

Prayer  
Is Christ In You?  
Scripture: Matthew 23:1-12

This Scripture in Matthew serves as a challenge to all those who claim to be Christian. Here is the challenge: are we as Christians living out our faith? Are we practicing what we preach? Do we mean what we say? Or we just like the Pharisees that judge others for the same misbehaviors that we partake in? This text says the Pharisees were not practicing what they preached. where one can search their heart to see if it lines up with God. Just to give a little background to this particular text. In the New Testament time period, the Pharisees and the teachers of the Torah (first five books of the Bible) were authorized successors of Moses (NIV Bible Commentary). Often times the Pharisees, who were extremely knowledgeable in the Torah, tore down people that did not obey the Torah. Just imagine these people traveling through towns and just constantly judging people that did not conform to Old Testament Scriptures.

The reason that the Pharisees were not practicing what they preached is because in the same Scriptures that they quoted from also said not to judge other people. So the Pharisees were breaking this fundamental law in Scriptures. In other words, the same God that said “do not steal” said “do not judge.”

In these Scriptures, we see Jesus’ admonishment of his disciples to practice what they preach. In others words, they used Scriptures to condemn other people for doing the same evil that they were doing. Also, this bothered Jesus because it meant that the Pharisees really did not believe the Scriptures that they quoted from.

Does this sound familiar? To me, it sounds like the 21<sup>st</sup> century church, that wants to condemn everyone for the very sins they are committing. People that want to play the role of God and judge others' actions.

More often than not, people judge others out of conviction for the same sins they commit. They realize that they committed the same wrong as the next person, but they want to appear that they have not committed that sin and are right with God. So they criticize someone else, because that is easier than getting their relationship right with God. Unfortunately, these are some of the very reasons that many people do not want to be Christian. All of this judging turns others away. To quote DC Talk, a Christian rock group, "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world is Christians. They confess Christ with their lips, but deny him with their lives."

The Pharisees put heavy loads on their shoulders, but are not willing to move them. In essence, this is like asking someone to perform a task that you, yourself are not willing to perform. This Scripture is starting to sound like modern situations. How often do we ask others to behave in a certain way that we ourselves are not willing to behave? Many church people just identify problems in society, (for example, homeless), but do not address these serious problems. I have seen churches right across the street from extreme areas of poverty and I wonder what the church is doing about this problem.

v. 5: Everything that the Pharisees do is for the human eye to see. And the verse goes on and says how they dress and that they wear their garments long and have wide tassels for attention. In reading the King James Version Study Bible, I found that these phylacteries are small boxes worn on the forehead and the arms. They contained four Scripture passages (KJV Study Bible) (Exodus 13:1-10, 13:11-16, Deut 6:4-9; 11:13-21).

A dominant theme in these Scriptures is loving the Lord your God, with all your heart, soul, and mind.

Verses 6-7: Pharisees love to be in the spotlight at the banquets. Verse 8 they love to be called Rabbi, which means teacher. In the Jewish culture, this was a prestigious title. Many people sought this title but few obtain it.

Now, in verse nine the focus gets shifted to the disciples focusing on God as their Father. Verse 9: Do not call anyone on earth father, but you only have one Father which is in Heaven. The point here is that Jesus did not want his disciples so consumed with titles because that would bring about pride instead of being drawn to God. I do not believe this Scripture about not calling anyone else father is to be taken literally, but instead for an individual not to get caught in a title and pride. What Jesus is saying is that God wants all of the glory, so don't get caught up in calling other people Father, because God is not only their Creator, but also their Father.

Furthermore, in verse 11, Jesus digresses, and says that whoever is the greatest of you shall be your servant. Again, the point that Jesus is stressing here is humility. And to tie this in with the passage, the servant, by definition, is one who works. This is not one that only talks the talk, but also walks the walk. Moreover, verse 12: the humble shall be exalted. This went in direct opposition to the lives that the Pharisees lived. You see the Pharisees thought that those that exalt themselves will be exalted and those that are humble will go unnoticed by society.

Like the Pharisees, some of today's churches like to get attention. Some churches spend more time fixing and building onto their edifice and less time doing mission work in the community. Social problems of all sorts exist: drugs, prostitution, alcoholism,

gambling, and what is the church doing about it? Ministry and service takes sacrifice and meeting people where they are. This passage is one of sacrifice; sacrificing your ego and uplifting the name of Jesus.

Others constantly use ministry as a way of self-promotion. They use ministry so they can be seen through the public eye. They like to be on these major Christian radios and broadcast stations just to be seen. Sounds like the passage that I just read. So today, there are many modern Pharisees.

Another key element of Jesus' message is humility and love for humankind. The love for human kind is practice in humility and recognizing that because of God's grace and mercy, individuals are where they are. To quote a great gospel hymn, "If it had not been for the Lord on my side, tell me where would I be, where would I be."

Service is a key element in this passage. It encourages us to reach out to a stranger or a friend. See, Jesus realized that in order for his Gospel of love, salvation, and joy to spread, he needed people that would be willing to put faith into action.

Finally, this passage is one of action, humility, sacrifice, and service to God. God wants us not only to be hearers of the word, but also doers of the word. Self-promotion and attention is not what ministry is about, but having a lowly spirit and exalting God. I will leave you with these words: Do not uplift yourselves, Exalt Christ alone for Christ alone is worthy of all honor, glory, and praise.

Amen