

Series: All Peoples	Reference: <i>Various Passages</i>	Title: Light or Heavy	Date: 08.16.2020
Website Writeup: Today we look at Matthew 23:23 where Jesus challenges Jewish Leaders. We're asking are we heavy in the outwardly religious things, but light in the more weighty immaterial issues relating to the heart of God?			

I have to give credit to Eric Mason, a black pastor in Philly, for the general direction & flow, as well as much of the content of this sermon. I identify him as black given it's significant to the conversation since, as such, I wanted to hear what he had to say on this subject & loved what I heard.

We've talked about addressing these difficult race & equality issues from within a biblical worldview with Jesus at the center, not putting people in the position of victim, or on the defensive, rather giving all equal voice in the discourse of human interaction & regard. Evil would pit people against one another seeking revenge & subjugation, bringing further separation. But Christ is about true biblical justice, where mercy & fairness reign in breaking down walls of division through forgiveness, mercy, biblical justice & understanding - treating all equitably.

This is a new day for sure as God is doing something great, despite all the division & vitriol expressed in society. We have things to learn & changes to make in how we regard & operate in relationship with others. We can't court compromise through alignment with divisive anti-Christian movements, but that in no way means we're not about biblical justice. It doesn't mean we can't engage with people we disagree with. It just requires wisdom, love & mercy to do so without compromise. Our central purpose isn't to solve all societal ills, but to speak the gospel into society through bold words & loving action - to be salt & light in a dark tasteless world.

The church has always learned in similar difficult situations. For instance...

- (1) In Acts 6 the Hellenistic non-jewish peoples among early believers were being neglected due to favoritism. The church listened to each other & maturely made adjustments, understanding that we sometimes operate out of blindness & without nefarious intention. And where wrong intentions *are* apparent, we confront, calling for repentance & transformation.
- (2) In Galatians 2, Paul confronted Peter as he noticed him to pull away from Gentiles when Jews were present, treating them differently. Paul confronted this directly with a plea from Scripture. Peter changed.
- (3) Jesus gave the Disciples a lesson in John 4 by interacting openly with a Samaritan woman at a well, demolishing longstanding racism & animosity the Disciples held towards Samaritans & women!

(4) Paul & Barnabas also came into sharp dispute with the Council at Jerusalem, where the leaders were unfairly putting unrealistic burdens on Gentile believers. In all these instances changes were made as issues were challenged by Scripture!

As in past instances, some whites have either been ignorant to, or disregarded the minority plight. However, when issues are made clear, Christians can, and often do, address them well through a Biblical Worldview. Likewise, non-whites, confronted with the truth of Scripture as it pertains to all peoples, would also embrace unity with those different from them in Christ. I'm confident the Church will do well, since the Spirit of God resides within her. Admittedly, the issues are complicated & change often happens slowly, but it does happen.

Someone recently said, hurt people cry & really hurt people scream - so it's the job of the church to listen & adjust when necessary to these pains in society with Christ at the center of our message & practice. Let's go to Scripture for guidance. Join me in opening up to Matthew 23:23, where Jesus says...*"Woe to you, scribes & Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint & dill & cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice & mercy & faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others."*

Whenever you hear the word 'woe' in Scripture it's both a warning & invitation towards repentance, identifying some deviance from God's standard where change needs to be made outwardly, in practice & inwardly, in the attitude of hearts.

Jesus is comparing the commitment these men had to the light natural material outworking of religion to the more weighty spiritual immaterial issues which reflect the heart of God to all peoples. He probably has in mind Micah 6:8 as He says these words in Matthew 23...*He has shown you, O man. What is good & what does the Lord require of you? But to act justly, to love mercy & to walk humbly with your God.*

Mint, dill & cumin are light spices, the lightest smallest things one could tithe. He's saying, you look spiritually heavy when you practice all the outward practices of religion down to the very small light tithe of spice. Outwardly, you look spiritually heavy, paying attention to minute physical details, but you're not practicing the weightier immaterial issues of justice, mercy & faithfulness. You look religiously heavy, but you're spiritually light. And it's not that you shouldn't practice tithing of these natural things - you should be doing both. So they're following the outward practices down to the minutia of very light things, but in the heavy weightier issues which govern human relationships in equality & justice they were light.

The outward things *are* important, should be done & can be meaningful, but only if the heart's in the right place. In Isaiah chapter 1 God says to Israel that He has no use for their outward offerings when their hearts are not in the right place. He says...*Your hands are full of blood! ¹⁶Wash & make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. ¹⁷Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow. (Is 1:15-17)*

It's possible to do the outward things without the inward, but it's impossible to do the inward things without it meaningfully bleeding into outward actions - a good tree will be known by its fruit! The inward things are who you are & becoming to be. If you're heart's right with Jesus, your actions are just & merciful. If your heart's not right with Jesus, you can do all the little outward religious things, hopefully fooling everyone that you're some spiritual giant, but Jesus knows & calls you on it.

We've learned in past sermons, Israel from the beginning was to be a light to all the peoples of the world; all nations. We've followed that call from Genesis to Revelation. Regarding all peoples as fellow creations of God & as such with value as we're to bring the light of salvation to all.

The prohibitions in the Old Testament against taking on pagan practices of surrounding nations wasn't a prohibition of interaction, or a call to complete separation. Rather it was a call to purity in walking in the ways of God by bringing the light of His word to others as we walk among them. God is just & merciful, His people are to be the same in attitude & practice. Beginning internally with each other, followed with how we treat others outside the faith. It's these inner weightier godly characteristics which people seek & respond to because they're light & salt to them.

In discussion among pastors these days the question often is, how *multiethnic* is your church? Our goal as a local church isn't to be multiethnic or multicultural. When that becomes the goal, we're focused only on the outward religiosity of church. Not every church can be multiethnic given geography. And even when they are, it doesn't mean it's addressing the weightier issues of justice, mercy & faithfulness. Going to a multiethnic church may only be your light tithe of spice, making you look good on the outside, but the inside goes unchanged.

Eric Mason says his church in Philly is multiethnic on Sunday mornings, but not during the week. That people like to say they go to his church *because* it's 'multiethnic', but in reality, the deeper issues which separate still haven't been addressed & it's seen in how segregated they are during the week.

It's easy for us to do the outward things. Write a check. Show up to church on Sunday. Worship alongside others. Go to a Bible Study. All those should be done, but we can't neglect the deeper issues which divide. And that work begins firstly in our own hearts as we're confronted & convicted by God's word. It's easy to voice that we love all peoples equally, but how is that play out in our lives? Who's really challenging us in these things, some young student yelling on the street, or God Himself? This is God authored stuff, He embodies justice, mercy & faithfulness - He called us to this before anyone else began yelling about it & His justice is merciful, pure, not bitter & full of forgiveness.

It's a different & much harder thing, to address the issues of injustice, or lack of mercy & unfaithfulness to God's heart in these matters. It's difficult to engage in discipleship relationships with others where everyone's treated as equal, listened to & adjustments are made for the health of the whole body. It's easy to go on a march, it's much more difficult to actually walk into a neighborhood different than you & engage in relationship & ministry together. It takes sacrifice & forgiveness.

Leaders have always been expected to lead in these things, embracing them in the most intimate way. But these guys were acting like something was present in them, which actually wasn't & Jesus called them hypocrites. The word hypocrite at its root is derived from the concept of being an actor. Words connected with it are deceiver, imposter, pretender. In British slang, a hypocrite is 'A Creeping Jesus' - I like that one best since it takes the good name of Jesus making it awkward & uncomfortable, revealing the exact opposite character of Christ. Someone trying to look like Jesus, but not really Jesus.

We're willingly deceived by actors, they act as if something is happening that isn't. That's great in the realm of entertainment, but in the governance of human relationships & especially in the life of the Church, where we're to reflect God's heart, hypocrisy & play-acting are damaging & hurtful. I can't just say I love all peoples equally without actually loving them equally.

It's pretending we're committed, without really being committed. It's saying we're not racist, without actually caring about the suffering of those different from us. It's closing our ears to the crying & screaming, especially when it seems like personal attack. Taking the higher road of forgiveness & going to the cross daily for others.

The church needs to grow confident in its prophetic voice. Speaking & living the Gospel out in society in bold practical ways. Voicing & living biblical truth which addresses our current social ills. Which takes a deeper commitment on our part, and isn't easy.

Here's a good statement for today...*We acknowledge, racial tensions within the Church, on this side of eternity, may likely continue until Christ returns to perfect us. Nonetheless, as modeled in Acts 6, we resolve to actively listen to the broad outcry coming from our minority brethren's complaints of neglect & racial injustice. Rather than seeking to dismiss concerns, we choose empathy, seeking solutions together that address them & promote unity. This often requires us to study & better understand our own history & culture, and how each may contribute to present racial tensions.*

Remember, we heard last week, we've been declared by Jesus as the light of the world. Light shines in darkness & things are dark right now. To shine well, putting our light up on a stand to benefit all those around us we must become & remain close to Jesus, understanding what He's called us to in Scripture, making adjustments where we're not living it out in complete commitment.

It means unity within the church, which we've been speaking about for weeks. What does being unified in Jesus look like for the church as urged in Ephesians 4:3-6 where it says, *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4There is one body & one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6one God & Father of all, who is over all & through all & in all.*

What does it look like to allow Jesus to break down the dividing walls of hostility making us one as it states in Ephesians 2? These aren't easy conversations or solutions - individual Christians may have different specific callings & convictions in this work of race reconciliation. God may call you to engage society in certain ways differently than

your brother or sister in Christ, but we should all be unified under Christ, that justice, mercy & faithfulness, and the gospel message, are the things we pursue in the church, no matter what. And in doing so we become a brighter light to the world. Where the world can point to us & say, "They're practicing justice, mercy & humility! What do they have that we don't?" The answer is obviously Jesus.

The PH scale runs from 0-14, one end being acidic, the other alkaline & with the center balance as 7. The only thing you can add to either side is pure water to bring it back to center balance. If something's too alkaline, add pure water, too acidic, add pure water. That's Jesus' Church in the world. No matter what extreme people fall within, add Jesus (the Living Water), since He's the only one who can bring us back to balance or neutrality. Jesus has created us to be His representatives in social relationships - we are the light, salt & pure water added to these situations which bring people back to center. We preserve & make things better & shed light on evil intentions & practices which destroy & block the life of Christ.

But being 'in Jesus' is in essence confrontational. Before we confront the world, Jesus confronts our heart with its idols, misconceptions & secret sinful attitudes. Confrontation's at the center of the relationship. So you, as a member of the body of Christ, will be confronted in your thinking of others by Jesus first. And also, in the act of discipleship & witness, where you inject yourself into the ills of the world, it'll not be easy. It'll be messy & difficult at times. Notice how much you wrestle against the Spirit of God, so expect that to be more intense with those who don't yet have the Holy Spirit. People wrestle in the light as their sin is exposed until soothing repentance lays down our guard & we allow Jesus to do His work in us.

These things Jesus points out in Matthew 23:23 are the glasses we put on to look at everything & everyone with a Christian worldview - they're reflective of the heart of Christ. As Jesus said in John 5:39-40...*You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*

Scripture reflects Jesus. When we read verses like Micah 6:8, we're confronted to think in new ways & adjust ourselves to reflect justice, mercy & humility. Justice is to utilize God's word equitably among all peoples. Not to play favorites, to extend equal opportunity & dignity to all. It's judging rightly in all situations.

In John 8:1-11 in the story of the woman about to be stoned for adultery - they weren't judging rightly since they were doing the same things, they just hadn't got caught. Jesus says they're hypocrites, they were unjust & unmerciful. Actors, playing religion, not reflecting the heart of God. White, black, brown, whatever we are, we can't condemn a whole other group since we certainly don't know every one of them - that would not be judging rightly.

Eric Mason pointed out that the issues in the black culture are very real. He said at one point the Philadelphia school district laid off about 2500 people, closed a bunch of

schools & dropped the education budget by 410k then raised the prison budget a half a billion. The largest population affected by this were blacks at 81%.

So his church partnered with Temple to gain materials & teach other skills to kids affected. But at the core of his desire as pastor is to share the gospel through these endeavors. They have many muslim families who send their kids to their programs. Apparently, they don't care their kids hear about Jesus, as long as they're off the street. That's being light, practicing Titus 3:14 which says, *Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order to provide for urgent needs & not live unproductive lives.*

We often revert to being law-keepers when we see issues around us. We become Pharisees just doing the right things & measuring everyone else against the law. But the term mercy is intimately tied with the Ark of the Covenant where the Law was kept. When we look at it, there's the Ark with the Law inside, and the cherubim covering the top with folded wings. They overshadow the Mercy Seat, the seat on which the Shekinah Glory of God sits. Think about that picture. God sits on the Mercy Seat over top of His Law. In other words, He responds to you with mercy in spite of the fact that you fall short of being perfect measured against His law. Then He calls us to reflect Him in character, in the same way to the world around us. Which means our lead foot is mercy - mercy & justice as it pertains to Jesus' sacrifice being the filter to which we view all peoples no matter what they do to us.

2 Co 13:11 says, *Finally, brothers & sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love & peace will be with you.*

I urge you to be prayerful today in light of our current cultural status. Examine your heart before the Lord, measured against the standard of His law & couched in the mercy of the Cross. Avoid the temptation towards condemnation the Evil One brings, rest in the righteousness Christ has laid upon you. You are right with God in Christ, but you are being sanctified in Christ as well. Where do you need to adjust, where do you need to practice the inward things as well as the outward things of your relationship with Jesus? Where are you heavy or light? Pray for unity in these things as a church - how can we *learn to devote ourselves to doing what is good, in order to provide for urgent needs & live productive lives?*

Because...We acknowledge, racial tensions within the Church, on this side of eternity, may likely continue until Christ returns to perfect us. Nonetheless, as modeled in Acts 6, we resolve to actively listen to the broad outcry coming from our minority brethren's complaints of neglect & racial injustice. Rather than seeking to dismiss concerns, we choose empathy, seeking solutions together that address them & promote unity. This often requires us to study & better understand our own history & culture, and how each may contribute to present racial tensions.