments they would wear these tassels and they would attach these blue cords to it.

And the intention was to remind, to serve as a visual reminder of the commandments of God, that they should obey the commandments of God. And the Pharisees in the scribes, instead of using them as reminders to obey God's commands, reminders for themselves, they use those things to remind other people of how obedient they are.
God's God. like there's a joke among the Greek Orthodox Christians that the length of the priest's beard corresponds to how holy he is.
And there's a joke among Reformed Protestants that the size of the preacher's pulpit corresponds to how seriously he takes God's word and how weighty his preaching is.
If you don't have a pulpit at all, you've probably abandoned preaching altogether. If you use a cafe table, then you're a lightweight preacher with flimsy theology. If you use a sturdy, imposing mahogany pulpit, is this mahogany?
[46:13] I don't know. Then you're an expository preacher with solid theology. If you use an elevated pulpit, then you're a five-point Calvinist with a high view of God. These are all jokes and memes, but there's some truth to them.

Sometimes priests and preachers do use things like these to project holiness, to showcase their holiness. That's what the scribes and the Pharisees were doing with their broad phylacteries and long fringes.
They didn't really care about being holy for God's sake. They cared only about being perceived as holy by men, for they love the glory that comes from men more than the glory that comes from God.
For the same reason Jesus says in verse 6 and 7, they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.
I've shared this story with some of you years ago.
In 2010, I volunteered at this congress called the Third Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization. It was held in Cape Town, South Africa. There were 4,000 Christian leaders from 198 countries attending.
[47:30] I was volunteering. And one evening at the conference, there was a bit of a stir, some commotion, because an Anglican bishop refused to sit down. He protested that he should not be sitting on an ordinary chair like the rest of the conference attendees because he's a bishop.

And he demanded a special chair that befitted his office. It's shocking. How can someone who has heard Jesus' teaching in Luke 14, 8 to 11 ever think to demand such a thing?
Jesus expressly tells his people, whenever you go to a place, seek out the lowest place. Sit on the lowest place so that they tell you to come up and sit in the higher place. Don't go seeking out the

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high place and then be humiliated when they tell you, no, you have to go sit down there.
For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and who humbles himself will be exalted. And the scribes and the Pharisees who knew the Old Testament should have known better because Proverbs 25, 67 says this exact thing.
Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great. But how do Christian leaders get to that kind of place?
[49:00] When you are a hypocrite seeking your own glory rather than the glory of God, if you care more about man's approval than God's approval, then the gravitational pull of those places of honor and the seats, the best seats, are irresistible.

The scribes and the Pharisees loved greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. Courtesy greetings in this culture is very important. It would be a grievous insult to not acknowledge your social superior with proper honorific titles.
And the scribes and the Pharisees loved to be called rabbi by others. The word rabbi comes from the Hebrew word rav, which means great. Rabbi means my great one.
Or it means my master or my teacher. Similar to the titles we use like reverend or doctor. Whenever I ISVP to a conference, a Christian conference, usually you have to fill out your information.
And there's usually a section where you are asked to select your title. And I always think for half a second and then I just select mister. As an ordained minister, technically I can select reverend.
[50:20] But that just seems so like God knows I'm his servant. My church congregants know that I'm their pastor.

Why do all these other people need to know that I'm a pastor? Why do I have to have reverend in my name placard at the conference? Why? Because I'm afraid that people think I'm not important enough to talk to?
Isn't that exactly what James 2 warns against? That kind of partiality? Jesus supplies more examples of this kind of glory-seeking hypocrisy in the fifth and sixth woes of verses 25 to 28.
Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean.
Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.
[51:24] Pharisees and scribes took painstaking care to ritually cleanse the cups and the plates that they used so that they don't contract ceremonial uncleanness. And Jesus uses that as an illustration, as a starting point to denounce their preoccupation with outward appearance rather than inward purity.

He says, for you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. How can the inside of a cup be full of self- indulgence and greed?
They're not physical things you can pour into a cup. He's switching, he's pivoting from literal to the figurative. He's speaking of the Pharisees themselves. You clean the outside of the cup because you're so concerned about appearing holy on the outside, but inside your own heart you are full of lawlessness and greed.
And what an offensive thing to say to a Pharisee and the scribe who took pride in keeping the law actually in your heart is lawlessness. True purity and true holiness is from the inside out, not outside in.
They were like whitewashed tombs. Nothing spreads ceremonial uncleanness like corpses in the Old Testament. And the Pharisees avoided coming into contact with corpses at all costs.
[52:44] And yet Jesus tells them, you yourselves are tombs. You've probably visited beautiful cemeteries before. I like to go to Mount Auburn Cemetery to walk around or go birding.

If you haven't been, it's beautiful in Watertown. Tombstones are beautiful. The grass is green and immaculately manicured. Trees soar above and flowers bloom and birds are chirping with songs. But then you stop for a moment and you think about what's actually underneath you, rotting flesh and bones of the dead. That's what the scribes and the Pharisees were like.
Beautiful and righteous on the outside, unclean and lawless on the inside. The term whitewash is an allusion to Ezekiel 13 where the Lord denounces the false prophets of Israel who told the people of God instead of telling them to repent of their sins, which is what they needed to do, they would

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falsely prophesy peace.
You have peace. God's giving you peace. When there is no peace, says the Lord. And he compares them to smearing a wall with whitewash.
[53:59] There are cracks along the walls that indicate that the foundation is structurally unsound. There's grime and mold growing on the wall from damage, water damage. But then these leaders, they come to the wall and they just plaster it over with whitewash and pretend like everything is fine and dandy.

But that's foolish. That wall is going to collapse soon. How many people put on their Sunday best clothes and hang a bright smile on their faces when they are inwardly crumbling inside?
How many people quote Bible verses and pray flowery prayers and have a reputation of being righteous when inside their hearts they are full of unrighteousness? In verses 8 to 12, Jesus continues, but you are not to be called rabbi for you have one teacher and you are all brothers and call no man your father on earth for you have one father who is in heaven.
Neither be called instructors for you have one instructor, the Christ. Maybe some of you are panicking because you call me Pastor Sean and you just feel like you got called out by Jesus.
If we apply what Jesus says here too literally, we run into some contradictions. For example, in 1 Corinthians 4 15, Paul says to Jesus, not Jesus, sorry, Paul says to the Corinthian church that he is their spiritual father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.
[55:25] In 1 Timothy 2 7, he says, For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle, a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. And the fifth commandment of the Ten Commandments commands us to honor your father and mother.

So clearly the Bible doesn't have any trouble with calling actual fathers fathers and teachers teachers. Nonetheless, Jesus says, don't be called rabbi, father, or instructor.
What does he then mean by this? These are all terms that the scribes and the Pharisees apply to themselves in a hubristic way. Hubris is a Greek word that describes arrogant people who believe themselves to be above human limitations, who dare to rival or challenge the divine.
That's what the scribes and the Pharisees were doing. They called themselves rabbis, instructors, teachers, but we see throughout Matthew that Jesus is the only true teacher.
He taught as one who had authority unlike the scribes. They called themselves fathers, even though there's only one God, the Father, who is in heaven. In other words, the scribes and the Pharisees were inserting themselves in the place of God and his son.
[56:47] This is not to say that no one should have any authority over another among the people of God. What Jesus said in verse 2 explicitly contradicts that. Jesus is not speaking about formal hierarchy or church structure.

He's getting at something more fundamental. Even pastors, shepherds, must remember that there's only one good shepherd, one shepherd of the church, and that is Jesus Christ.
I am a shepherd, I am a pastor, but I'm also sheep. And every Christian leader, pastors, need to remember that, yes, you are, as an elder, a spiritual father figure in the family of God, but you must always remember that there's only one true father in heaven above.
We're all brothers and sisters. There's a radical parity among believers. And this is one of the many things that grieves me and concerns me about some of other denominations or the Catholic Church.
What's the leader of the Catholic Church called? The Pope. It means father, papa. The Pope is called the vicar, vicar of Christ, Jesus.
[58:08] Meaning that he is the earthly representative of Christ in a way that no other Christian is. He stands for Christ on earth. Christ vicariously reigns, governs through the Pope.

But Jesus explicitly says here, call no man your father on earth. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. Jesus explicitly says that no man in the world should take his place on earth.
Claiming that kind of privilege and authority, I think, flies in the face of Jesus' warning. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.
God delegates authority to people, not so that they might wield it for their own benefit and advancement, but so that they might use it to serve and lift up others. Christian leadership is servant leadership.

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The hubris of the Jewish leaders necessarily and naturally led to bloodshed. When you want to be God yourself, you don't take kindly to the messengers of God.
[59:23] God. The Jewish leaders were not following God, they were not listening to God, so God would send the prophets to rebuke them, say you're doing the wrong thing. If you're truly a servant of God, and you hear the prophets of God tell you that you're doing the wrong thing, then you say, oh, sorry, master, I'll change it, I'll do something different.

But when you want to be the master, then you plot out how you can kill that prophet. So you can keep doing what you want to do. If God were to show up in the flesh, people who want to be God themselves would kill him.
Well, that's exactly what they did to Jesus, isn't it? Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, verse 29, hypocrites, for you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, if we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.
Does you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murder the prophets? Fill up then the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?
Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murder between the sanctuary and the altar.
[60:52] Abel was the first martyr, the first righteous blood shed on earth, because he was more righteous than Cain. Cain killed him. And Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, it's a little confusing.

It's hard to know who exactly Jesus is talking about here. There's three main options. One is Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, mentioned in 2 Chronicles 24, 20-22.
We are told that this Zechariah was stoned to death in the court of the house of the Lord. So he's a leading candidate for being this Zechariah because he was killed in the temple like Zechariah that Jesus mentions here.
And also because 2 Chronicles is the last book in the order of the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish Bible. And so then that begins with Abel in Genesis to Zechariah in the last book, and it bookends, and so he's talking about all the blood that was shed in the meanwhile.
So he's one candidate. The only problem is he says here, Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, and that Zechariah is not the son of Berechiah. He's the son of Jehoiada. And there is an early reliable manuscript called Codex Sinaiticus that actually does not contain the phrase son of Berechiah.
[62:01] So it's possible that maybe the son of Berechiah is not originally part of the scriptures. It might be that Zechariah. It could also be Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada in Isaiah 8 verse 2.

Very similar father's name. He was a contemporary of Uriah, the priest during Isaiah's day, and Jewish tradition does say that he was martyred. Or it could be Zechariah the prophet who wrote the book of Zechariah, who is called in Zechariah chapter 1 verse 1 as Zechariah the son of Berechiah. We just don't, we're never told that he died as a martyr. So if that's the case, then Jesus knows something that we don't know. But it doesn't really matter.
I'm really not sure which one of those are, because Zechariah is the right one. But one of them is the right one. And the main point of Jesus is that from the beginning with the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, they have consistently been killing off the prophets of God because they wanted to be God.
And isn't that what we all have done? Why do we resist the authority of God, the commandments of God? Because ultimately we want to be God.
[63:23] We want to rebel against him. We want things to go our way, not God's way. We want glory for ourselves. We have all lived in this way.

And yet, even though we live like the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus comes, the son of the father, the greatest of all the messengers that God has ever sent.
And we kill him. We crucify him on the cross. That should be the end of the story. Divine vengeance, the judgment.
But it says in Hebrews 12, verse 24, that Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant whose sprinkled blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

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The blood of Abel to the blood of, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the righteous blood has been crying out for vengeance. The Lord, Lord, bring justice. Shed the blood of these evildoers who have killed your servants.
[64:28] But when Jesus dies on the cross, his blood does not cry out for vengeance. His blood does not cry out for our destruction and death. Instead, his blood cries out for our atonement, our cleansing, our forgiveness, and our reconciliation.

It speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. And it's when you receive that mercy that God has shown us in Jesus Christ, that it's his blood that cleanses of all our sins, that we can by no way, no strength of our own, attain the holiness that is necessary, but that we must receive it as a gift from God in his son, Jesus Christ.
That's the only way you have a religion, you get a religion that does not lead to hypocrisy. Because if you have already been told, you can't meet the standard.
This is the standard and you're down here. In fact, you think you're here, you're actually here. And that's why Jesus had to die for your sins. Then you don't go around trying to hide things when God's word has already told everybody that we're worse than we even think we are.
And when you have been accepted by God in such a radical way and have been received his mercy and grace, and you have been loved and accepted, even though we are unlovable in that sense, we are unholy and defiled, well then, we don't need to go around groveling at the feet of men for their approval and their pleasure.
[66:03] Because we already have something so much more precious in God's approval of us and his son, Jesus Christ. That's the only way you get true religion, true Christianity, true gospel.

That's the only salvation. That's the only path to holiness. Let us remember it and let's pray. Let us pray.

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