

Religion Gone Bad

On Sunday, we studied Jesus' sharp critique of the Pharisees found in Matthew 23.

1. Warm-up question: Where were you when you heard about the Supreme Court decision legalizing gay marriage nationally? What thoughts or feelings did that moment evoke?
2. Jesus faced huge opposition from powerful institutional religious forces in his day. In the Gospels, these opponents are referred to as "the scribes and Pharisees." They were defenders of the "received tradition" and the cultural status quo. So they often tangled with Jesus. Near the end of his ministry, Jesus laid out a stinging critique of his opponents in Matthew 23 – producing a kind of road map for how good religion can go bad. Jesus' critique gives us a chance to double-check ourselves and consider: is my approach to God and religion more like Jesus or the Pharisees? So let's dig in.

As a way of organizing our thoughts, we'll divide Jesus' comments in Matthew 23 into three topical sections, resulting in three key contrasts between good and bad religion.

3. **Section 1: Bad religion is about seeking prestige; good religion is about humble service.** Read Matthew 23:1-15.
 - a. Was it wrong to wear Phylacteries or fringes? Why or why not? If it wasn't wrong, what became wrong about how some were doing it?
 - b. When you read verses 6-7, do they remind you of someone you've known? Don't tell us the person's name, but tell us what you noticed about that person.
 - c. Is it wrong to want to be thanked and honored for spiritual service? Why or why not?
 - d. What do you make of verses 8-12? Does this mean it's wrong to call priests "Fathers" or call ministers "Reverend"? Why or why not?
 - e. In verse 11, Jesus calls for deep devotion to humble service as a core of our faith. Think of someone you've known who lived that way. What did you learn from them?
4. **Section 2: Bad religion is focused on parsing and keeping detailed rules; good religion is focused on high values like justice, mercy, and faith.** Read Matthew 23:16-28.
 - a. Here Jesus lists some of the minutiae of rules that the Pharisees obsessed over – things like (a) what kinds of oaths are spiritually binding and what kind are not; (b) how to tithe down the most precise computation; and (c) the importance of

ritually washing dishes and cups as a sign of holiness. Meanwhile, they were far less concerned with huge spiritual issues like justice, mercy, and faith. Why do you think people are much more drawn to “religion as rule keeping” than to “religion as a life of highest values”? Have you ever felt that tension in yourself?

- b. Jeff said, “Mindless rule keeping can only get us so far. No spiritual zombies! To really live the way Jesus wants us to, we have to rediscover our ability to think in the Spirit, to actively discern how to live God’s highest values in every life situation, whether there’s a rule about it or not – and because of that, sometimes we may even decide to break some rules, as Jesus did.” How does that approach sit with you? What do you like about it? What worries you about it?
- c. As an example of the kind of transformational goodness that only can come from things like mercy and faith, Jeff shared the recorded words of some of the family members of victims of the massacre at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston. Family members were speaking directly to the murderer. When you heard their words, what did you think or feel? What kind of impact do you think their example is having on the debate over the Confederate flag and related issues of racial hatred?

5. **Section 3: Bad religion is about stomping out the dynamic voice and movement of God’s Spirit in our generation; good religion is about embracing it.** Read Matthew 23:29-39.

- a. Jesus came to teach us new and wonderful things – things that built on the past, but pushed us forward. As noted above, it was the institutional religious elite in his day who most adamantly opposed Jesus. We look back and shake our heads. Yet we can see the same phenomenon repeating itself often over the last 2,000 years of Christian history. Powerful institutional Christian forces have often persecuted and killed prophets and resisted much needed progress on issues like slavery, democracy, religious freedom, voting rights, segregation, women’s suffrage and equality, and even matters of science like global warming, Galileo’s astronomical discoveries, etc. Why are religious people often so resistant to change?
- b. Of course, there were powerful Christian prophets who went against the grain and advocated in favor of all the issues just listed. Bad religion can be terribly destructive. But good religion, if it perseveres, can create enormous change. We often feel this same tension in ourselves when God calls us to embrace a new idea. Tell us about a time in your life when God called you to an idea that was new for you? What gave you the courage to make the leap?
- c. Of course, not all new ideas are good and many old ideas are wonderful. How do we discern when to embrace something new and abandon something old?
- d. What can we do to stay open to God’s dynamic voice speaking to us?