

Walk the Talk

Matthew 23:1-12

There is a saying in some communities: “Walk the talk,” which means don’t have a double standard, live what you say you believe.

You remember that for several sermons Jesus has been defending his authority to receive praise and to teach and perform miracles. He told a series of parables to explain the authority of John the Baptist and himself. In last week’s scripture Jesus gave us the basis of true religion: love God, love our neighbor and make Jesus lord and savior of your life.

In our scripture today Jesus is finished playing nice and just tells things like they are! You know how it is, someone keeps bothering you, keeps questioning you, keeps implying that you don’t know what you are doing, or you don’t know how to do a task and you just get tired of their picking and you zap them! This is the feeling we get when Jesus makes his statement today.

Jesus turns to the crowd and his disciples, who were in the temple listening to His debates with the various religious leaders, and explained the basic flaws of the religion of the Scribes and Pharisees.

In verses 2 and 3 Jesus explained these religious leaders had a false concept of righteousness. “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in Moses’ seat” is the literal translation. This means that God gave the Law to Moses; Moses handed it to Joshua; Joshua transmitted it to the elders; the elders passed it down to the prophets; and the prophets gave it to the Scribes and Pharisees. The whole of the Ten Commandments are based on two great principles. They are based on reverence; reverence for God, for God’s name, for God’s day, for the parents God has given to us. They are also based on respect, respect for a human’s life, for their possessions, for their personality, for their good name, and for oneself. These

principles are eternal; and, in so far as the Scribes and Pharisees teach reverence for God and respect for humans, their teaching is eternally binding and eternally valid. Their only authority was the Word of God. Therefore, the people were to obey whatever the Pharisees taught from the Word.

However to the Pharisee, righteousness meant outward conformity to the Law of God. They ignored the inward condition of the heart. Religion consisted in obeying numerous rules that governed every detail of life, including what you did with the spices in your cupboard (Matt. 23:23–24). Religion was thousands of rules and regulations; and therefore it was an intolerable burden.

We must ask some questions to determine if a religion is true. Does it lift a person up, or drag a person down? Does it bring joy or depression? Is a person helped by their religion or are they haunted by it? Does it carry the person, or does the person have to carry it? Whenever religion becomes a depressing affair of burdens and prohibitions, it ceases to be true religion.

The Pharisees would not allow the slightest relaxation of the rules. Their whole self-confessed purpose was to “build a fence around the Law.” Not one regulation would they relax or remove. Whenever religion becomes a burden, it ceases to be true religion.

The Pharisees were careful to say the right words and follow the right ceremonies, but they did not inwardly obey the Law. You remember from Jesus’ teaching that Jesus taught about the desires of our heart being important as well as our action. Psalm 51:6 states that God desired truth in the inward parts. Here Jesus tells the people they were not to obey the traditions and the man-made rules of the Pharisees because they were not God’s laws and they were not under obligation. Beside Jesus’ accusation against these religious leaders is they preached one thing but practice another, in other words they are not walking the talk!

In verse 4 Jesus says they had a false concept of ministry. To them, ministry meant handing down laws to the people and adding to their burdens. In other words, the Pharisees were harder on others than they were on themselves. Jesus came to lighten our burdens (Matt. 11:28–30), but legalistic religion always attempts to make burdens heavier. Jesus never asks us to do anything that He has not first done. The Pharisees commanded, but they did not participate. They did not walk to talk so they could not be considered spiritual leaders. We cannot, must not, ask others to go where we have not been and are not willing to go ourselves.

In the remainder of our scripture Jesus says the Scribes and Pharisees had a false concept of greatness. To them, success meant recognition by others and praise from others. They were not concerned about the approval of God. They used their religion to attract attention, not to glorify God (Matt. 5:16). This even meant using religious ornaments to display their piety. “Phylacteries” were small leather boxes into which the Pharisees placed portions of the Scriptures (Ex. 13:9, 16; Deut. 6:8; 11:18). They wore these boxes on their foreheads and left arms, in literal obedience to Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18. However they made sure theirs were wide and conspicuous, so show others how religious they were and demonstrate their exemplary obedience to the Law and their exemplary piety.

They also increased the size of their “tassels” on the hems of their garments and prayer shawls (Num. 15:38; see Matt. 9:20) so they were long and noticeable. In Deuteronomy 22:12 we read that God commanded his people to make fringes on the borders of their garments, so that when they looked on them they might remember the commandments of God. These fringes were like tassels worn on the four corners of the outer garment. Later they were worn on the inner garment, and today they are perpetuated in the tassels of the prayer-shawl which the devout Jew wears at prayer. It was easy to make these tassels of especially large size so that

they became an obvious display of piety, worn, not to remind a person of the commandments, but to draw attention to them self.

The Pharisees also thought that position was a mark of greatness, so they sought the best seats in the synagogue and at the public dinners, which they thought gave them honor. They liked to be given the best places at meals, on the left and on the right of the host. They liked the front seats in the synagogues. In Palestine the back seats were occupied by the children and the most unimportant people; the further forward the seat, the greater the honor. The most honored seats of all were the seats of the elders, which faced the congregation. If a man was seated there, everyone would see that he was present and he could conduct himself throughout the service with a pose of piety which the congregation could not fail to notice. However where a person sits has no relationship to who that person is. Albert Einstein wrote, “Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value.”

They also thought that titles of honor were a mark of greatness. The Pharisee liked to be addressed as Rabbi and to be treated with the greatest respect and seen as scholars. They claimed greater respect than that which was given to parents because they said, a person’s parents gave ordinary, physical life, but a person’s teacher gives them eternal life. They even liked to be called father as Elisha called Elijah (2 Kings 2:12) and as the fathers of the faith were known. It is the same today when religious leaders want honorary doctor’s degrees, which they did not earn. Jesus forbid His disciples and followers to use the title rabbi because all of them were equal, and Jesus alone was their Teacher (“Master” in Matt. 23:8). There is a spiritual equality among the children of God, under the lordship of Jesus Christ. For the same reason Jesus also forbid them to use the title father with reference to spiritual things. We have only one Father in the faith—and that Father is God.

A third title that was forbidden was instructor (Matt. 23:10), which means “guide, leader, one who goes before and guides.” A modern equivalent may be “authority.” God has placed spiritual leaders in the church, but they must not replace God in our lives. A true spiritual leader directs people into freedom and a closer fellowship with Christ, not into bondage to their ideas and beliefs.

Jesus taught that true greatness is found in serving others, not in forcing others to serve us (John 3:30; 13:12–17). Leadership positions should never be a goal in and of themselves, but should always be viewed as opportunities to serve others. True greatness is not manufactured; it can only come from God as we obey God. If we, like the Pharisees, exalt ourselves by the way we dress or call attention to ourselves, God will humble us. But if we humble ourselves in service to others and give glory to God in Heaven, someday God will exalt us (1 Peter 5:6).^{1 2} Any religion that is just for show and pride is a false religion.³ God wants true religion where people actually live out what they say they believe, walk the talk!

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Mt 23:1

²Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:73

³Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Matthew : Volume 2*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible, Rev. Ed), S. 284