

# THE TRIUMPH OF GOD DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN FALSE AND TRUE RELIGION

## Matthew 23: 1-15

*Please review this week's catechism question.*

### INTRODUCTION

Jonathon Edwards was a pastor and theologian who lived in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in colonial New England. He is arguably the greatest pastor, theologian and philosopher that the North American continent has ever produced. In the opening line to his foundational work, "Religious Affections", he writes this: "There is no question of greater importance to mankind in general and to individuals in particular to be resolved than this: 'What are the distinguishing qualifications of those that are in favor with God, and entitled to his eternal rewards?' Or, to say it another way, 'What is the nature of true religion? Wherein lies the distinguishing marks of that virtue which is acceptable in the sight of God?'"

This is the issue that is at the center of the controversy between Jesus and the religious teachers of his day. They have been engaged in a debate over the nature of true religion. Jesus, by his teaching and his life has exposed the religion of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law as a false religion, while declaring that he is the final and absolute authority on the nature of true religion. Chapter 23 is the culmination of Jesus' discussion with the Jewish religious leaders. He turns his attention away from directly confronting them and now addresses the crowds of people and his own disciples to set before them the distinguishing marks of false and true religion.

### STUDY

**1.** A literal translation of vv. 2-3a says, "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sat down in the seat of Moses. Therefore, everything, whatever they might say to you, do and keep." Read Matthew 12: 1-14, esp. v. 7; 15:1-4, esp. vv. 9&14 & 16: 6 & 11-12. In light of what Jesus says in these earlier passages what is surprising about what he

says here about the teaching of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees? What are we to make of this apparent contradiction?

*Anyone who has been paying attention as they have read the gospel of Matthew is going to have a serious problem with vv. 2-3a. Jesus has repeatedly told his disciples and the crowds of people to watch out for the teaching of the Pharisees and scribes. At one point he said that their teaching is but "rules taught by men." In what follows he criticizes their teaching over and over. So how can it be that he says that they have the authority of Moses and that everything they say is to be listened to? Most commentators simply say that Jesus is telling us that we should not reject the word of God because the teachers of that word speak error and live as hypocrites. Just because those who claim to speak for God are found out to be liars and sinners doesn't mean that we have the right to throw out God's word. So Jesus is saying that we are to listen to what teachers of the Bible say as long as what they say lines up with the Bible and how they live doesn't negate the truth of what they say. Now, while I think that is good advice I can't get around v. 3a telling us to listen to everything they say.*

*The solution is in the tense of the verb "sit" in v. 2 and then understanding 3a as sarcasm or irony, not a command. Let me show you what I mean. The Greek tense of the verb in v. 2 is usually translated as a past tense. The NASB captures this idea in its translation when it says, they "have seated themselves in the seat of Moses." In other words, Jesus isn't saying they are speaking with the authority of Moses but rather that, they claim to speak with the authority of Moses. So what Jesus does is he says they claim to have Moses' authority and then he speaks with heavy sarcasm, "Therefore you should do what they say. After all, they claim to speak with Moses' authority and if they say it is so then it must be so and you had better do what they say. Even though they have no idea who the Messiah is, as I just proved." This makes the most sense in light of the context. (There are a number of other examples of this same kind of sarcasm in the OT prophets and in several of the NT letters, Jeremiah 28: 5-6, 1 Cor. 4: 8 & 10).*

**2.** All false religion claims to speak with the authority of God. All false religion speaks sincerely, that is, those who teach false religion

truly believe they are speaking with God's authority. How does that make you feel? What does that mean about how you should approach the question of truth?

**False religion claims God's authority while true religion has Christ as its authority.**

3. In v. 3b Jesus says that the Pharisees do not do not "practice what they preach." Compare this with Matthew 9:11, 12:2, 15:2 & 23:23. What does Jesus mean when he says they do not practice what they preach (see Matthew 15:6b-9)?

*The point that Jesus is making when he says that they do not do what they tell others to do is not that they do not obey the regulations they tell others to obey. The Pharisees are very religious people. They conscientiously observe their religious duties. Jesus says so himself in just a few verses when he talks about how they make sure that they even give a portion of the herbs they grow in their vegetable gardens. What they don't do is they don't please God. They don't truly love God. They say that they love God and they parade around in all their religious piety as though they are loving God but they don't truly love God. They do not practice what they preach in that they do not actually obey God's laws. They say they are obeying God's laws but in reality their teaching is but rules made by men, as Jesus says in Matthew 15. They tell people that what they say is what God says and they do what they tell people to do but they don't actually obey God because what they teach is not what God says.*

4. Rather than enabling people to love God, what does Jesus say they are actually doing in v. 4?

*They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders however they are unwilling to do anything to help men carry those burdens. Jesus is not simply repeating what he said in v. 3. He is saying that these men command people how to live but they don't tell men how to truly obey and love God. They have no good news for sinners. Their religion is a will power religion. It has no help for sinners.*

5. Compare v. 4 to Matthew 11: 28-30. What does Jesus and his teaching do for people that the religious leaders are not doing by their teaching?

*All false religion is will power religion and has no grace and no gospel in it. The true religion of Jesus is a religion of grace. The weary and the burdened, hear the commands of God, "You shall have no other gods before me." "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength". When they hear these commands they faint from fear because they know they have not obeyed these laws. They groan under them and can see no solution as they find that they love and trust and prefer everything but God himself. They have no desire to obey and therefore no ability to obey. They know that God is justly angry with them for not loving him and trusting him and preferring him to all. So when the Pharisees come along with lists of rules to keep in order to please God, it only adds to the burden of the weary. They know the rules have no power to forgive their transgressions and no power to transform their hearts. However, they hear the invitation of Christ with joy. They see in the suffering of Jesus the satisfaction of God's anger against them. They see in the obedience of Jesus, righteousness for them. They see in the promise of the Holy Spirit a new heart that loves God's law and wants to obey it and therefore has the power to obey it. Jesus' burden is light not because it ignores God's law but because Jesus fulfills all the law for us and then gives us his Holy Spirit so we begin to actually obey because we want to obey it, not because we are trying to prove we are worthy of God's approval.*

6. Do you find Jesus' invitation to take his yoke upon you an invitation to rest or do you view it as a heavy burden? Why?

**False religion has no help for sinners while true religion gives rest to sinners.**

7. According to vv. 5-7 what is it that motivates these religious teachers?

*False religion is primarily concerned with what people think, not with what God thinks. Everything they do, they do in order to be seen by*

men, which is a different way of saying they seek to exalt themselves. They do all that they do in order to show off how great they are. They love, delight in, find all their happiness in men's recognizing them at parties and in their religious services and by the external ceremonial symbols of religion. These men do all they do with but one question in mind, what will people think of me? They do not think at all about what God thinks or if they do, they merely presume he is happy with them because humans are happy with them. Men praise them so God must also praise them. They were not interested in actually obeying God's commands just that other people thought of them as obeying God's commands. Their joy is in being recognized and honored by men. They are grieved when they are not accorded the kind of respect they think they deserve.

**8.** In contrast to the proud, people-pleasing religious leaders how are the true children of God to live? How is the humility of God's true children expressed? (NOTE: Take into account Matthew 10:1-4, 16:17-19, 28:16-20, 1 Cor 4:1, 15-17, 2 Cor. 10:8, etc.)

*In vv. 8-10 Jesus forbids us from being called Rabbi and teacher and from calling any other human, father. He is not saying that there are to be no distinctions of authority in the church. Verse 11 presumes that there will be leaders in the church. In Matthew 10 Jesus appointed 12 men as apostles to teach. In Matthew 28 he is going to command all his disciples to teach. The apostle Paul describes himself as the father in the faith of Timothy, the Galatians and the Corinthians and says he is a teacher to the Gentiles. So Jesus is not saying that because we are all brothers there are no distinctions in authority. Neither is he condemning social customs that address people with respect.*

*The point Jesus is making is not so much about words as it is about what we mean by the words. The contrast in each verse is the important thing. We only have one master, one father and one teacher. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ. Pastors, elders, parents and others in authority in the church are not to act as though disobeying them is disobeying God. We are to require obedience to God, not to us. We are to require respect for God, not for us. We are slaves of God and of God's people and so we ought not to be offended*

*when we are treated like slaves. It should not grieve the heart of any pastor, elder or other leader in Christ's church to be treated with contempt and indifference in respect of themselves. The only reason that we should be grieved when people disrespect us is if their disrespect is due to a disrespect for the gospel we are teaching and the God we represent. We are to be grieved by men's indifference to God but not by their indifference to us. Additionally, we are not to give respect to men that is for God alone. We are not to give any person authority over us that is due to God alone. Christ is our Master, God is our Father, the Spirit is our teacher. We must not put anyone else in the place of God in our lives.*

**9.** What gets you more excited, the thought of people approving of you or of God approving of you?

**10.** How do you respond when people don't approve of you?

**11.** Honestly, do you ever wonder if your "religious" behavior is motivated by a desire to impress men or God?

### **False religion is proud while true religion is humble**

**12.** Jesus begins a litany of seven "woes" in v. 13. Remember he is talking to the crowds and disciples, not directly to the religious leaders though undoubtedly some are present. Read these OT passages (Woe occurs 60 times in the OT) and define what "woe" means. Isaiah 1:4, 24, 3:9-11, 5: 8-25.

*The term "woe" is the opposite of the term "blessed". When God pronounces "woe" upon a person or nation it means they are under his judgment and subject to his wrath. Woe means the person addressed is condemned to eternal suffering in hell as the just expression of God's anger against them for their sins. Woe is the sentence of God's justice against sinners. Usually when woe is pronounced both the sin and the punishment due the sin is described.*

**13.** In vv. 13 & 15 what are the sins for which Jesus pronounces woe upon the Pharisees and teachers of the law? How are the sins related to one another?

*The first two woes in vv. 13 and 15 emphasize how false religion inoculates people from the truth. They state the same sin from two different directions. Jesus is God's only savior. He is the only one who is the way, the truth and the life. It is only through him that anyone will ever enter into God's kingdom. However, the religious teachers have rejected Jesus as the Messiah. They have slammed the door in the face of all those who think that Jesus might be the Messiah. They threaten men with ostracism and persecution if they dare to follow Christ. Then they work to convert men to their point of view. They aim to persuade people that they possess true religion. They teach their converts that it is by their own goodness and their own "law-keeping" that they are made right with God. They seek to persuade men that it is possible to gain heaven without the pain of repentance and of hatred of sin and humbling themselves before God and men as sinners. They act as though it is possible to pursue and love the approval of men and yet to be loved by God. In this way they shut the door to heaven and they make others into twice the sons of hell that they themselves are.*

**14.** What does v. 15 tells us about the desire and sacrifices made to convert people to your "religion" and whether or not your "religion" is true?

*Verse 15 tells us that missionary zeal is no proof that you are a child of God. Great sacrifices in order to persuade people to agree with your religious system is not evidence that you have been born again by the Spirit of God. I do believe that every true child of God will be concerned that other people hear the gospel and trust in Christ. However, contrary to much teaching in the evangelical church, a desire to share the gospel is not a primary evidence that God has granted you repentance leading to life. Being excited when people adopt your religious point of view does not show you are born of God. Everyone loves it when others agree with them. Virtually all false religions engage in missionary work. Therefore, why you want to be a missionary, why you engage in sharing the gospel matters more than actually being a missionary or doing evangelism. There are going to be many missionaries and pastors and zealous laypeople in hell.*

**15.** How should vv. 13 & 15 make every pastor, elder, bible study leader, seminary pastor and parent feel and act?

*These two verses ought to strike terror into the hearts of all who take on the task of teaching others about the things of God. The Pharisees did not think they were shutting the door to the kingdom of heaven or that they were turning their converts into sons of hell. However, that is exactly what they were doing. Every teacher of God's word ought to tremble as they talk about the kingdom of heaven and plead with God to keep them from doing this to others. Every pastor, elder, parent, etc. ought to be incredibly diligent in studying the Bible and reading doctrinal books so that we do not mislead others and both go to hell and take others with us.*

**16.** How should vv. 13 & 15 make every member of every congregation feel and act?

*Every true child of God ought to plead with their heavenly father that human teachers not mislead them. Every Christian ought to give themselves to the study of God's word and to the reading of theologically oriented books. Ignorance is suicide when it comes to our relationship with God.*

**False religion sends people to hell while true religion takes people to heaven.**