

Fighting Complacency

One thing I think about a lot is the fact that we are all products of our society.

There's a trend today to take down statues and rename things because we don't like the bad things people did. Some want to get rid of Columbus Day and we renamed Lake Calhoun or disparage Thomas Jefferson because he was a slave-holder.

Now, lest I get in trouble, I believe it's good to have those conversations. I think we should acknowledge that some of our heroes did some terrible things. Even moreso, I believe it's good to recognize the accomplishments of minorities who were previously overlooked because of their race. So, there's a good impulse in these movements.

But there can also be an undercurrent of arrogance or complacency in them. You see, it's that complacency that leads us to believe, that *if we were in their shoes, we never would have done what they did*. We think: "I would never have owned slaves." "I would have always believed women should be able to vote." "I would never have been a part of the mob that wanted Jesus crucified!" But, if we're honest, we have to believe that any of us is more than capable of any of those things. We love the bandwagon and we love to pronounce that it's other people that are on the "wrong side of history."

The reason I started with this today isn't because I want to get into that discussion, but because this is the very topic Jesus is dealing with in our passage from Matthew 23

today. *Turn with me to Matthew 23:29-36.* We're getting to the end of our series called "Versus" where we're looking back at the time Jesus put on the gloves and went toe-to-toe with the religious leaders. He called out things like hypocrisy and self-righteousness. We've talked about the fact that faith in Jesus is more than just an intellectual exercise and following a few rules, but it's an undying allegiance to him and his teaching. And last week, Keith talked about our tendency to settle for *looking* good on the outside rather than being *good* on the inside.

You see, I believe there are two things Jesus saves us from—*sin* and *dead religion*. Most of us recognize that sins like lying, cheating and stealing are bad, but religion is good at giving us a false sense of righteousness, forgetting we're imperfect and need God's grace. So, we're not here to complain about how terrible our society is or point out *other* people's sins, but it's to take a good, hard look at our own sin so we don't fall into the same trap as the religious people of Jesus' day. Let's take a look at today's passage.
[read Matthew 23:29-36]

Verse 29 begins the 7th and final "woe" Jesus pronounces on the religious leaders. In it he addresses the religious leaders' tendency to project themselves back in history and judge the people back then for being so ignorant. He does it by bringing up the fact that they revere the OT prophets. Look at what he says in verse 30, "**You say, 'If we had**

lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.”

Now you have to understand that the prophets were *always popular in hindsight*. *But never very popular in their day*. They were ostracized by the people and terrorized by kings. Many were martyred because they told people things they didn't want to hear.

In fact, there's a first-century Jewish writing called the "Lives of the Prophets," but it's better known as the "Deaths of the Prophets," because it describes how each of the Old Testament prophets died. And let me just say that few of them died peacefully at home with family by their side.

For instance, Isaiah was sawed in half by king Manasseh of Israel. Jeremiah was stoned to death by a mob of Jews. Ezekiel was killed by the leader of the Jewish Exiles in Babylon for criticizing idol worship. Daniel was fortunate to die in peace, but Micah was thrown off a cliff by king Ahab's son. And Amos was killed by the priest Amaziah who hit him in the temple with a candlestick in the library. (Actually, it was a cudgel rather than a candlestick, but apparently, he lived long enough for him to make his way home and he died there.) So, the moral of the story is think twice before choosing a career in prophecy.

So, Jesus says it's convenient for the religious leaders to side with the prophets *now*, but the truth is they would do the same thing, because they have the same attitude as the people in the time of the prophets. They don't take their sin seriously and the

believe that as long as they continue to do their religious thing, they're A-OK with God. In other words, they were complacent. Complacency is *to show smug or uncritical satisfaction with yourself or your achievements*. Some dictionaries call it self-satisfaction and it always blinds us to reality.

Complacency is dangerous—in sports, in business, and especially in religion. Complacency gives you a distorted view of *yourself*—you think you're better than you really are. It gives you a distorted view of the *world*—which you will always see ignorant and beneath you. And when you can't see things as they are, you can't grow. And the greatest danger is that you won't see it until it's too late. Let me give you an example.

I don't care whether or not you like Mike Pence—that's irrelevant to the story, but do you remember during the campaign last year when it came out that Mike Pence wouldn't have lunch with a woman who wasn't his wife? In fact, he said, he would never be in a room alone with a woman who wasn't his wife. The media absolutely obliterated him! It's sexist. It's keeping women down.

Now, you might think he took it further than he needed to or he was too strict, but his reason for doing it was not sexism. He didn't do it because he thought he was holier or less fallen than anyone else; He put those rules in place because he knows he's not! And yet the media was brutal!

Well, now that all the sex abuse and sexual assault stuff is coming to light—and make no mistake, I think it’s good that it is—I wonder if anyone will change their mind and see the wisdom in setting up some strategic rules for protection.

It’s amazing to me how often people get caught and they apologize and almost with a sense of shock say something like, “I don’t know what happened to me. This is not who I am.” Complacency says, *“I’m good enough to control myself. I could never fall for something like that!”* That’s dangerous thinking.

But that was the attitude of the religious leaders. “We’re smarter now.” “We’ve progressed.” “We would never kill a prophet.” But Jesus’ answer was that not only *would* they have done it before, he says they *will*. In verse 34 he tells them he’s going to send out some prophets and he tells them this, **“Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.”** If you read further, you know they killed Jesus himself. And that Jesus *did* send his disciples and they were flogged and crucified and pursued from town to town—starting with Stephen in Acts, chapter 7 and continuing from there. Spiritual complacency.

Now, I suspect you’re probably not going to kill any prophets or pastors for telling you what you don’t want to hear... But if you’re not careful, it’s possible that you end up divorced, have an affair, get addicted to pornography or alcohol, or believe that you’re right with God and yet be filled with hypocrisy, self-righteousness and pride. If you’re not

careful, it could destroy your family, your career, your faith or even the church. And the sad thing is that you won't even see it coming.

So, the question is, how do we fight complacency? Well, I think the first answer is found right here in this section and it's this: *fear judgment*. I know some people say this sounds like Old Testament stuff. But now we know God is *love*, so why would we fear judgment? Well, because Jesus says so in verse 33, **“How will you escape being condemned to hell?”** And earlier in the chapter he tells them they make their converts **“twice as much a child of hell as they are!”** I know this shocks people because we don't think about Jesus as a “fire and brimstone” preacher. But you might be surprised that Jesus mentions judgment quite a bit.

Now, at this point, I need to pause for a moment and say a few things about hell because I know there are many people who won't consider Christianity because they can't stomach idea that God would torture people forever because of some sins they committed in an 80-year life. For many people, that's a non-starter.

Even for many Christians, the idea of hell doesn't seem to be consistent with what Jesus reveals about the character of God. It seems unduly harsh and even sadistic. We have a sense that the punishment needs to fit the crime, but the idea of endless torture doesn't seem to do that. So, most of the time we just avoid the issue because we don't know how to answer these questions.

Now, some Christians answer by saying that we have a fallen sense of justice. If we had God's perfect understanding, we would be OK with it. The problem is that even though we can't understand *everything*, can't we trust *something* about our sense of justice? Justice is a pretty significant Biblical theme, but if we can't understand something as basic as it seems unfair to torment people forever, then how can we make *any* judgments about justice? Could it be that the reason many have an issue with it is because God *has* given us a reliable sense of justice and it doesn't seem to coincide with what is plain about the character of God as Jesus reveals it in Scripture?

Now, with all that said, we can't do away with a teaching simply because we don't like it. God is God and we're not. And we believe the Bible is the Word of God and reliably and authoritatively teaches us Truth. So, rather than saying, "We don't like hell, let's get rid of it," it should motivate us to go to *Scripture* and try to figure out why what we've been taught about hell might *seem* out of touch with what Jesus tells us about God. Unfortunately, we don't have time to go too far with it today, but this is an incredibly important question for people today. So, I at least want to get you started on where to look to study the topic and I've listed some Scriptures and resources in your notes.

First, there's no denying that the Bible clearly teaches that someday we'll all stand before God and will receive our due, whether it's reward or punishment. The Bible

teaches quite plainly and directly and it's been part of the Creeds from the beginning. It's clear that there will be a judgment someday.

But beyond that, the Bible is a little less clear. Hell is often described as flames, but are they real, physical flames or are they metaphorical? It also describes hell as utter darkness—can real flames and darkness exist at the same time? Sincere, orthodox Christians throughout history have disagreed about this. And the truth is that we get our mental image of hell more from Dante's *Inferno* than we do from the Bible.

Through history, there have been three major views about hell that were considered orthodox. The first one is often called *Eternal Conscious Torment (ECT)*. This has been majority view from the time of Augustine in the 4th Century. ECT says that the unrighteous will spend all of eternity in conscious torment as punishment for their sin.

The second view is what is often called "*Conditional Immortality*" or "Conditionalism" or "Annihilationism." This view says that the wicked will be punished for the appropriate time, but eventually and mercifully, their soul will be destroyed.

A third view is what we might call *Restorationism*. This is similar to the Catholic teaching of purgatory—that some people aren't quite ready for heaven, so they need to pay the punishment for their sin to be cleansed and purified for heaven. Some within this camp will say that *everyone* eventually makes it, but it takes longer for some. Others say,

that there are some who were just too bad or they continue to be angry at God, so they'll burn for eternity anyway, but most people will eventually make it to heaven.

Most believe the image of flames is metaphorical, but we get a picture of each view by what the flames do. ETC would say the flames *torment*. Conditionalists say the flames *consume*. And Restorationists say the flames *purify* to make people fit for heaven.

There are some other views that don't fit into these categories and tend to be more philosophical. And while I lean toward the Conditionalist view, I really like what C.S. Lewis' says about hell—that God doesn't send anyone to hell who doesn't want to go. Essentially, people in hell choose hell because they couldn't stand to be in heaven.

My point today isn't to convince you of any particular view of hell, but I do encourage you to look into it because I know this is *the barrier* for many people when it comes to Christianity. The truth is that neither the Bible nor the creeds necessitate any particular view of hell. But there are some things that are clear about hell from the Bible.

First, hell is *real*. Whatever it looks like, there is judgment after this life.

Second, hell is *eternal*. Whether it's punishment or destruction, it's final.

Third, hell is *bad*. Hell is not the place where you go to party with your buddies. It's painful, it's separation from God. And you don't know how bad that is because you've never experienced the hopelessness of separation from God because even in your darkest moment, God's presence was there. Hell is bad and you don't want to go there.

Finally, hell isn't just for the unreligious. It's a danger for the self-righteous, hypocritical, and complacent religious people. In fact, I could only find one time where Jesus warned of judgment and he wasn't talking to complacent religious people.

Now, when I talk about fearing judgment, I'm not talking about the fear like you would fear a terrorist or cancer that seem to be random and unpredictable. I'm talking about fear as a motivating respect—more like knowing there's a test coming motivates you to study.

The Bible tells us that Jesus died to take on the punishment we deserve for our sin. So, when we trust Jesus, we're covered. But trust starts with a decision, but it's not just a one-time thing. It's a continual process of getting to know Jesus better and following him. That each day as you get up, you commit once again to following.

So, what does that look like? First, it's *embracing humility*. Now I know I might be sounding like a broken record here because it seems like humility has been the answer to this whole chapter. But it's true—and attitude of humility is the foundation for anyone who wants to follow Jesus.

Humility is being aware of our sins and failures and shortcomings and readily admitting we're not perfect and that we need God's forgiveness. So many Christians today are so mouthy in our society, pointing out other people's sins and gloating when people get what's coming to them. Yet at the same time, they ignore their own sin.

Humility doesn't point out other people's sin. It's introspective. 1 Timothy 4:16 says, **"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers."**

And listen these words from James 3:13, **"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.**

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness." Humility holds this kind of life up as the example to follow.

And finally, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Hebrews 12 says, **"...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."**

It's so tempting in our day to get caught up in so much stuff that really seems to be Christian, but it doesn't look too much like Jesus. There's much in Christian politics that doesn't look much like Jesus. There's much in Christian popular culture that doesn't look much like Jesus. There's much on the internet—with bloggers and Facebook that on the surface seems Christian, but it doesn't really look a whole lot like Jesus. That's why we can't be content looking to those things as our teacher and our example.

We have to continue to go back to Jesus. To look to the Bible and look honestly at ourselves to see if how we live out our faith matches up with Jesus. Is your faith producing the kind of life Jesus taught or are you just going through the motions?

I want to end today with a moment of introspection—to take a couple of minutes for you to ask yourself some searching questions.

The first is, "Have you made the decision to trust Jesus with your life?"

Second, "Have you become complacent or self-satisfied in your faith?"

Third, "Is there sin or sins that have crept into your life because you haven't been diligent about your faith?"