

Have you ever had high hopes for something and then seen those hopes crumble to pieces? ... It happened to one man in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His story hit the news wires... as one of those sadly humorous... stupid-thief tales. ... Actually... if you knew him... his story is probably only very **sad**.

He wanted money. ... Maybe he desperately needed money. Perhaps he had a substance addiction or owed tens of thousands of dollars on a charge card. Regardless... somehow he got the idea to go into a grocery store... hand the checkout clerk counterfeit money... and ask for change. If it worked... he would get real money in exchange for fake money. Brilliant!

He was a big thinker. If he was going to risk attempting this fraud... he was going to do it in a way that would set him up for life. ... So he decided to try to pass off **not** a counterfeit \$100 bill... **not** a counterfeit \$1,000 bill... **not even** a counterfeit \$10,000 bill... ... but a counterfeit **\$1,000,000** bill.

Again... you can pat this poor fellow on the back for thinking big... but you also have to pity him for thinking **badly**. ... First... you have to suspect that the average checkout clerk doesn't keep a million dollars in her drawer.

Second... you have to think that a one million dollar bill is going to attract some extra attention and might even bring the scrutiny of the store manager. ... Third... (this is the clincher)... there is no such thing as a \$1,000,000 bill. The largest currency printed in the U.S. is a \$100 bill!

When the counterfeiter walked into the supermarket on that Saturday in Pittsburgh... holding that one million dollar bill in his sweaty hand... just imagine his soaring hopes. ... He must have thought that soon he would be able to pay his bills... buy a nice house and car... get all the things he had always wanted... and never work another day in his life. This would be his lucky day!

Needless to say... his high hopes were dashed. The checkout clerk refused to give him change for his bogus bill. The manager came and confiscated the forgery. His dreams went up in smoke. He got angry. He grabbed the electronic funds transfer machine and slammed it on the counter. He tried to grab the scanning gun used to read product labels. Soon the police had him in custody.

It's a sad... sad thing... when a person's high hopes come to nothing.

How do you know when your hopes are resting on something true and legitimate and real... instead of on something bogus and stupid? ... Where do you place your hope? ... You might say... (and I hope you do)...” *Well I place my hope and confidence in my Christian faith...*”

But have you ever stopped and considered that maybe... just maybe... the religious leaders of Jesus’ day felt that they had just as much reason to be as confident as you are ...with their hope...? I am pretty sure that the Pharisees... and the Sadducees... and the Herodians... who we have seen come to Jesus in His final week... (to trip Him up)... all felt very confident that they had made the best life choices.

The danger of spiritual deception is real - even for those who are sincere in their religious convictions. ... Therefore... we must submit to God's Word... and keep our heart pliable and moldable and obedient to it. ... A hope that believes the Bible to be true... but does not obey what it teaches... is just like the hope of the crazy Pittsburgh 1,000,000 dollar counterfeiter. It is bogus... it is stupid... and it will come crashing down!

We will see in our passage this morning that the religious leaders of Jesus' day believed God's Word... but they were not motivated to obey it. They thought others should... but they didn't need to.

In our Bible text this morning... as we begin the 23rd chapter of Matthew... we come to the most scathing rebuke from Jesus... that we will find anywhere in the Gospels. He really opens up and lets the Sadducees and Pharisees have it! (John MacArthur writes: [Jesus' words] "*fly from His lips like claps of thunder and spears of lightening.*") ... Jesus calls them hypocrites, sons of hell, blind guides, fools, robbers, self-indulgent, whitewashed tombs, snakes, vipers, persecutors, and murderers.

This all comes out in the second half of the chapter. We will only get to the first twelve verses of Matthew 23 today... but this morning we will see Jesus expose their hypocrisy... using no uncertain terms. ... Now before we get to it... let me offer a serious caution. If we are listening rightly... we can feel our own hearts being operated on in the process.

We shouldn't read this text as if it were simply directed toward a couple of groups of people in Jesus' day (a little more than 2,000 years ago.) Instead... we need to ask, "*Have we missed it?*" and "*Where are we deceived?*"

Throughout our time together in this passage... I will ask a number of questions... that this text should cause us to ask ourselves... based on what Jesus says to the scribes and Pharisees. ... Please don't answer these questions too quickly... and don't think... in your pride... "*That's definitely not me.*" ... Pause and consider these questions honestly. In the process... may God expose our blind spots... uncover our hearts... and save us from ourselves.

In our passage today... Jesus does two things. First... He exposes hypocrisy (in verses 1-7.) Then... (in verses 8-12)... He exalts humility.

Matthew 23:1-4

Notice (in verse 1)... that Jesus is talking "to the crowds and to his disciples" - *about* "the scribes and the Pharisees." ... In next week's passage... (verses 13-36)... He'll shift. ... Verse 13 begins, "*But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees.*" There he talks directly to **them** or "at them." But in our passage today (verses 1-12) His direct audience is *the **church***... if I can put it that way. Here Jesus is building up His future church upon the cornerstone of humility. ... For "His disciples" and those from the crowd who **will become** His disciples... He is laying down the foundation... and

He is laying down the law. ... What Jesus teaches here should always govern the church.

So here is the first question... every member of Christ's church needs to stop and contemplate: **Do we fail to practice what we preach?**

In a statement of pure irony... Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat... (and what He means is)... they have Moses' authority — the authority to teach God's Word — so people should practice and observe what they say. ... But it is necessary for us to note what Jesus says a few verses later... in verse 15. He says that the converts of the Pharisees are children of Hell! ... So we **know** that Jesus doesn't mean that we are supposed to do everything the scribes and Pharisees were teaching. ... Jesus means here that people should obey these leaders... insofar as they teach the Word of God rightly. ... Their actions... on the other hand... are not to be imitated. ... Jesus 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...*”

(LISTEN!)...Any application of the word of God in the lives of believers today... that results in the imposition of a burden upon their shoulders... is the complete **opposite** of the freedom and rest offered by Jesus. ... It was to the '*weary and burdened*' that Jesus said, '*Come to me... and I will give you rest*' (Matthew 11:28).

Any understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ that imposes a heavy burden on those it claims to **liberate** is clearly false. ... A false Christianity

imposes rules and regulations... A False Christianity demands that its followers engage in the sheer hard work of fulfilling the Bible's commands – "to the best of our ability." ... Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps and just do it! ... Gut it out! ... That is the main ingredient of religion... and many in the church will argue that this is to be everyone's Christian experience.

But let me tell you... the demands of God are greater than our ability to perform them. Just last week the point of our passage was to love God in total commitment... with every fiber of our being... and to love others more than we love ourselves. (I can guarantee you that this is a heavier burden than any of the burdens the Pharisees were placing on the shoulders of others.) ... It is blatantly obvious as we read and understand what the Bible commands... is greater than our ability.

Therefore it is not in implementing them by our own self effort... but in abandoning any sense of human ability... and resting in dependency on the power... of the indwelling life of God... that genuine Christianity functions.

The invitation of Jesus 'Come to me all you who are weary and burdened' should be coupled with a second invitation of Jesus to 'Abide in me...' (John 15:4). These two invitations encompass the whole of Christian experience.

(LISTEN!)... To come to Christ in an initial act of surrender... that does not lead to the continuing process of abiding in Christ... is to produce only a sense of frustration and failure. ... We cannot fulfil the requirements God demands of us – alone.

John 15:5 (ESV)

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

“...for apart from me you can do nothing.”

The function of the law that God gave to Moses... is not to provide a blueprint for us to fulfil on the basis of doing our best to obey them... but to serve as the means of exposing our **inability** to do so. ... Paul wrote,

Romans 8:3-4 (ESV)

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

The requirements of the law still stand, for they represent the character of God ... but the fulfilment of the law of God is only by the Spirit of God. The New Covenant promised by God to Israel through the prophets does not involve a *revision* of the law, but a *relocating* of the law from tablets of stone on which it was given to Moses... to the human heart... on which it is to be ' written by the Holy Spirit (Jer. 31:33 and Ezek. 36:27).

When the Christian life is a heavy burden on our shoulders... it is because we have wrongfully assumed the responsibility of producing godliness by our own ability. We have rendered the indwelling life of the Holy Spirit as irrelevant to the task... and have failed to grasp what is to be everyone's Christian experience.

Question number two: **Have you wrongfully assumed the responsibility of producing godliness by your own ability...?** Abide in Christ, as the

branch of a grape vine abides in the vine. ... I grew up in the Central Valley of California... where a lot of grapes are grown. I never saw a branch... strain and struggle with all it's might to produce a cluster of grapes. As long as it stayed connected to the vine... grapes came naturally without a struggle.

Matthew 23:5-7

They knew the Scriptures but did not live by them. They didn't care about **being** holy—just **looking** holy in order to receive people's admiration and praise.

They do **all** their deeds to be seen by others”. The word “**all**” should jump off the page. “**All**” their actions are polluted with pride. Two small examples of their bigheadedness should suffice. Verse 5... “*They make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long*”.

Every male wore an outer robe that had tassels attached to the four corners. ... During times of prayer... these men would don a headband and an armband with small leather boxes called *phylacteries* that contained portions of the law written on parchment in four columns. ... This was done in obedience to the literal interpretation of Deuteronomy 6:8: “*Write them down, and tie them around your wrist, and wear them as headbands as a reminder*”. While all male Jews complied with this decree... the scribes and Pharisees made *very sure* that their tassels were longer and their headbands larger than everyone else's. They assumed that this outward demonstration would impress people that their devotion to God was **greater** than everyone else's.

To them... success meant recognition by men and praise from men. They were not as concerned about the approval of God. They used their religion to attract attention... not to glorify God. This even meant using religious ornaments to display their piety.

And they loved the best seats in the synagogues... those that were at the front of the synagogue and faced the congregation and that they were reserved for officials and others of distinction. The most honored seats would have normally been in the most visible place... probably nearest the bema... (the platform for the reading of the law). ... Distinguished guests were given bench seats that were lined around the synagogues... while most hearers remained on mats on the floor. ... Likewise... at dinners and banquets... these religious leaders sought these places... so that they could be seen by the common people and be revered by them.

In Jesus' eyes, meeting others in the marketplaces was not the issue. The problem lay in their love of being seen by the general populace, thus elevating their position before the people.

The third question is based on verses 5-7: **Are we not content with the approval of God?** ... Do we desire the applause of men? ... Matthew had addressed this theme earlier in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus talked about those who give, pray, and fast in order to be seen by men (6:1-18). ... That same accusation is directed toward the scribes and Pharisees in this passage. ... They "*enlarge their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels*" for this very purpose.

The question for us... then... is whether we are content with the approval of God. ... It is a deadly thing to desire the applause of men... because once you receive it... your flesh enjoys it... and you want it more and more. As a result... you become less and less content with the approval of God.

Scripture... on the other hand... calls us to be so content with God's gracious smile... that we are **dead** to what men say **to** or **about** us. ... We need to pray for that kind of attitude for ourselves... and for others in the church. I am asking you to pray this way for me.

"Greatnessism," as one scholar labels what Jesus exposes in verses 1-7... *"is a major social-spiritual disease"*... and if it is not cured... it will not only plague the church... but will destroy the individual soul. For you see... the door to the kingdom of heaven is only small enough for a child to enter in... (in other words)... those with childlike (humble) faith in Jesus. This is what Jesus teaches in verses 8-12. If we want to be big... we must grow small. If we want to move up... we must go down.

We move now from... Jesus' exposing hypocrisy ...to His exalting humility... ... (from his diagnoses of religious sickness in verse 1-7... to its cure in verses 8-12).

Matthew 23:8-12

Rabbi means (literally) "my master." They were especially masters of their students. ... Rabbis were also affectionately and respectfully called "Abba," or "Papa."... They addressed their disciples as their children... and the rabbis' authority and honor placed them on a higher level than their students. ... But that misuse of the term was to be avoided by those who

followed Jesus... the rightful teacher. God alone was to be revered as the only source of wisdom and truth. In the church... teacher and student are equals in Christ.

But we might have a problem. Look what Paul wrote to the Corinthians...

1 Corinthians 4:15 (ESV)

For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Paul referred to himself as a "*spiritual father*." ... Paul even calls himself a spiritual father to Timothy... his son in the faith (Phil 2:11). ... Uh-oh... Paul. Did you not know what Christ taught here in Matthew?

No! Paul does not violate Christ's principle. He did not demand them to use that term when addressing him. He is not being prideful to the Corinthians... elevating himself above them. He is reminding them of his connection to them... as the one who brought them the Gospel through which they were born again... he is like a spiritual father who bore spiritual children.

The fourth question based on this passage is: **Do we assert our superiority over others** (and in the process usurp Christ's superiority over all)? ... Jesus ends verse 7 by talking about the delight the scribes and Pharisees take in being called "rabbi" by others. ... Then He says we should avoid that practice.

At first... this passage can sound as if Jesus were forbidding any teachers in the church. ... However... we know that's **not** His point... since elders

are prescribed throughout the New Testament to teach and to lead in the church. ... Later in this chapter... Jesus talks about sending "prophets, sages, and scribes," - essentially as missionaries... so He is not denouncing every form of spiritual leadership among God's people.

But His words are a clear rebuke to those who have used their leadership position... to assert some sort of superiority over others... to the point where they usurp or subvert Christ's superiority over all. ... And that's exactly what these scribes and Pharisees were doing. They were calling themselves rabbis and teachers and spiritual fathers and instructors... and in doing this... they were drawing people to themselves and away from Christ.

I don't want to get too nitpicky here. But if you ever want to call me "Pastor"... I will accept it. ... I won't require it... but I'll allow anyone (if they chose) to confer that upon me. I think the title *pastor* is a good title... because it means "*shepherd*." (There's nothing lofty about that.) ... The issue is not so much whether we give certain people titles within the church. ... It is more whether such titles are used to confer special privilege or status.

When I am called "pastor" it doesn't go to my head (because these days being a pastor is not an esteemed profession in our culture).

Jesus says there is to be "*one instructor, the Christ*," and by this... He is instructing His church to do away with all personality cults in the church — "*I follow Dr. Bible*." "*Oh, really? I follow Super-Apostle Sam*." ... Don't follow anyone but Christ! ... The only voice we are to hear is that of Jesus... and

we hear that voice today... only when teachers (*small t*) teach what **the Teacher** (*capital T*) taught. ... All faithful Christian preachers are to preach Christ. That is what it means.

No leader in the church is to manifest pride. ... We are all servants. The disciples of the kingdom were never to seek positions of leadership for the purpose of receiving the accolades of others.

Consider these diagnostic questions for the pride in your own heart:

- Does your heart delight in receiving honor over other people?
- Do you find comfort whenever you realize that you are in a better or a higher position than someone else?
- Are you prone to, even in your own mind, exalt yourself above others?
- Do you compare yourself with other people, subconsciously measuring yourself against them to discern your own level of spirituality?

In his well-known book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis devotes an entire chapter to pride. He calls pride (or self-conceit)... "the great sin." ... Lewis says, "*If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.*" He then provides the remedy for pride: "*If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud.*" ... C.S. Lewis goes on to link pride with competition:

Now what you want to get clear is that pride is essentially competitive—is competitive by its very nature.... Pride gets no

pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If every one else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest.

May God help us to live... lead... and relate to one another in ways that affirm **equality** as brothers and sisters in Christ.

This leads naturally into the fifth question: Do we humbly serve others or **are we hypocritically centered on ourselves?**

Jesus addresses this question in verses 11-12. We've already seen humility discussed numerous times in the book of Matthew. Jesus goes against the grain of every worldly leadership principle by making clear that God humbles the self-exalted and exalts the self-humbled. This principle of humility is expressed most clearly in the way we serve others (or fail to).

True greatness is a matter of service, not title. Those, like the scribes and Pharisees, who seek to exalt themselves will be humbled, but Jesus' disciples who seek humble service will be exalted.

Are we consistently looking for ways and opportunities to serve others... or are our thoughts more along the lines of... "*What would be best for me in this situation?*" ... Humble service is the way of Christ. Is this *your* posture?

... ..

As we read about this standard of godly living that Jesus presented... we discover (to our dismay)... that we can no longer point our finger at the

"scribes and Pharisees" (the representatives of religious futility.) ... We discover that we all are seduced by the same determination to make others respect us. ... While we may have enjoyed the accusing finger that Jesus pointed at the religious elite among us... we should be asking ourselves if we are as guilty as they are.

But for you and I... it does not need to be constant religious futility!

John 15:5 (ESV)

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.