Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Characteristics of False Spiritual Leaders, Part 1
Scripture: Matthew 23:1-4
Code: 2360

Let's open our Bibles together to Matthew Chapter 23, Matthew Chapter 23. It is our privilege this morning to look at one of the most fascinating provocative stirring portions of Matthew's gospel as we embark upon this 23rd Chapter. We're going to being this morning a look at the first 12 verses. And if I were to entitle this particular section I would simply entitle it False Spiritual Leaders, False Spiritual Leaders.

There have always been and there always will be in this world false spiritual leaders who pretend to represent God, but in fact do not represent God. The Old Testament talks about them, identifies them, and warns people to stay away from them. The New Testament does the same. In fact, Moses was in conflict with them in Egypt. Jeremiah was fighting with them in Judah. Ezekiel faced them and called them foolish prophets that followed their own spirit and have seen nothing. Our Lord warned of them as false Christ's and false prophets who shall show great signs and wonders. The apostle Paul struggled against them as preachers of another gospel in Galatians Chapter 1, and purveyors of the doctrine of demons he called them in writing to Timothy.

Peter said they were false preachers who secretly bring in damninable heresies and they are like dogs who return to lick up their own vomit. John, the apostle, saw a coming anti-Christ and many anti-christs already present who denied Jesus as the true Christ. Jude saw them and called them deluded dreamers who defile the flesh. And Paul may have summed it up well when he said they are wolves whose desire is to enter in not sparing the flock. They're always present and they're always eager to counterfeit the work of God.

In the second coming of Jesus Christ as the great event unfolds we see the false prophets amass and congregate as portrayed for us in those apocalyptic visions of Scripture that look to that future time. And it seems to us that that may be the time when they flourish as it were in their hey day, but if there is a time equal to that time for the working of false prophets it must have been in Palestine during the time of the Lord Jesus Christ. For in His first coming all hell amassed its forces for a three-year assault on Him and His truth. Therefore, false spiritual leaders take a very high profile, a very great visibility in the gospel record. And in this particular chapter we hear the Lord Jesus Christ confront them with a denunciation that blisters and burns as it comes from His lips. Right thorough verse 36 is the scathing rebuke of false prophets and only in the last three verses of the chapter are there words of tenderness and words of pity.

Now as we look at this particular text I want you to note that it fall into three sections does Chapter 23. The first twelve verses are spoken to the crowd and the disciples. From verse 13 to 36 it's spoken to the Pharisees themselves and the last moment of tender compassion over the plight of the lost of Israel.

Now we're looking at the first twelve verses and to get the scene in mind let's look at verse 1. "Then spoke Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, saying. Now the word then just hooks us up with the past. We know we're on the same day, it's Wednesday still, as I said last time, a very long Wednesday. A Wednesday that began in the morning, with the Lord coming into the city from Bethany, where He had spent the night near or with Lazarus and Mary and Martha. And along the way they had passed the cursed fig tree and He taught His disciples a lesson then coming to the temple, which He had cleansed the day before He began to teach and as He was teaching the massive multitudes collected for the Passover He was stopped by the religious leaders and they began this dialogue, which has gone on now for several chapters. They wanted to know by what authority He did and said the things He did and said and He didn't give them that authority at first, but rather gave them three parables, which condemned them and told them they would be shut out of the kingdom of God and replaced by others. They then counter those parables of condemnation with three questions meant to discredit Him, each of which He answered in such a way as to discredit them. And then He finally asked them a question about the Messiah, which proved beyond shadow of a doubt that the Messiah was both man and God and at this point they stopped asking anything at all.

And so the dialogue, as such, has ended. And beginning then in verse 1 of Chapter 23, the Lord gives His last sermon to the people of Israel. This is it. His ministry to them is over. This is the last public speech and it is a denunciation of these false religious leaders and a warning for the people to stay away from them. It is a very severe serious presentation, but a very necessary one. They are false shepherds, they are wolves in sheep's clothing, they damn people, and they must be avoided. And our Lord pulls no punches in making that abundantly clear.

Now it isn't the first time that He has denounced them. A year earlier He had and a few months before as recorded in Luke 11, He had said some very similar things to what He says now. So He's already confronted them and called them what they truly were, but now he warns the people particularly to stay away from them because they damn men's souls.

Now there's another thought that you need to have. The Lord knows that He's about to die on Friday and soon after that He will ascend to heaven and the work will be left with His disciples. And it is essential that the people be warned to stay away from the false religious leaders and to be turned toward the true spiritual leaders. And He knows that the true spiritual leaders will be His disciples who after His ascent to heaven will be filled with the Spirit of God and will go everywhere preaching

the gospel. And He wants the people to be ready to listen to them. And so He warns the people about the false spiritual leaders so their hearts will be open to the true ones. And in a sense He's setting us His disciples for their ministry, that's why down in verse 8 to 12, He calls His disciples to be distinctly different than these false spiritual leaders are. So it isn't just a denunciation of the leaders, it isn't just a warning of the people, it is both of those with a purpose, that the people might listen to those who are true spiritual leaders, who manifest, in fact, the very opposite kind of characteristics to the ones that He will denounce in the false leaders.

By the way, He succeeded in calling the people away from them to some degree and to His disciples because you'll remember the very first day they preached on the day of Pentecost three thousand people believed and were baptized and that is in Acts Chapter 2. And you don't move much beyond that in the Book of Acts until you see even greater things occurring, thousands more coming to embrace the Savior. And perhaps by Chapter 4 there are as many as twenty thousand who have heard and believed in apostolic preaching. And by Chapter 5 and verse 28 they complain that these preachers have filled all Jerusalem with their teaching, and so the Lord paved the way here for the true spiritual leaders, His own disciples, to do their work and call the people away from the damning doctrines of the false leaders.

Now notice in verse 1 He speaks to the multitude and His disciples. This doesn't mean the scribes and Pharisees didn't hear because they did. The religious leaders were all gathered. They were there because they had been there for the whole questioning process. They heard but the message was directed to the multitude and the disciples. Primarily the disciples are in view in verse 8 to 12, as we'll see next time, but they heard. And in verse 13, when He directs His words eyeball to eyeball to these false leaders the rest of the crowd heard as well.

So they are denounced publicly in the presence of the multitude and in their own presence also. This then is an electrifying scene. And again it helps us understand why they had to get rid of Jesus, why they had to have Him killed by the Romans, especially after such a blistering public denunciation, which threatened their own credibility and career.

Now notice in verse 2, it says He said, "The scribes, etc." They are the subject of these first remarks. Now not all the scribes were equally deserving of this rebuke. There may have been some scribes that had some integrity. Not all the Pharisees were either. There must have been some of them that had an honest heart toward God like Paul the apostle who was a Pharisee and who had some genuineness and did what he did ignorantly and unbelief. But for the most part they are generally characterized by the words of our Lord. There were some and few, I suppose, exceptions.

Now keep this in mind. There were various sects in Judaism. But the dominant sect was the Pharisees. The were the religious spiritual leaders. The Sadducees were primarily into politics and in amassing fortunes. They weren't really involved in the theology and the spiritual leadership though

they had some positions of authority in the hierarchy of the temple. Theirs was pretty much a political and economic operation. And there were the zealots who also were political nationalists. And there were the Essenes who were monastics and they never really had an impact on society because they utterly separated from society. And then there were the Herodians and they were a political party that pro the Herods. That leaves the bulk of spiritual leadership to this group called the Pharisees, of which some say there were no more than six thousand, but highly influential.

Now they were the ones committed to the law. You remember back in 586 when Judah was taken into captivity into Babylon. They were there for seventy years. They came back from Babylon, they started to reestablish life in the land, and you remember that Nehemiah and Ezra brought the Scriptures to the people again, and the Scriptures were discovered and in Nehemiah 8 there was a standing and a reading of the Scripture, you recall that? And this was after all these years of not having that, and the people all stood up and heard the reading and they swore to obey the Scripture and they swore to be committed to God' authority and God's word. And the law was put back in the center of their life. The law was put back in clear focus for them. And it became that which they were committed to.

Now at that time a group of people then became committed to studying and teaching the Scriptures. Out of this group grew this Pharisaic mentality, where the Scripture was everything, the Scripture was everything. And over the years from the time of Nehemiah's reading of the Scripture, Nehemiah 8, right down to the time of our Lord, these people have studied the law, interpreted the law to the point where there were in excess of fifty volumes of their commentary on the law. And they had added all kinds of things: ceremonies, rituals, regulations, add infinitum ad nausem, myriads of them and they had enjoined them on people. And for them life was all about the law.

Now all Pharisees were scribes, but within the group of Pharisees were a group of scribes who were among the Pharisees the experts in the law. All the Pharisees were committed to law keeping, but the scribes were the experts. They were the ones who cared for the law; they were the ones who dispensed the law. The old Jewish saying was that God gave the law to Moses, Moses gave the law to Joshua, Joshua gave the law to the elders, the elders gave the law to the prophets and the prophets gave the law to the men of the synagogues and the men of the synagogues were the scribes who were a part of the Pharisaic whose job it was to interpret and bind the law to the hearts of the people. Now that was their task.

So they were the spiritual leaders. They had the law they said. It wasn't just the law of God, it was the law of God and all the rest of that stuff and they bound it on the people. William Barkley who spent a part of his life in the land of Israel researching background material say there were seven kinds of Pharisees and he described them with these terms. First there was the shoulder Pharisee, so called because he wore his good deeds on his shoulder. He paraded the good that he did. When he prayed he would put something, ashes, on his head and he would look sad so everyone would

know how pious and spiritual he was. He was the shoulder Pharisee.

And then there was the wait a little Pharisee. This was the Pharisee who could come up with a spiritual reason to put off doing something good. He always had excuses but they sounded very pious.

And then there was the bruise and bleeding Pharisee who thought it was a sin to look at a woman and so whenever women were around he bent over and closed his eyes and he kept running into walls. And according to the Pharisees the more bruises you had from walls the more holy you were.

Then there was the humpback tumbling Pharisee and the humpback tumbling Pharisee was called that because he wanted to demonstrate his humility so he slouched way over and bent his back and walked around all day in that humble position and thought it was wrong to lift his feet so he shuffled his feet and he kept tripping on things and tumbling. And he was called the humpback tumbling Pharisee.

Then there was the ever reckoning Pharisee. He was the Pharisee who kept count of all of his good deeds so he's know what God owed him in terms of blessing.

And then there was the fearing Pharisee who did all that stuff because he was scared to death of going to hell. And then William Barkley suggested there was the God-fearing Pharisee who did what he did because he thought it was right to do it and he had integrity to some extent. He was the one out of the seven who was a really good guy. And that's the group to whom our Lord speaks in this chapter and of whom he warns.

Now in looking at verses 1 to 12, I want to suggest to you that a good way to see this section is to see it as a description of the characteristic of a false spiritual leader. And there are five elements that false spiritual leaders lack and I believe the Lord gives them to us right here. They lack authority, they lack integrity, they lack sympathy, they lack spirituality, and they lack humility.

Now conversely, beloved, those are things true spiritual leaders possess: authority, integrity, sympathy, spirituality, and humility. So it's a study in contrast. Now listen, this is historic, this is a description of false spiritual leaders in that time and that place, but you can take the principles right out of here and apply them today as if our Lord was standing here and saying it in relation to our time. They are truly the marks of false spiritual leaders, and they are important for us to know so that we can identify these people.

First of all it is implied in verse 2, that they lacked authority, that they lacked authority. You notice it says that Jesus said, "The scribes and the Pharisees," and the text says, "Sat in Moses' seat, sat in Moses' seat."

Now in the synagogues there was a special seat. It was called Moses' seat. It was the chair of Moses and in that chair, which may not have been a real chair, but stood for a place of authority was the leading teacher, the leading Pharisee, the leading scribe. If you had the seat of Moses in your synagogue you were the chief teacher. You represented the authority. In fact, the word seat is the word *cathedra*, from which we get cathedral, but maybe more significantly than that the Latin's took that Latin word *cathedra*and made a phrase out of it, *excathedra*out of the place of authority. And they said in the Roman Catholic system, when the Pope speaks he speaks *excathedra*it is then binding on the conscience, it is binding on the life because it is out of the throne of authority, or out of the seat of authority.

And so *cathedra*has to do with the seat, Moses has to do with the law, and so they spoke as the law authority. They were the authority. Like our modern universities have a chair of philosophy or a chair of history or a chair of biology or a chair of whatever, so the synagogue had a chair of Moses, a seat of Moses, a place of authority. The person occupying that seat would have great weight and great authority.

However, there is nothing in this verse to indicate that they had a right to sit there, that they had a right to pontificate about what the people should do, that they had a right to represent God in that place or the law of Moses. There is nothing to say that they had earned it, that it had been given them by God, that they were qualified to take it. All it says is they sat in it, they took it. In fact, they did everything they could to try to keep Jesus from taking it from them and when He did go into their synagogue and teach they were infuriated just as they were when Paul did that. And that's why John 16 says, "The day is going to come," when Jesus talks to His disciples, he says, "The day is going to come when men think they do God's service by killing you," and they're going to throw you out of their synagogues because a truth teacher who has real authority is always a threat to someone who is a usurper. And these usurpers had gone in and occupied the chair of authority when in face they did not delineate the divine authority but gave their own tradition and their own ritual and their own routines that they themselves through the centuries had invented. And did all they could to keep others out.

They are parallel to some men identified in the time of Jeremiah. Look to Jeremiah 14 for a moment. And Jeremiah faced the same kind of situation. Jeremiah was a true prophet. He was really a lonely prophet. He was crying out one message when all the other prophets were crying out a lie. He was telling the truth and all these other prophets were lying. They were all saying, "Oh it'll all be well. Everything is fine." And Jeremiah was saying, "It isn't," and the people would go to the teachers that said what they wanted to hear. They're identified in Jeremiah 14:14, "The Lord said to me, 'The prophets prophesy lies in My name.'" That is a fearful thing. To use the name of God to propagate lies. "I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spoke unto them. They prophesy unto you a false vision and divination and a thing of nothing and the deceit of their heart. Therefore,

thus saith the Lord concerning the prophets that prophesy in my name and I sent them not." He goes on to describe what He's going to do. He sent them not.

In Chapter 23, several times the same thing is indicated again, verse 21, "I have not sent these prophets yet they ran, I have not spoken to them yet they prophesy." Verse 32, "I am against those who prophesy false dreams," says the Lord, "And do tell them and cause my people to err by their lies and their instability, yet I sent them not, nor commanded them." And you find in Chapter 27:15, "I have not sent them." And it goes on like that Chapter 28, Chapter 29.

Isaiah, another of the great Old Testament prophets faced the same kind of thing. I believe it's Chapter 30:10, It says, "Say to the seers, see not, and to the prophets, prophesy not unto us right things. Speak unto us smooth things prophesy deceits. Get out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us." Don't tell us the truth. We don't want to hear what God wants us to know. That's an amazing thing. One of the reason people go into untrue religions, go into false religions is because they don't want to hear the truth. They don't want to hear what God really has to say. And so there's always an audience for false prophets.

In John 10:1-2, Jesus said, "The true shepherd enters the sheepfold through the door and those that climb into the sheepfold and don't come through the door are thieves and robbers, and they have come to steal your life." That's another characterization of false religious leaders, usurpers who have no right, who have no authority, who speak not for God nor are sent by God, but they take the place of authority and they put demands on people and they tell things in the name of God that are not the truth of God, usurpers, quite in contrast, by the way, to the one sent by the Lord; those who have been, like Paul, made a minister by the dispensation of the gospel, which is committed unto them. Those like Timothy who have been called by God and set apart by the laying on of hands is confirmation. Those like the apostles on whom the Lord breathed and said receive ye the Holy Spirit and to whom He said go into all the world and preach the gospel.

So the false spiritual leaders lacked authority. They had taken self-appointed seats of authority, filled them with their own ideas, filled them with their own traditions, filled them with their own regulations in addition to the law of God obscuring the law of God and when anyone threatens that seat of authority they become instantly hostile to those who threaten. It's the same today. There are usurpers all over the place. There are liars by the multitude uncountable, fostering their falsehoods, their diluted dreams, making up their supposed visions, saying the represent God speaking in His name and spewing out lies right out of hell that damn men's souls to one end of this world to the other. There is only one authority and that's the word of God and when the deviate from that they are usurpers as were these.

Now the second our Lord says and this not by implication but by explication directly is that they not only lacked authority but they lacked integrity. Lacking authority they were usurpers, lacking integrity

they are hypocrites. A most interesting verse, verse 3, follow it. "Paul, therefore, whatever they bid you observe, observe and do, but do not after their works for they say and do not."

Now listen very carefully to this or you will misunderstand it. He says all that they bid you do it. Now you could stop and say wait a minute, wait a minute, how comprehensive is the word all? Obviously this can't be a general comprehensive command to absolutely obey everything the Pharisees and scribes say because we've been told not to do that. That's what this whole speech is about. Then if you go back to Chapter 5 in the Sermon on the Mount from verse 21 to 28, the Lord was there saying the rabbi's and your tradition and all that says this, but I say this. And you've heard it told this and I say this, and you've heard this and I say this. In other words He says you're wrong. You're wrong about murder and you're wrong about fornication and you're wrong about divorce and you're wrong about adultery, and you're wrong about swearing and your prayers are wrong in chapter 6, and your alms are wrong and your worship is wrong.

And he condemns so many of the things they taught in chapter 6 and in Chapter 15 of Matthew He indicts them for having taken the commandments of God and set them aside and in their place put the traditions of men. And He says to them, "You have substituted the tradition of men for the commandments of God." So He has condemned much of their teaching. He has condemned much of it and He can't be giving blanket approval whatever they tell you to do, do it. What then is He saying? Well the idea is this: the key to it is to understand what He said in verse 2. They sat in Moses' seat, and listen carefully, insofar that they rightly reflect Moses you do what they say. If they read, as they always did in the synagogue, the law, you obey it. In other words in condemning these leaders there was always the potential problem that having condemned the leaders He would with them condemn their whole message and the people would; therefore, throw the whole baby out with the dirty bath water.

And what He is saying to them is look, we will condemn these individuals, but even these individuals speaking the law of God are speaking that which you must do. In other words the message from God is still the message from God even in the mouth of a false teacher. And so it was when the Pharisees read the word of God it was binding on their hearts. And when they said to love God, worship God, love your fellowman, love righteousness and hate evil, they were to do that. Insofar as Moses' law and the law of God was reflected it was to be obeyed.

You see the word of God is not corrupted even in the mouth of a false prophet. It remains the powerful word of God. So if they teach what Moses taught you must respond.

Now He says to them observe and do, it says in the King James. The Greek words are first word is really do *kueo*, it means it's an aris tense so it's the idea of immediately respond, do it. If it's out of the law of Moses do it, even if it's in their mouth, do it.

And then the second one is the verb *tayreho*, which means to go on doing, present tense. Do it and keep doing it. Do it and keep observing it. So He's calling them to an instant and continuous obedience to the law of God no matter who articulates it. I mean when a Mormon comes down the path and reads the Bible and calls people to love one another that's the word of God. Even in the mouth of a false prophet it's still the word of God. Don't throw that away because you eliminated the false prophet. So when they say the truth, and like a clock that doesn't run, it's still right twice a day, false prophets tend now and then to hit the truth. So as far as they fulfill the role of representing Moses you respond, because the issue is the word of God and there is no other authority.

But, the end of verse 3, watch this: "But do not after their works." If they recite Moses do it, but don't do what they do, because they say and, what, and don't do. They're hypocrites. I mean follow the word of God, but don't do what they do because they say something and don't do it. Oh my what a telling thing this is. They are phonies without integrity. They could teach the law of God, worship God, love righteousness, love your fellow men, hate evil, but they didn't live it.

I'm going to say something very important, listen. They couldn't live it, no way, because the flesh unredeemed has no internal ability to restrain evil and promote good. You understand that? It has none. They could be outwardly moral and outwardly ethical and they can develop very sophisticated ethics and morality and you listen and you say my that's good. It talks about God, it talks about love everybody, and they're nice to the poor and they're strong on the family, or whatever, and all this is really nice; the truth of the matter is they aren't even able to do what they're asking you to do because they have no internal power to restrain evil and promote good. Neither does anybody else who is unredeemed because it is only in redemption that you receive a divine nature, right. It is only in redemption that you are a new creation. That you are in terms of Ephesians 2:10, "Born again entering in to new life, which God has foreordained should be a life which exudes good works."

That's why Paul in Romans 7, having been redeemed says, "In my inner man I delight in the law of God," but you see unredeemed people no matter what their ethics are, no matter what their morality is cannot restrain the flesh internally and cannot promote good internally because they have an unredeemed and vile and fallen and vicious sin nature. Hypocrisy can't restrain the flesh.

You look at false religious systems and you see oh they look so moral. I think of the Mormons because they're sort of the classic illustration of this. They look so ethical. They have all these moral codes and all this morality. Their hair is even cut in a conservative manner and they operate their lifestyle very conservatively and they seem so nice and so warm hearted, and the truth of the matter is on the outside they're making demands on that and even the people who are making the demands on the rest, those who sit at the top as the prophets are unrestrained vice on the inside, because there is no capacity in an unregenerate individual to either confine the flesh or to promote righteousness. And even the things he thinks he does that are good the Old Testament says are

nothing but filthy rags.

Now this characterization is carried further if you look over to verse 23 in Chapter 23, and when the Lord gets into a direct hit on the Pharisees and scribes He calls them hypocrites here for about the fourth time in verse 23, He says you pay your tithe of mint, that's this little tiny herb, anise, a small plant, cumin, that's a little tiny seed, you tithe all these little deals. You've got ten seeds and you're taking out one little seed, you've got ten herbs, you take out one little herb and you omitted the weightier matters of the law like justice and mercy and faith, why, because they can't handle that. I mean they can count seed and they push a bunch of herbs around and fool with some little plants, but they can't produce justice and they can't product mercy and they can't produce faith.

And verse 25 He says, "You clean the outside of the cup and the platter and within they're full of extortion and excess." And in verse 27, "You're like whited tombs you appear beautiful outside and within are full of dead bones and all uncleanness." And then in verse 33, He says, "You serpents, you generation of vipers, how can you escape the damnation of hell." And verse 28 sort of wraps it up, "Outwardly you appear righteous; inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." You see that's the characteristic of a false spiritual leader. He tried the best he can to put a cap on his vice and it just fills him on the inside. It pushes its way out somewhere. There's no power to restrain evil.

That's why Paul writing to Timothy characterizing false spiritual leaders says, "They speak lies in hypocrisy. They can't live what they tell and their conscience is seared with a hot iron," very very vivid phrase. It's like scar tissue. I was thrown out of a car and on my back I have a whole large area of scar tissue that's not sensitive to feeling at all. You could stick a pin in my back, I'd prefer that you not experiment, because if you miss the area I will feel it, but you could stick a pin in my back and I wouldn't feel it because of that scar tissue that's there because of the friction burns as I slid along the highway.

And here he's saying these false prophets have lived this hypocrisy so long that their conscience is like scar tissue. It's formed callousness so that they are no longer even sensitive to the hypocritical nature of their existence. They are just liars who have lied so long, hypocrites who have hypocritically so long that they are desensitized to it. The truth is inside is wretchedness and rottenness that they cannot restrain.

In II Peter Chapter 2, you have a description of these false spiritual leaders in terms that are so vivid they're almost shocking. He says, and there are many places to step into this second chapter, in verse 1 there were false prophets among the people and there shall be false teachers among you who secretly bringing in damnable heresies and then he goes on to describe them. And if you look down, for example, to verse 10, it says, "They walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness. They despise authority. They are presumption and self-willed." Verse 12 calls them, "Natural brute beasts, and they speak evil of things they don't understand and will utterly perish in their own corruption."

Verse 13 calls them, "Scabs and flesh spots reveling with their own deceivings. Verse 14, "Their eyes are full of an adulterous, they're sexually unrestrained, even though outwardly they may restrain it, inwardly they're not, their hearts are exercised with covetous practice. They are cursed children. They have forsaken the right way. Verse 17: "They are wells without water. Clouds are carried with a tempest; _____ the midst of darkness is reserved forever. They are servants of corruption," verse 19, that's the *coup de gras*, folks, they are servants of corruption, corrupt to the very core."

Now Jude refers to them in much the same terminology that Peter does. He calls them "deluded or filthy dreamers. They defile the flesh," Jude 8, "they despise authority" again, and then it says, "They are brute beasts again. "They corrupt themselves," verse 10. In verse 12 again that idea of "scabs, clouds without water, trees with withered fruit, without fruit, twice dead plucked up by the roots, raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame, wandering stars to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever." In other words the point is these aren't just nice folks who have a nice moral approach to life and just happen not to know Christ. They are on the outside calling for a standard, which their inside can't live up to. They say it they don't do it. They can't do it. Vice is not restrained nor is righteousness promoted in an unregenerate fallen heart.

Now you look at these systems today, I don't care what they are, you look at any of the religious systems that you see around the word that are false systems that don't adhere to the gospel of Jesus Christ and that add to the holy Scriptures and you will find people advocating ethical standards and advocating moral standards and binding those standards on people and the truth is in their own hearts they're filled with garbage that they can't restrain. And there's an utter absence of true righteousness. So look at their life.

The world shouldn't be shocked with a Jim Jones proves to be exactly what he was eventually. That stuff is going to ooze out somewhere, the filth and corruption of one who appeared to be so ethical and so moral and so upstanding and so concerned for the poor and the needs, and etc., etc., etc. It doesn't always come out, however, quite that dramatically. In fact, sometimes we don't even know it until final judgment.

There's a third thing that I would call your attention to and I'll stop with that one this morning. The Lord condemns him for a lack of authority and he condemns him for a lack of integrity and thirdly for a lack of sympathy, for a lack of sympathy. They were not only usurpers and hypocrites they were loveless.

Verse 4, "They bind heavy burdens and grievous to be carried and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not remove them with one of their fingers. Unbelievable! No sympathy at all. No love, no care. The picture is of a guy loading up his burro, his donkey, and if you've been in the Middle East it's incredible what they put those donkeys. It's a good thing they're dumb. They can pile

that stuff high up to the top and hang down over the sides and strap it all in so that you can't find the animal. That thing is carrying stuff; we saw boxes piled 10-15feet high, those slat kind of crates. I saw a donkey with chickens hanging all over it in little crates. It's the Arab pick-up truck and they would just pile it on and pile it on and pile it on and pile it on and a guy walking alongside with nothing, carrying nothing. And some of those donkeys are listing ten degrees to the left, fourteen degrees to the right and no movement to straighten up that burden at all. That's the picture here and it would have been a vivid picture to these people. "And that's what the Pharisees do," says the Lord. They pile on regulations and rules and traditions. It's an impossible load, so that you're totally obscured and frankly it'd be better to be asleep or dead than to be alive and try to carry it all.

And not only that but the guilt of not making it and the whole of life, the biggest burden of all for them was the works righteousness system that said God is counting up your bad and He's counting up your good and if your good gets better than your bad when you die you're going to get to heaven and if your bad beats your good you're going to hell. And there was no way to get rid of the bad pile see, the bad pile just stayed there all the time, just stayed there and he just kept trying to get ahead of it with the good stuff. What a burden, what an interminable burden. They just piled it on, piled it on, piled it on, heavy burdens, the heaviest, as I said, works righteousness, the idea that you had to keep piling up your good deeds. So religion for them was depressing. Religion to them was a horrifying impossible life of demands and demands and demands and there wasn't any hope, and they never came along with the finger of grace to remove the burden, they never bothered to give the gospel that says there is no bad pile. That's the good news, folks. Jesus takes the bad pile away totally. All's left is the good, that's all.

And even when the apostle Paul preached the gospel in Galatia he went through preaching grace and forgiveness and mercy and here came these same guys dogging his steps and they went in and said, "No sir, you've got to keep the law of Moses and you've got to be circumcised, and you've got to do everything Moses said, and keep the traditions and they just wanted to pile it all back, and Paul writes to the Galatians and he is livid when he writes and he dispenses with any amenities and he says, 'I don't care who they are and I don't care if an angel from heaven shows up and give you that message, that's another gospel they ought to be damned." And he goes on to say in Chapter 5, listen, "For liberty Christ has set us free, now don't you be entangled again with that yoke of bondage."

But the Pharisees with all their religious stuff were not interested in talking about grace and forgiveness and mercy. They wanted to pile people up with this morality and then live under the interminable guilt of not being able to make it. No sympathy, no love, no tenderness, no caring, no helping to shoulder the burden. They never heard what Peter said, "Casting all your care on Him, He cares for you." They didn't know the tender shepherd that carries the little one in His own arms. Nobody ever picked their load up for them.

In fact in Mark 12:40, which is a parallel to this passage, our Lord says it's typical of the scribes and Pharisees to devour widow's houses. It's like the Simon Legree. They move in on the widow that can't pay the rent and eat up her house and make her destitute. They abuse people they grieve people.

Paul writing to Timothy in I Timothy 4:3 says, "They come around pontificating and forbidding people to marry." What a ridiculous thing. How stupid it is to make men who want to supposedly serve the Lord, for example in the Roman Catholic system, swear never to be married all their life long and to add that kind of bondage to them. It's a far cry from what the Lord intended when He said that through the apostle Peter, "Marriage is the grace of life."

And then it says in I Timothy 4:3, they make them abstain from certain kind of foods. They say there are certain things you can't eat. How foolish. Who cares whether you eat meat on Friday or not, or whatever else? God has given us all things to be received with thanksgiving.

In I Peter 2:3, I think it is, he says they make merchandise out of you, they just use you, just abuse you, that's all. You're part of the building of their empire, you're part of the feeding of their supposed spiritual egos. And it isn't new. Isaiah, he saw it, the same kind of unsympathetic attitude. Verse 1 of Chapter 10, "Woe unto them who decree unrighteous decrees." In other words they make laws that aren't even fair, aren't even right. "They turn aside the needy from justice." If you don't have the money to buy it you can't get justice. "They take away the right from the poor, that widows may be their prey, and they rob the orphans." What kind of people do that? Only religious leaders do that. Fleecing the sheep instead of feeding the sheep.

Jeremiah talked about that, Chapter 7, "Trust not in lying words." They say the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these. In other words, this is what God requires, this is what God requires, this is God's truth. Then he says, "If you thoroughly amend your ways in your doings you thoroughly execute justice between a man and his neighbor if you'll press not the stranger and the orphan and the widow, shed not innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your harm, then will I cause you to dwell in this place," and so forth. Don't give me that the temple and all that pious talk, go out and be fair to a stranger and take care of an orphan and a widow, and stop devouring these people for your own ends.

And then there's that credible passage in the 34th Chapter of Ezekiel, which indicts the false shepherds of Israel. Just listen to this: "And the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Son of man prophecy against the shepherds of Israel, prophecy and say to them thus saith the Lord God unto the Shepherds woe or curse you shepherds of Israel that do feed yourselves. Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?'" You know we are criticized so often because religious leaders in the public eye are known to eat people alive, to build great empires, to amass great fortunes, to build great prestige all

at the expense of poor unwitting people. How many people have been bilked and ripped off by religious charlatans only God knows. It's nothing new.

"You eat the fat and you clothe yourself with the wool." In other words, you're feeding on your own sheep. Instead of reaching out to meet their need you're devouring them, taking everything they've got. "You kill those who are fed you feed not the flock. The diseased have you not strengthened, neither have you healed the sick, neither have you bound up what was broken, neither have you brought again that which was driven away, neither have you sought what was lost? But with force and cruelty you have ruled over them." Boy that is such a definition of false religious leadership. Just brutalize people. Get everything out of them you can and build your own empire. "And when they were scattered because there's no shepherd they became food to all the beasts of the field, My sheep wandered through all the mountains, on every high hill, my flock was scattered on the face of the earth and no one sought after them; therefore, you shepherds hear the word of the Lord. As I live says the Lord God, surely because my flock became a prey and my flock became food to every beast of the field because there was no shepherd, neither did my shepherd search for my flock, but the shepherds fed themselves and fed not my flock. Oh Shepherds hear the word of the Lord. I am against the shepherds."

God's against them. And Jesus in His day looked out over the multitude and He saw them as sheep without, what, shepherds. There wasn't anybody to feed them. There wasn't anybody to pick them up and carry them. There wasn't anybody to bind up their wounds, to restore them, to carry them. There wasn't anybody to move a finger to ease the load. The Pharisees wouldn't remove the burden. The word move there could better be translated remove as the same term is in Revelation 6:14, they wouldn't remove that burden at all. They wouldn't preach a grace message. They wouldn't act in love. I'll tell you in some people's hearts it must have been in wonderful moment when they heard Jesus say this: Matthew 11:28, "Come unto Me," as opposed to them, "Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden." In other words you have this big burden, come to Me. I'll give you, what, rest. "Take My yoke and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly of heart and you shall find rest for your souls for My yoke is easy and My burden is light." That's all in contrast to the horrifying bondage the false spiritual leaders put on the people.

It's the same today. These false religious systems bind people with ethical weight, with moral codes, with strictures of life from one kind of demand to another they have to do this. Some of them tell them who they can marry, where they can live, how many kids they can have. Some of them say you've got to do this, light these many candles, or go through here on your knees, or crawl up these steps and do that, or you've got to come and study so long these kind of things, you've got to crank out these rules and make sure you do all this. They bind that on them and never a word of grace, and never a word of forgiveness, and never tenderness and never a caring to meet the need that can only be met by forgiveness. It's just the same.

And so the first three things we see of a false teacher, false spiritual leader, they lack true authority, integrity, sympathy. Let me turn it over. Listen very carefully. You want to know how to identify a true spiritual leader? He has true authority. Where does it come from? Where does the authority come from? Right here. Never goes beyond this, always interprets this properly. He has integrity. Look at his life. Look at it over the long haul and see that he endeavors to live and love what he calls other people to live and love. Thirdly, is he sympathetic? Is his greatest heart's desire to feed or to fleece? Is he building his own empire or is he carrying those who are wounded?

Father we thank you that we've been able to look beginningly at this. We know that it's a rebuke almost unequaled in the gospels. And yet at the same time it teaches not just that negative truth, but a very positive lesson about what true shepherds are by contrast. We have real authority. Jesus told his own, "All authority is given unto Me," and in so many words said I give it to you and that authority is Your word. And oh God we must have integrity. If we preach it we have to live it. And sympathy, the compassionate Jesus who showed the tenderness and pity of the heart of God by alleviating disease and pain, set the pattern for the tender shepherds who represent Him. Save us Lord from those false leaders and give us true shepherds. We thank you in Christ's name, amen.

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