

## **Today's Religion**

Sunday, September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1984

### **Matthew 23:23**

*“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”*

My message today is: “TODAY’S RELIGION.”

This message just might be a little offensive to some of you but I think that it is an important message that needs to be preached.

I’m asking you to open your Bible with me to the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Matthew. If you will, please open your Bible; I will be reading several verses of Scripture from Matthew 23 and speaking on the subject: “Today’s Religion.”

My friends; we need to speak of the issues. When we preach the Word of God we need to apply that Word to the day in which we live.

We don’t need to be talking about a day that has passed or a day that is to come, but we need to take the Scriptures that we are reading and preaching and apply them to our own situation.

This Scripture that I have selected for a text is a vivid picture, a plain and graphic picture, of today’s religion in America. I want you to turn to Matthew Chapter 23 and follow along as I speak.

This is a religious generation. America, like Jerusalem of old, is a religious nation. Churches and religious organizations are everywhere. Nearly every town in America has dozens and dozens of church buildings and religious organizations.

Religious programs are on every television station and every radio station. Some radio stations and some television stations are 24 hours a day in which you can get religion in America.

There are thousands of preachers. There are preachers who are self-appointed and there are preachers who are appointed by their denomination. There are thousands of preachers in America.

There are hundreds and thousands of what we call “Christian schools.” There’s a Bible in every home, in every office, in every motel room, in every jail and in every hospital room. There’s a Bible wherever you go.

Religious leaders are even attempting to take over political parties by electing government officials and black-balling other government officials. We are definitely in a very religious day. America is a religious nation.

My friends; remember, I am not excusing indifference to real, moral issues, and providence. I’m not excusing indifference nor am I discouraging zeal, those things for which we believe and those things which are important.

Anyone with any understanding of the Scriptures at all can see that today’s religion in America is an outward form of godliness that denies the power of God inwardly; it is an outward religion. It is a show of religion and it is a profession of religion that denies the power and presence of God inwardly (in the heart).

When our Lord walked on this earth, when Jesus Christ our Lord was walking on this earth in the flesh, when He walked through Jerusalem, Galilee, and Capernaum, the nation of Israel was religious just like we are.

These people were moral and legalistic to the core. The nation of Israel and the city of Jerusalem was the most religious nation and city on the face of the earth.

The religious leaders ruled. They influenced the government. The people went about with the form of religion and the ceremonies of religion. They tried to keep the laws of religion systematically and the laws of religion were diligently and strongly enforced.

An example of this is when they brought the woman found in adultery and cast her at the feet of Christ. They told Him *“Moses’ law condemns her to be stoned; what do you say that we ought to do?”*

These religious laws were strictly enforced. Yet, our Lord said of that religious day; *“You call me Lord with your lips but your hearts are far from me.”* That was their problem and that is our problem. *“You call me Lord with your lips but your hearts, (your souls, your spirits), are far from me.”*

He said again to these people, these religious leaders, *“You clean up the outside of the cup but within you are full of extortion and excess. You pay tithes; you observe days;*

(you keep the ordinances of religion), *but you have neglected the weightier (important), matters of the law (Word of God) judgment, mercy, and faith; these ought you to have done (diligently).*”

He said, *“You wash your hands and you are careful about everything that goes into your mouths and you ignore the evils which live in your heart. It is not that which a man puts into his mouth that condemns him, it is that which comes forth from his heart.”*

Christ said to the religious leaders; *“You are the blind leading the blind.”* The people were following their religious leaders blindly until they *“both fall into the ditch.”*

Turn with me to Matthew 23. Here in this chapter our Lord Jesus Christ is speaking to His disciples and to the people. He is describing the religious leaders and the religion of Jerusalem and Israel. In His description, He also gives to us a plain picture of today’s religion in America.

It is so clear that you will be astounded as you read it in Matthew 23; He says of the Scribes and Pharisees, which were the preachers, prophets and religious leaders of that day; *“they sit in Moses’ seat.”*

They occupy a position of authority. They take to themselves a title. *“They say but they do not.”* They bind heavy burdens, burdens of laws, ceremonies, traditions, and customs, on men’s shoulders and offer them no relief.

It takes more than a position and a title to make one a prophet of God. It takes more than just occupying Moses’ seat or occupying the office of pastor, missionary, superintendent or evangelist to make one a preacher of the Gospel of God’s grace.

Do you know what it takes? It takes a call from Moses’ God. These men sat in Moses’ seat; they occupied the position of leadership. They didn’t have the call from God that is required if a man is going to be a prophet.

Not only does this require a call from God but it requires an experience of grace in the heart as Moses had. More than that, it requires a message given to that man from God to take to the people.

Christ said, *“These men occupy office; they assume the office of authority and they claim to be God’s prophets.”* It takes a call from God to make a prophet. It takes an experience of grace and it takes a message given to that man’s heart from the God of glory to make him a preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Notice if you will, in Matthew 23 verse 5; listen carefully, He said; "*All their works they do to be seen of men.*" They did their works, not to be seen of God or not to be heard of God, but they did them to be seen of men.

Let me ask you some questions: For whose eyes and approval do we build these gaudy, religious, buildings with their steeples reaching to heaven with their gaudy picture windows, and with their crosses everywhere?

These buildings that we build which we call "church buildings," for whose approval and eyes are these built for? God is not impressed with these things. We are trying to impress people. We are doing our works "*to be seen of men.*"

Let me ask you this: For whose information do we count people? We count how many are in Sunday school, how many are in the morning service and how many are in the evening service. We count how many made a profession, how many did this, and how many did that.

Why do we count people? Why do we report numbers? Why do we report our successes? God Almighty does not need these figures. God Almighty does not need these reports. We are doing these things to be seen of men, and to be heard of men and for the praise of men. "*All their works they do to be seen of men.*"

For whose information do we right up our meetings in the paper? All the church socials are written up in the paper. They say, "This one did that, this one did something else, and we had so many there."

All the church socials, church events and meetings are written up in the local paper. For whose eyes are these written, for whose information? Does God need to read it in the paper? Are we doing these things to be seen of men, to impress men?

For whose praise do we report our great offerings, our great accomplishments, and how many souls we won to Jesus?

When a church builds a building and pays off a mortgage they will call in a newspaper reporter to take a picture of the pastor, the head deacon, as they burn the mortgage and put it on the front page of the newspaper.

For whose information is that? Is that for God's information? Certainly God knows what we are doing. God doesn't need a record or a report. He does not need us to keep numbers or number Israel as David did.

Our Lord describes us, He says; *"They sit in Moses' seat"* but they don't have Moses' message. They don't have Moses' God and they don't have Moses' grace. *"They do their works to be seen and heard of men."* You know it and I know it!

Our Lord told us *"When we fast; wash our face that we appear not unto men to fast."* He said, *"When you pray; don't pray openly, publically, with a long pretense, go into your closet and shut the door. God who hears in secret will bless you openly."*

When you give, don't give with a fanfare. Don't give for applause; *"give in secret as unto the Lord."*

Notice verses 6 and 7; listen to this, *"They love the uppermost rooms and the chief seats in the synagogue. They love to be called of men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi; (Master, Master)."*

Oh my friends; how men and women love religious titles; how they love religious authority. How they love to stand in front of people and be seen, heard, and be called by some official title.

The Bible recognizes prophets. It recognizes apostles. It recognizes evangelists. It recognizes pastors and teachers.

We have invented all kinds of titles. We have titles all around us. We have reverends, doctors, cardinals, popes, superintendents. We have deaconesses, presidents, and secretaries. We have all manner of titles.

The Lord Jesus Christ said, *"Call no man your Father on this earth. You have one Father who is in heaven. Be not ye called masters. You have one Master, the Lord Jesus Christ; He that is greatest among you; let Him be your servant."*

There is no one looking for the office of *"servant."* They are looking for titles. They love to be called; *"Rabbi, Rabbi."* Everyone wants to take the floor but nobody wants to sweep the floor. Everybody wants to stand up and be heard but nobody wants to bow down and worship. I am saying that we are plagued with an *"outward form of godliness and denying the power thereof."*

This is not all; read verse 13, *“Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees; you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men. You neither enter yourselves nor suffer others to enter.”*

Not only do these false prophets, preachers, and teachers refuse to believe the truth, hear the Word of God, and preach the glorious Gospel of God’s glory and grace in Christ Jesus; not only will they not preach it, but they discredit those who do.

They discourage their people from listening to those who are telling the truth. They discourage people from following those who are preaching the Gospel. They urge them to follow them in their religious games.

Christ said, *“But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.”*

Listen to verse 14: Will you listen a moment? If this is not today’s religion, He says; *“You devour widow’s houses.”* These religious leaders have no conscience. They take money from poor widows to support themselves in their greed for luxury and for their greed in high living.

They advertise the kingdom of God as something you buy. They say, *“You send your money to me and God will bless you. You send your money to me so that I can live in high-style and luxury.”* Poor widows and people on Social Security and people who can’t afford it are sending most of their income to support these religious programs.

He said, *“You make pretense by praying long prayers.”* They pretend to pray in order to impress those who see them and hear them. Real prayer is closet-work. Real prayer is secret-work. These men want to appear to be religious to impress poor deceived people into supporting their causes.

So, they make these long prayers. Do you know what He says in verse 14? *“You shall receive the greater condemnation.”*

Listen to verse 15: *“You compass sea and land to make one proselyte to your religion.”* Everyone is out to make proselytes to their religion, persuasion, and to their denomination. When you have made it; when you have converted him to your cause and to your beliefs, then; *“he is two-fold more the child of hell than you yourselves.”*

These men are not really interested in people knowing God, knowing Christ, and coming to a living, intimate, personal and saving union with Christ. They are interested in success. They are interested in having a bigger crowd and a bigger following.

They want to make a bigger splash on the religious scene. They want success as soul-winners. God said, *“You did it; you compass sea and land.”* You make him a convert; you make him a proselyte; you did it! You gave him that profession of faith. You gave him that false refuge.

My friends; *“salvation is of the Lord.”* It is a work of God’s grace from beginning to end, from *“Alpha to Omega.”* It is not talking a man into a religious profession.

I’ve heard so many preachers admit that they get these crowds down to the altar (those who go down to the front at the close of the service). They put the pressure of “Hollywood evangelism” on men and women to make some kind of religious profession.

Nearly all of these preachers will admit that a majority (which some say is 95% of those who walk the aisle and make a profession) do not continue in any kind of faith.

I ask you this question; why do we encourage these false professions? Why don’t we preach the Gospel, pray for people and commit them to Christ? Why don’t we wait on the Holy Spirit to do a personal, individual work in the sinner’s heart and bring him to faith in Jesus Christ?

Listen to this in verse 25: *“You make clean the outside of the cup and the platter but within you are full of extortion and excess.”* You aim to reform people outwardly and you fail to see that true conversion is not a reformation of the flesh; it is a change of heart.

True conversion is not in dress; it is in God giving you a new heart and a new nature. If a man knows God in his heart, if he is a *“new creature in Christ,”* he will live godly. He will walk in righteousness. He will live in honesty and truth.

His motivation will not be your rules and regulations along with your threats of punishment, and your promise of reward. His motivation will be his love for Christ. *“The love of Christ will constrain him.”*

To appear righteous before men is to be like a cemetery which is beautiful on the outside but is *“full of dead men’s bones”* on the inside. Christ said in verse 29; *“You garnish, (you decorate, you adorn), the tombs of the prophets and say, if we had lived in the days of our fathers we wouldn’t have killed the prophets.”* You brag on dead prophets and you kill living prophets.

You brag on Moses; you brag on the apostles, and you brag on the reformers like Calvin, Luther, and Spurgeon. You condemn, destroy and kill true preachers that are preaching just what these men preached.

Let me give you an example: I was listening to a television preacher a few days ago, (just recently). He spent four or five minutes bragging on Martin Luther, the great reformer. He also talked of Whitfield and Spurgeon.

In his message, he denied everything that Luther taught, everything that Whitfield taught and everything that Spurgeon taught. He doesn't believe what Martin Luther believed.

I am a student of Martin Luther, George Whitfield and Charles Spurgeon. I am preaching what those men preached, what those men died for.

These modern preachers, these men, are nothing but names to them, famous names. If they were living today these men would destroy them. These men would not even hear them because they won't read what those men wrote.

It is dishonest to brag on a dead preacher and kill a man who preaches what that dead man preached. They brag on the success of these men and not their message. Our Lord summed it up in verse 33 when He said, *"How can you escape the damnation of hell"* with this kind of attitude?

Look at Matthew 23:23 *"You pay tithes and on all things, even these anis and cumin, (little herbs); you pay tithes even on cumin (little herbs, the smallest herb). You have neglected the weightier, (the important matters) of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith."*

In all of our religion, zeal, and promotions, it would do well for us to slow down and listen to the Master and hear Him talk about the *"weightier matters,"* the important matters of the law such as judgment.

What is He talking about when He says the word *"judgment?"* He says, *"You have neglected judgment."* The Scripture says, *"It is appointed unto men once to die, after that the judgment. We shall all appear before the judgment seat of Christ."*

My friend; here is the great question; *"How can a man be just with God?"* How can I one day stand before God at the judgment forgiven, pardoned, justified and redeemed?



The issue is not my dress; it is my depravity. The issue is not my habits, it is my heart. The issue is not my ways; the issue is my will. Something has to be done about my depravity, my heart, and my perverse will to bring me into subjection to God Almighty.

Something has to be done about the holy law of God. Something has to be done about God's justice. Who is going to do it? I can't do it and you can't do it. Who is going to do it for us? Who is going to deliver us from judgment, justice, and condemnation?

There is only one and that is Christ the Lord. He is our Redeemer. God's Word says, *"There is therefore, now, no condemnation, (no judgment), to them who are in Christ."* Paul said, *"Who can lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth."*

I'm talking about justice, judgment, and justification. Who justifieth? God does. *"Who is he that condemneth? Christ died, yea rather, is risen again who is even at the right hand of God who intercedes for us."* Judgment is the *"weightier matter of the law."*

What about your sins and what about mercy? Here is a matter of grave concern (mercy). Whose mercy? It is God's mercy to sinners in Christ. As God said, *"I will be merciful; I will be gracious."*

The Lord Jesus said, *"I am come not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."* He did not come for your sacrifices and self-denial; He came to show mercy. David said in Psalm 51; *"O Lord be merciful to me."*

All who came to Christ came seeking mercy. Blind Bartimaeus said, *"Jesus, thy Son of David; have mercy upon me."* The Canaanite woman prayed, *"Lord, have mercy upon me."* This is what I need; what do you need? There is mercy for the miserable. Mercy is the *"weightier matter of the law,"* the mercy of God in Christ.

Then there is faith; *"Without faith it is impossible to please God."* Our Lord sent us out to preach the Gospel to every creature and said; *"he that believeth shall be saved."* He also said, *"If you shall confess with your mouth Jesus to be Lord and believe in your heart that God hath raised Him from the dead thou shalt be saved."*

*"Without faith it is impossible to please God. These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ and believing you might have life through His name!"*