

## Matthew 23:1-12

23Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup>“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; <sup>3</sup>therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it;

but **do not do as they do**, for they **do not** practice what they teach.

<sup>4</sup>They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but **they themselves** are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

<sup>5</sup>They do all their deeds **to be seen by others**; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. <sup>6</sup>They love to have the **place of honor** at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, <sup>7</sup>and to be **greeted with respect** in the marketplaces, and to have people call them **rabbi**. <sup>8</sup>But you are **not** to be called **rabbi**, for you have **one** teacher, and **you are all students**.

<sup>9</sup>And call no one your **father** on earth, for you have **one** Father—the one in heaven.

<sup>10</sup>Nor are you to be called **instructors**, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. <sup>11</sup>The **greatest** among you will be your **servant**. <sup>12</sup>All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who **humble** themselves will be exalted.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Happy Reformation Sunday everyone! We gather every last Sunday of October to celebrate the hanging of 95 Theses by Martin Luther back in 1517. This ‘re-forming’ of how we understood church sparked the beginning of a faith tradition which we celebrate **even to this day**, with robes, and organ music, and people sitting uncomfortably in wooden pews 😊.

**The Reformation was about rejecting the status quo.** Martin Luther and John Calvin may have been two of the leaders of this movement, but people being upset about religion has never been, nor ever will be, a new idea. If we read the Scriptures we are made aware of a long line of individuals and groups who ‘called out’ the existing religious structure of the time; people like Noah, Jonah, Isaiah, Esther, ...and Jesus, to name a few.

Our Presbyterian faith tradition is no different. According to some reports, there are at least 10 different denominations within the US alone today who claim 'Presbyterian' as their heritage, and the numbers globally are much more.

The idea behind reformation is pretty simple. We witness it today in the Middle East and Africa with the protests in Egypt, Lybia, and Syria. We even witness the calls for reformation here in the US today with 'Occupy Wall Street' and a different march on Washington every month.

**Reformation TODAY is also called for with the rejection of the status quo.**

The CONFLICT and tougher question today, however, and this is what many of today's reformers are facing, is 'okay, so I hear that you're against this. **What exactly are you FOR?**'

And this is unfortunately where many mouths fall silent, where leadership is lacking, and there is a disunity of opinion and vision. Upon reading Matthew's text this morning, we may be asking this same question.

## **III. SCRIPTURE**

According to the author of Matthew, Jesus is credited with a series of condemnations against the religious leadership of the time following his arrival in Jerusalem. Again, many could say that Jesus is calling for some reformation. But **what, exactly, is Jesus calling for** here? I think it's important to note here the importance not so much on the condemnation of the Pharisees, but more on the **theological statement** that is being made here by the author. The aim of this teaching is ultimately not to disrepute the individual scribes and Pharisees, but **rather to teach the crowds about living in the presence of God**.

Well, it's pretty clear that Jesus is upset, right? In fact, he's got a laundry list of the ways that the scribes and Pharisees are messing up. I've seen people like this before. My mom gets like this every now and again. I can still picture to this day her walking into a dirty kitchen after a long day of work with the rest of us sitting around, and I can hear the anger in her voice building with every word. And when she's mad, you better figure out QUICK what she wants you to do, even if she won't tell you!

So I learned in my years of wisdom to take what I call the 'opposite' approach in times like these. Simply put: listen to what the person is yelling about, and do the exact opposite. I still remember the rest of my family and their looks of surprise and helplessness as my mother would share EVERYTHING that was wrong with the house...maybe we can learn from this 'opposite' approach.

Jesus at least told the people what do in verse 3:

3therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; **but do not do as they do**, for they do not practice what they teach.

Okay, let's put this opposite approach to work here...

- 4They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

So what should we do? **Place only light burdens, and be willing to help out—YES!**

- 5They do all their deeds **to be seen by others**; for they make their phylacteries (this is part of their outfit) broad and their fringes long. **Do your deeds in secret, and do not draw attention to yourself.**
- 6They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. **Sit with the lowly; don't assume any recognition.**

How many of us know people like this? They may your family, your friend, your boss, etc. How would Jesus have acted? How did he go about his business in his daily life? His prayer life? His eating meals? His teaching?

Jesus just does not leave us helpless though in this passage. He continues to teach, and leaves us with one of the essential tenets of Reformed theology. In contrast to the actions of the religious leaders, we are to focus on **God's sovereignty, or the one will of God.**

- 8But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.
- 9And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven.
- 10Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.

The idols were the same then as they are today: power, money, popularity. But Jesus reminds us that worship only one God.

This final section is said to be just as important for early **Christian** leaders as it is for the **Jewish** leaders at the time this gospel was written. Already there are individuals in the Early Church whose heads were getting too big. So here is a new paradigm for faithfulness in God's identity.

- 11The greatest among you will be your servant.
- 12All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

This idea is called 'The Great Reversal', which Jesus, himself, modeled in his life. Why is this important? What does this say about the world?

### III. RESPONSE

Again, we come back to our original question: 'okay, I hear what you're against, Jesus.

#### **But what are you for?'**

Yes, we're not called to be like the Pharisees...that's pretty clear... or is it? But are we called to be disciples? Well, if the idea of becoming a disciple seems like a little too big of a step for you, I've got a secret: the Disciples didn't get it right all of the time either...

And there's a lesson here that I think we need to hear today. Just as Jesus was calling out the hypocritical practices of institutional religion, and just as Martin Luther and John Calvin were calling out the hypocritical practices of the Church in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, **we have to acknowledge the fact that there is hypocrisy here in the Church today.** And what Jesus, and Martin Luther, and John Calvin, and even MLK Jr. did so well is not only point out the hypocrisy, but they then pointed us to what is most important in our faith lives: **it's about following the will of God, and God alone.**

We come to an idea called **Discipleship.** Simply put, it means **to follow Jesus in our daily lives.**

And in my opinion, this is one of the most important things you can do as a Christian: take home your faith identity, and grow in Christ each day.

And this is what discipleship is about. It's not about the fancy robes that the ministers wear, or the beautiful church facilities, or how big our operating budget is. It's not about saying the right words when you pray, or raising perfect children, or marrying the perfect spouse. Just as the scribes and Pharisees had to learn that day, we need to learn as well. While these things can be **nice** to have as part of our faith lives, **the only thing that matters is how you are following the will of the God of Creation.** This is our Reformed thought for the day☺.

And there are three ways that I would like for us to think about following Jesus today.

### 1. **Accepting God's grace**

'The Cost of Discipleship,' Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1937

"costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is **costly because** it compels a person to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is **grace because** Jesus says: "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

What does submission look like in your life? How do you submit to God?

### 2. **We are called to live as examples of Christ's humility.**

The Apostle Paul, another follower of Christ writes about discipleship...

Phil 2:5-8 <sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, <sup>7</sup>but **emptied** himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, <sup>8</sup>he **humbled** himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

In a world where we are called to be confident, in control, and self-sufficient, how are we also called to be humble in the Twenty First Century?

### 3. Not just fans, but disciples (Kyle Idlemand, 'Not a Fan')

I was having a conversation with a friend of mine who's a pastor at a local church, and he said something that has had me thinking for the past few weeks. He said that his church does a great job of creating converts, but they are struggling to make faithful disciples. We have a challenge in this world to move beyond people 'going to church,' and instead understanding that we are called to 'be the church'. Is that our challenge here at First Presbyterian?

Hear these words that come from the website of the UMC:

Discipleship is about loving God....It is more than an acknowledgement of God's existence or a statement of belief regarding God. It is total devotion, head-over-heels-in-love-with adoration. It is the deep desire to know God, to be one with God, and to worship God. (umc.org)

This is the Good News and our challenge this week that Jesus, in his teaching was all about, which our Reformed Tradition points to each and every day. When we have God as the center of our lives, and not ourselves, we are **free to follow as faithful disciples** in grace, humility, and with our very lives.

What will this look like in your life? Thanks be to God, and God alone.