

The Temptations of the Religious

Matthew 23:1-12

January 6th, 2019

Big idea: the temptations of the religious are hypocrisy, pride, and love of appearance. Humility is the cure.

Intro

Certain jobs or positions might come with different temptations than others.

Someone handling lots of cash might be tempted to steal in a way that someone who never handles cash

A nurse might be tempted to share confidential information about a patient

A teacher might be tempted to anger or impatience after working with 30 squigly kids all day

What are the temptations of the scribes and Pharisees? What are the temptations for “religious people?”

We find here temptations that are not unique to the scribes and Pharisees but are temptations of for all “religious people.” We need to be careful of approaching this passage as an indictment only of other people and not see the warning for us.

They are things that the outside world looks on with disgust and so does Jesus.

Jesus addresses the crowds, who were often interested in what he had to say but perhaps uncommitted. He also addressed His disciples as a group within the crowds. He speaks about the scribes and Pharisees and then, as the chapter goes on, addresses them directly.

It appears to be a combination of warning to the scribes and Pharisees but also teaching the disciples about how they should conduct themselves differently within the church.

This is the climax of the preceding confrontations going back to the middle of chapter 21

21:23-27 – question of authority – who gave you this authority?

21:28ff – parable of the two sons – one agreed but then didn’t follow through, one said no, then later changed his mind

21:33ff – parable of the vineyard –

22:1 – parable of the wedding feast – invited but refused to come

22:15 – Pharisees plot how to trap him, worked with the Herodians to trap him about taxes

22:23 – Sadducees attempt to trap him with a question about the resurrection

22:34 – trap on the greatest commandment

22:41 – Jesus turned the tables and trapped them with a question about David’s son being the Lord.

1. The **temptations** of the religious (23:1-7)

a. **Hypocrisy** (vv. 2- 3)

- i. Scribes as the trained professional theologians. Pharisees as laypeople who followed certain scribes.
- ii. Interesting that Jesus doesn’t challenge their teaching role here.
 1. They have seated themselves in the chair of Moses, so observe what they tell you.
 2. Not a little chair but a reference to an authoritative teaching position.

3. We talk about a “chair of philosophy” at a university – an endowed teaching position usually with some prominence.
 4. The greek word is kathedra, where we get our word “cathedral” from because in some churches with a hierarchical structure the cathedral is where a bishop has his chair or throne as the principle church in a region.
 5. Elsewhere Jesus has challenged their handling of the law, in particular their additions of restrictions that go far beyond what God’s Word actually says.
 6. Here he doesn’t focus on that. If they are teaching the law of Moses accurately, follow it. But don’t follow what they do.
- iii. Hypocrisy is not simply failing to live up to what you teach, because anyone who teaches the Bible is still a great sinner and needs a great savior, myself very much included.
 - iv. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be what he never intends to be. —Tom Ascol
 - v. The Bible puts an emphasis on a leaders character and example as well as his teaching.
 1. **1 Peter 5:1-3** Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, ² shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of* God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; ³ nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.
 2. It’s for this reason that the qualifications of an elder or deacon in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are character qualities not giftedness, with the exception of an elder being “able to teach.”
 3. As we have been considering elders and deacons to recommend to the church for 2019, that has been our main concern. Not who has the most successful career, the most outgoing personality, or has been here the longest.
- b. ***Laying*** burdens but not ***lifting*** burdens (v. 4)
- i. they tie up heavy burdens – comparing the spiritual burdens to the packing of an animal with loads to carry that were too heavy or too unwieldy.
 - ii. Not just that they didn’t follow through with their own obedience, but they loaded people up but didn’t provide the shepherding care to help them with the loads. They don’t even lift a finger – no help, not even the smallest effort imaginable.
 - iii. We are guilty of this when we give moral obligations divorced from the empowerment of the gospel.
 1. Indicatives before imperatives
 2. Identity in Christ before demands of Christ
 - iv. We are also guilty of this when we hold people to the appropriate Biblical principles but don’t provide counsel, accountability, example, prayer, and teaching to carry it out.
 1. “Don’t divorce” but fail to give real help in developing strong marriages
 2. “Give” but don’t teach how to handle money faithfully
 3. “Get those kids under control” but don’t walk beside them to model and teach because it’s too messy

c. Prioritizing pious **appearance** over **substance** (v. 5)

- i. The deeds they do perform, they do in order to be noticed.
- ii. Phylacteries were small boxes worn on the arm and forehead containing scripture verses as an attempt to literally follow certain OT passages
 1. **Exodus 13:16** "So it shall serve as a sign on your hand and as phylacteries on your forehead, for with a powerful hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt."
 2. **Deuteronomy 6:8** "You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead."
- iii. Tassels were worn on the edges of their clothing in obedience to Numbers 15
 1. Numbers 15:38-41 ³⁸ "Speak to the sons of Israel, and tell them that they shall make for themselves tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and that they shall put on the tassel of each corner a cord of blue. ³⁹ "It shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, so as to do them and not follow after your own heart and your own eyes,
 2. Even Jesus wore them as a couple places in Matthew mention people touching the fringe or tassels of His cloak.
- iv. The problem wasn't the wearing of phylacteries or tassels, it was broadening them and enlarging them to be noticed. The point of the tassels was for the one wearing them to look at them and be reminded of the Lord's commandments. They had turned it into something they wore to show others how pious and holy they were, making them extra long so they stood out even more.
- v. What are modern, evangelical examples of this? How might "we" be guilty of it not just "them?"
 1. W.W.J.D. bracelets – good reminder, became like a fashion thing
 2. Having a worn out Bible is good if it means you have worn it out through reading. Wanting to have a Bible that looks worn out so that you appear to have read it is not.
 3. Friend from the south commenting on how people would sleep in Sundays then get dressed up and go out to eat so people thought they went to church first
 4. Spending 10 minutes to get the perfect instagram picture of our morning devotions, and then only spending 5 minutes in the Word.

d. **Loving** honor and prestige (vv. 6-7)

- i. Like with the tassels, the problem isn't having places of honor at banquets. If you attend a wedding reception you'll likely see a table up front just for the wedding party. It's a place of honor.
- ii. Same with respectful greetings.
 1. Morris quoting Meier – in oriental etiquette, the inferior had the prior obligation to greet his superior with a salutation whose length indicated the superior's importance. The Pharisees wish to receive salutations and title, not give them.
- iii. The problem is they came to LOVE these things.

2. The **solutions** for religious pride (23:8-12)

- a. Honor **Christ** alone (vv. 8, 9, 10)

- i. Three times He emphasizes this
 - 1. Do not be called rabbi (teacher), for One is your Teacher
 - 2. Do not call anyone on earth Father for One Father
 - 3. Do not be called leaders (instructors), for One is your Leader – Christ
 - ii. There will always be those who teach and lead
 - 1. Romans 12:8 talks about a gift of leadership
 - 2. Hebrews 13:17 says to obey your leaders who keep watch over your souls
 - 3. Acts 2:42 – they were devoting themselves to the apostles teaching
 - iii. The problem is giving to any human what belongs to Christ alone.
 - 1. There is no human intermediary between man and God
 - 2. Avoid placing spiritual leaders on a pedestal, and titles can be used to do that.
- b. See other believers as ***brothers*** and ***sisters*** (v. 8)
- i. The ground is even at the cross.
 - ii. Yes, elders and deacons are to be examples and are to be “above reproach.”
 - iii. But they aren’t too view themselves as superior to others and aren’t to lord their position over others.
- c. Seek to ***serve*** (v. 11)
- i. Rather leaders, teachers, and those with authority should use those positions to serve.
 - ii. Leadership is responsibility to care for others, to shepherd them, to help lift burdens, and equip them to follow Christ.
 - iii. This message is for all of us but specific application obviously to those who lead within the body. At UBC, that means our pastoral staff, our elders, our deacons, as well as those who lead small groups or oversee other ministries.
 - iv. If I could gather just those people in a room, this is what I would want to communicate.
- d. ***Humble*** yourself (v. 12)
- i. **Matthew 20:26-28** "It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."
 - ii. **Prov. 29:23** A man's pride will bring him low, But a humble spirit will obtain honor.
 - iii. **Matthew 18:4** "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.
 - iv. The gospel requires us to humble ourselves. The Christian life requires no less.
 - 1. The gospel says I am utterly incapable of saving myself. We need to be able to sing, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”
 - 2. I listened to a great interview this week with a guy named Mez McConnell. He’s a Scottish pastor and church planter working in the poorest parts of Scotland. He came

from a rough upbringing – his mom abandoned the family when he was 2, his dad spent most of his time betting on horses and drinking. His stepmother was highly abusive and violent. At age 12 he was convicted of assaulting an older couple. He saw a friend of his get stabbed to death. He was homeless and needed a place to live and a Christian guy invited him to stay at his house. He picked up an old commentary on the Bible and started reading through it. Took him months. He was converted by reading the book of Romans. Romans resonated with him because, he said, “I’ve been taught lies my entire life, largely by social workers and drug counselors. They just lied to me blatantly. The biggest lie: I wasn’t really a bad person, I was a good guy who had a terrible upbringing, a terribly abusive childhood. I was a product of my environment. I’m a victim. But Paul says: No. You need to take responsibility for yourself, for your actions. You had a tough childhood, but you are a sinner standing in front of a holy God and there’s no excuse for your sin, regardless of how people mistreated you.”

3. God’s grace flows downhill to the low places, not uphill to the pompous and put-together places. - Scott Sauls



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