

## Fighting for Faithfulness

Fred has been married for 20 years. He loves his wife dearly, but he's now middle-aged and has a growing desire for excitement that his wife just isn't providing. He finds that excitement through an on-going affair with a female co-worker who'd been flirting with him for the last couple of years.

While his affair satisfies his need for excitement, he feels guilty about it. But since, he just got a promotion, so he moves his family into a nicer house in a better neighborhood, buys her a new SUV and diamond necklace to assuage his guilt. But he can't keep the affair a secret forever and his wife finds out. When she confronts him, he points out that he's worked hard and lavished on her more gifts and a better standard of living than she ever dreamed of. If you were Fred's wife, what would you do?

I would guess Fred is in for the fight of his life. It might have seemed like a good idea to him, but from his wife's perspective is different. Well, if you can understand how she would feel, then you probably also understand what Jesus is telling the Pharisees in our passage today—Matthew 23:23-24. Turn there with me please.

This is the third message in the series we're calling *Versus*, where we're looking at Jesus' harsh words for the religious leaders in Matthew 23. And we're studying it because we understand that we are all more than capable of the same attitudes and patterns as

those religious leaders. We're all capable of pretending to be better or more righteous than we really are—we call this hypocrisy. We're also more than capable of comparing ourselves and looking down on other people because we're holier than they are.

Today, we're on to another one of Jesus' criticisms in verse 23-24. [read] Typically, at staff meetings on Wednesday, we talk about the Sunday passage. But this past Wednesday, we had a hard time agreeing on what, exactly Jesus is talking about here. The big question was this phrase in verse 23, "**...the more important matters of the law...**" Growing up, more than one Sunday school teacher taught me that all sins are equal in God's eyes. So, what do you think of that? Are all sins equal in God's eyes?

I know where we get this. We get it from James 2:10, "**For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.**" But the problem with saying all sins are equal in God's eyes is that, for instance, *lust* would be *equal* to adultery. And if that's really the case, if I lust, I may as well just go all way.

But the other problem is that Jesus seems to say otherwise. Some commands of the law that are more important than others. The question is, which ones are more important? Are the 10 Commandments important, but the rest of them aren't? Are sexual sins worse than others? We sometimes make them out to be that way.

Well, as I studied this further, I came to realize that the answer comes when we're able to answer the question, "What does God desire?" or "What does God really want?" I

came to this conclusion when I realized Jesus wasn't saying anything new. He was referencing something written 700 years before. The passage is from Micah 6. When we understand Micah 6, we'll understand Jesus.

The book of Micah is one of what we call the minor prophets. The reason the minor prophets are minor isn't because they were less important. There wasn't a prophet minor league. It's just that the minor prophets wrote shorter books. That's it.

The book of Micah was written in the late 700s BC, to warn the people of Israel that they were about to be conquered by Assyria because of their unfaithfulness, which was summed up in sins like worshiping idols (1:7), robbing people of their property (2:2), failing to uphold justice (3:9), and the priests taking bribes (3:11).

So, in Micah 6, God presents his case against Israel, **"<sup>1</sup>Listen to what the Lord says...For the Lord has a case against his people; he is lodging a charge against Israel."**

In verses 3-5, God asks some rhetorical questions, **"<sup>3</sup>People, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me. <sup>4</sup>I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam. <sup>5</sup>My people, remember what Balak king of Moab plotted and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the Lord."** He's basically saying, "Remember all the things I've done for you? The way I've kept my covenant with you."

Then in verses 6 and 7, Micah anticipates Israel's response. And they give some ridiculous, even sarcastic, examples. Verse 7, **"<sup>7</sup>Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"** Essentially, "What do you want us to do? How many more rams do we have to sacrifice? We're running out of rams. Do we need to sacrifice our children now? Would that make you happy?"

Micah answers in this famous verse, Micah 6:8, **"<sup>8</sup>He has [already] shown you, O mortal, what is good. What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."**

You see, Israel believed that what was important to God was their religious practice—sacrifice, special prayers and feasts. Now, to modern, Western ears, it seems strange that they didn't get it. But that's because we live in a society that attaches *morality* to religion. For instance, when someone says all religions are basically the same, they're speaking almost entirely about morals—all religions teach people not to lie, cheat or steal and just to be nice to each other.

What you may not know is this a Judeo-Christian idea. At the time of the prophets—and even at the time of Jesus, Judaism was the only religion that tied worship to morality. Pagan religions believed the gods didn't care how you live as long as you placate them with offerings and prayers and rituals. That's why the prophets consistently

harped on two things—don't worship foreign gods and treat others well. They're related. If you worship their gods, you'll live immorally like their followers.

The Israelites were always tempted to think more like pagans. So, they thought they could do whatever they wanted and be OK with God because they had the Temple. But the prophet Jeremiah warns them. **“Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!”** <sup>5</sup>**If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly,** <sup>6</sup>**if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm,** <sup>7</sup>**then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever.”** (7:4-7)

In Isaiah, chapter 1—same thing. The Israelites were faithful to do their religious practice at the Temple. <sup>11</sup>**“The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the Lord. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.** <sup>12</sup>**When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts?”**

In each of case, God is saying, *“People, this isn't what I want.”* And in each case the answer is similar to Micah 6:8, <sup>8</sup>**“He has already shown you what is good. Here's what God wants from you.”** (In other words, not sacrifices, not rituals, not religious festivals,

not temples), but **“To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”**

And all the other passages in the prophets say the same thing.

Now, 700 years later, Jesus says the same thing in Matthew 23. Verse 1, **“You tithe a tenth of your mint, dill and cumin.”** Jesus is talking about the fact that the Pharisees were religious overachievers. One commentator calls the Pharisees, “the serious.” In other words, they’re the ones who are really serious about their faith. They’re so serious about their faith, even though the law doesn’t require them to tithe on their herbs (mint, dill and cumin)—they do it anyway. That’s how committed they are. Are you impressed?

Well, this got me thinking about the practices we do that lull us into believing we’re doing what God wants. What’s the equivalent to the Israelite’s belief that because they had the Temple, God would never judge them or because the Pharisees tithed their herbs, they were in God’s will? Here are some I came up with.

I might ruffle some feathers here, but I think many Christians believe that because they prayed the “Sinner’s Prayer” at one point in their life, they’re automatically right with God. Now, a relationship with Jesus is a real and necessary thing, but it’s not a one-time choice, it’s a continual, daily decision to follow him. Following Jesus is more than just saying we follow him, but living the way he calls us to live.

Sometimes we’ll believe we’re in God’s will because we *know the Bible really well*. Some of us really love the Bible. Overall that’s a good thing. But 1 Corinthians 8:1 says,

**“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”** And from what I know of Jesus, is that *he would rather have followers who knew just a little, but loved people a lot than people who know a lot, but love very little.* Read 1 Corinthians 13 and you’ll see this.

Here’s another example: Many Christians are very careful to stay away from *pet sins*. They don’t “smoke, drink or chew or go with girls who do,” they don’t even have a Facebook (which, of course is the greatest corrupter of all!). They go to church and small group faithfully and might even attend a community Bible study somewhere else. They give more money than they have to, they serve in the church more than anyone else...and yet...

They’re self-righteous, critical and divisive. They’re concerned more about their reputation than their character. How they look at the world is influenced more by Fox News than Bible study. Their behavior at home, work, school or with friends doesn’t match up to their behavior at church.

Their attitude is, “As long as I follow God’s rules, all the stuff going on in the world doesn’t matter. Someone else can take care of that.” They’re quick to blame people for causing their own suffering in order to relieve themselves of any responsibility to help. Their religious practice makes them think they follow Jesus, but the rest of their life says they follow the gods of this age. Their life looks more like the Pharisees than Jesus.

And I believe that even if their religious practice is impeccable, Jesus would tell them they're neglecting the weightier matters of the law.

But this can be extremely difficult to see in ourselves. In fact, our natural reaction to this kind of message is to dismiss it or think about someone else who needs to hear it. Or you might even get a little angry at me because you think I'm picking on you. But it's a characteristic of religiosity to react to conviction with anger rather than soul-searching.

Now, I'm not against religious practice. I think religious practice is a gift. Keith likes to use the phrase "means of grace," because it's through these practices that God's grace is mediated to us. So, the question isn't whether you should participate in religious practice, the question is, "What's the outcome of your religious practice?" Does your religious practice harden your heart or soften it?

*The purpose of religious practice isn't just to placate God, it's to cultivate a certain kind of character.* Think about what it means to cultivate soil. It starts as a hard-packed surface, but in order to grow something, the plow comes in and breaks it up and turns everything over. And what results is soil that's able to accept the seed and absorb water and produce fruit. Your religious practice should do that same thing. What's most important isn't the plow, but the fruit. I believe that when Jesus talks about the more important matters, he's talking about the fruit. So, what does he say is the fruit? **"Justice, mercy and faithfulness."** Have you heard something like that before? **Act justly, love**



**mercy, and walk humbly with God. (Micah 6:8)** Well, if these are the more important matters—if these are what God really wants—we should probably know what they mean.

The first word is “*justice*.” It’s the Greek word *krisis* and it has to do with our relationships with each other. We act justly when we treat others fairly. It means we’re honest and we don’t try to take advantage of people, especially people who are in a vulnerable position. It also means not putting undo pressure or burdens on people. Earlier in Matthew 23, Jesus says that the Pharisees put heavy loads on people’s shoulder (meaning they make strict rules that are difficult to keep), but they aren’t willing to help.

In our last series, we talked about the Biblical concept of Shalom. Shalom is when things are in order—materially, socially, personally, and spiritually. Justice and Shalom are inseparable—where there is injustice, there is no Shalom.

Your religious practice should cause you live in reconciled relationship with people. You don’t carry grudges. You’re quick to forgive. You don’t avoid or judge people who are different than you or even people you deem to be “sinners.” They might be “sinners” (just like you), but Jesus didn’t avoid those people or marginalize them, he moved toward them and even ate with them. And he didn’t avoid you, but he died for you.

Second, your religious practice should develop a heart of *mercy*. Matthew uses the word *elios*, which means “*goodwill or kindness toward the afflicted or marginalized.*” So,

you could say that *justice* has to do with *maintaining* harmony and fairness, mercy has to do with how you treat people who are already suffering.

Now you might think that because you don't speak badly of the poor or marginalized and you try not to contribute to poverty that you're doing pretty well. But according to the prophets, that's not enough. Mercy isn't passive, it's actively engaging in ways that relieve suffering and hardship. That's why we're creating opportunities through Together for Good and Prison Fellowship to engage through giving and forming relationships. I've listed a number of examples on your takehome that you can go home and look up. Like the parable of the Good Samaritan, our religious practice shouldn't distract you from acts of mercy, but it should motivate them.

Now, I know there are some Christians today who are tempted to stop here. They would say the "more important" matters of the Law is social justice. But here's the problem. Social justice can become just as much of a rote religious practice or self-righteous as any other religious practice. In fact, I believe there might be just as many people who believe that because they serve the poor or fight racism or live sustainably, they're doing exactly what God wants. But you've probably seen examples where social justice takes the place of whole-hearted faithfulness to God.

But Jesus doesn't allow us to get away with this, because he adds something else. *Faithfulness*. Micah calls it walking humbly with your God. This is the Greek word, *pistis*,

and it's all over the pages of the New Testament. We often translate it "faith," but that's become such a meaningless word in our society that I don't think it really captures what Jesus is saying. A better word might be the word "fidelity." Remember our example of Fred from the beginning of the message? What would fidelity look like for Fred?

It would mean submitting his desires to the desires of his wife. It would mean not just seeking his own happiness, but hers as well. It would mean a whole-hearted commitment to her—with both actions and attitude.

Another word we might use is the word "allegiance." There's a whole book about this called *Salvation by Allegiance Alone*. The word allegiance acknowledges that Jesus is Lord. We tend to like to talk about Jesus as our Savior. Did you know the New Testament calls Jesus "savior" 24 times? But it calls him Lord, 627 times.

So, what does it mean to walk humbly with God? It means to live like Jesus is really Lord—to submit our will to his. If that's not what's in your heart, then all the social justice and all the Bible Studies and worship services and spiritual retreats in the world are missing the point. When you confess Jesus as Lord, you'll find that he is not a burden, he is not harsh. He is merciful and just. And he loves you. And as you get to know him more and learn to follow him more faithfully, and your character is formed to his, you will find strength in your weakness, peace in the middle of storms, and communion in the middle of loneliness.

What does God really want from us? Justice, Mercy, Faithfulness. So what if you find that all your religious practice isn't producing this kind of fruit? Well, it doesn't mean you should stop practicing. It doesn't even mean you should change what you do. What it means is that you need to change your heart. You need to change how you approach your religious practice.

If you've been attending worship service for years, it can be really easy to simply go through the motions and treat it as just part of your routine, or a task to check off the box. But instead of doing that, when we sing for worship, engage in it. Listen for the presence of the Lord. Come into it with the attitude that you're going to learn to grow in justice, mercy, and faithfulness. When you sit down to read Scripture, submit yourself to what you read and allow God to form your character into Christ-likeness. Think about the areas of your life, where you've been refusing to allow Jesus to be Lord.

And Jesus proved he's worth our faithfulness by dying on the cross to break the chains of our sin and guilt and by rising again on the third day to show that he is Lord.