

## THE TRIUMPH OF GOD DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN FALSE AND TRUE RELIGION PART II Matthew 23: 16-39

*Please review this week's catechism question.*

Did you meet anyone new after worship Sunday?

### INTRODUCTION

In spite of his terrifying language, Jesus is preaching the good news in Matthew 23. Jesus is preaching to the crowds and his disciples in order to set before them the characteristics of the false religion of the religious leaders of his day and the true religion of the true God that he has come to establish as the promised Savior. The reason he tells the crowds and his followers about the false religion of the religious leaders is because every human is prone to follow false religion. All of us would love a religion that promises eternal happiness while never interfering with what we really love. Jesus is making clear the distinction between man-centered religion and God-centered religion; between a religion that loves the approval of men and a religion in love with God; between a religion that emphasizes external duty and a religion that emphasizes internal transformation. The choice that Jesus sets before us cannot be clearer. You can either follow one of the hundreds of versions of false religion in the world and so come under the same condemnation that Jesus heaps upon the religious leaders of his day and their followers or you can follow his religion, which is the only true religion. Let's look at four more contrasts that Jesus makes between false and true religion.

### STUDY

1. Describe, in your own language what the religious leaders were teaching the people regarding the making of oaths as described by Jesus in vv. 16-18.

*Jesus is not saying it is wrong to ever take an oath. Rather he is condemning the practice of making certain oaths binding while others*

*are not binding. Let's say I wanted to borrow money from you. I would say to you, "I swear by the altar in the temple that I will repay this loan in one month." The point is that by invoking a sacred object I aim to convince you that I am trustworthy. I appeal to something that we both hold in high regard as evidence of my sincerity and honesty. What the religious teachers were doing under the guise of protecting God's honor was describing which oaths were binding and which oaths were not binding. They would say that because I swore only by the altar and not by the gift on the altar, that my oath was not binding and that I was not guilty before God if I didn't repay the money. In other words, they provided people with cover for not keeping your word.*

2. What are the two criticisms Jesus makes of them for this teaching? How does this teaching show they are "blind guides"?

*First, the distinctions they made about which oaths were binding showed their indifference to God and their love for this world. They said that a person was bound to their oath when swearing by the gold on the temple or by the gift on the altar. In other words, they valued the gold and the gift more than the temple and the altar. The temple and the altar were infinitely more valuable than the gold and the gift because they were the physical symbols of God's presence, justice and grace. Therefore, by making oaths by the gold and by the gift binding but oaths by the temple or by the altar not binding they display their contempt for God himself. Second, their whole method was foolish and blind because it doesn't matter what you swear by, everything belongs to God and so every oath automatically is invoking God. Whenever you promise to do something, no matter what words you use, you are calling God to witness your promise and therefore inviting his wrath if you don't keep your promise. Every time you make a promise you are saying, "May God punish me with eternal hell if I do not do what I say." They are blind guides and fools because they act as though you can escape God's command to always tell the truth by verbal and legal maneuvering. God sees all, knows all, and is going to hold everyone accountable to the promises they make. False religion permits people to lie while claiming to tell the truth by providing legal loopholes to avoid your responsibilities.*

3. Have you ever used religious language or “God-talk” to justify breaking a promise you have made? Can you think of any examples of how people in our day might do this?

*One way I regularly hear this use of religious language to justify the breaking of promises is from people contemplating a divorce. The rationale goes like this, “God wouldn’t want me (or if they are particularly sensitive spiritually they will include their spouse and children.) to be so unhappy. God loves me and wants me to have a good marriage and I cannot have a good marriage with this person. Therefore it is OK with God for me to break my vow.” I have heard this same reasoning from people who are ending friendships, breaking contracts and leaving churches. If your religion permits you to break your word with God’s approval, you have a false religion.*

**False religion provides cover for lying while true religion motivates honesty.**

4. Read Leviticus 27:30. How conscientious were the religious leaders in obeying this command?

*The religious folks of Jesus’ day loved to show how godly they were by conscientiously keeping the command to “give one tenth of the produce of your seed” by even giving one tenth of the produce of the herbs from their kitchen gardens. They spend lots of time counting the leaves of mint and seeds of dill and cumin to make sure they give one tenth.*

5. What part of the law did they neglect? What does this mean they were not doing?

*They neglected the more important parts of the law, justice, mercy and faithfulness. They spent no time considering if they were acting in a just and fair manner with their wives, children, co-workers and neighbors. They paid no attention as to whether they were helping the poor, the oppressed, the weak, the sick in the community. They were oblivious as to whether they are being loyal to God and people in the ways in which they think, feel and act. These three things, justice,*

*mercy and faithfulness are simply another way of saying the two great commands: Love God and love your neighbor.*

6. Why did they act like this?

*Counting mint leaves is way easier than getting involved in the lives of others for their good. Keeping track of how many dill seeds you plant and how many dill plants you harvest is a religious duty you can keep without interfering without the trouble of being with people. It’s way easier to impress people with your “tithing” than it is to show off a changed heart. You can give money to the church while lusting in your heart and no one will know. In fact, everyone will applaud your godliness even while you harbor all manner of wickedness in your heart and do nothing of any real consequence in terms of furthering God’s work in the world.*

7. What would be some examples of modern ways of doing the same thing, majoring on the minors while neglecting the more important parts of God’s law?

*Here is the person who shows up in church weekly and puts money in the offering plate, but who is harsh and demanding with their spouse and children and doesn’t see any problem. Here is the person who is careful to not watch an R rated movie but who is unwilling to forgo watching the Packer game in order to help a neighbor fix the brakes on his car. Here is the person who regularly reads their Bible but who has regular sexual fantasies about a co-worker. Here are all those who avoid smoking and drinking but who regularly criticize and gossip about their neighbors and fellow church members. Here is the person who sends money to the missionaries to the poor people in Africa but who regularly uses racial slurs.*

8. What are some ways you are or have majored on the minors while neglecting the more important parts of God’s law?

**False religion majors on the minors while true religion majors on the majors.**

9. What do the two metaphors in vv. 25-28 share in common? What do they tell us about the nature of false religion?

*In the next two “woes,” Jesus says essentially the same thing with two different metaphors. First, he says that false religion gives a lot of attention to cleaning the outside of the dishes but never cleans the inside. Second, in v. 27 he compares the practitioners of false religion to beautiful, freshly painted tombs and memorials. The gravestones are beautiful but inside the grave, there is a rotting corpse. They look good on the outside but their interior lives are full of rottenness and corruption. In other words, false religion is taken up with external, religious performance while it never really deals with the interior life, with what you love, fear, hate, desire, worry about, etc.*

10. Again, what are some ways we tend to clean the outside of the cup, beautify the gravesite while ignoring what is inside?

*This is the person who comes to church, that is they clean the outside of the cup and beautify the grave marker. However, they spend the entire service daydreaming about going hunting that afternoon or watching the Packer game or eating the big meal they have planned that afternoon. This is the person who spends 15 minutes every morning reading their Bible, that is, they clean the outside of the cup, they whitewash the tomb. However, they spend an hour and half studying the stock market and obsessing over how to structure their investment portfolio. Their emotional condition rises and falls with the Dow Jones Industrial average. Here is the person who doesn't let their children participate in Halloween, that is, they clean the outside of the bowl, they put flowers on the grave. However, they eat a bag of Milky Way miniature candy bars in one sitting after the children are in bed. Here is the married couple that goes to the marriage conference and in public hold hands and chat cheerfully, that is they have a clean outside and a well-manicured gravesite. However, in their home they cannot speak a kind word to each other. Here is the parent who boasts about their child's accomplishments in public but who is harsh, demanding and critical of their child at home. Who sends their child to Sunday School and Awana but who never reads the Bible with their child, or inquires into their spiritual condition.*

11. According to v. 26, what does Jesus say is the primary focus of true religion? Why is this?

*If you want to live a true life you must concentrate on what is in your heart. What you love is the most important thing about you. What you fear losing, what you hope in for happiness, these are the things that really matter. It is quite possible to live a perfectly acceptable religious life that everyone around you will approve and respect; and yet in your heart be full of greed, self-indulgence, hypocrisy and wickedness. The most frightening thing about being human is that you can appear righteous while inside you are full of wickedness. Inside you don't love God or people but something else drives your “righteousness.” Jesus knows that when you love God and people you will act in accord with those loves. The way to get people to act better is to get them to love better. The true religion of Jesus aims at your heart, at your motives and your affections. True religion promotes rigorous self-examination, sorrow over sin, repentance from sin and faith in and love for Christ. The true children of God, as John Calvin says, “desire to be pure rather than to appear pure.”*

12. What are some ways you have tended to be content with a “clean” exterior while your interior life is full of love for things other than God or people?

**False religion concentrates on externals while true religion concentrates on the heart.**

13. What do the religious teachers do and what do they say according to Jesus in vv. 29-30?

*They are proud of their Jewish heritage. They build large memorials to the greatness of the prophets who preached the word of God to earlier generations of Jewish people but who were murdered by those Jewish listeners. They say that they would not have participated in the murder of the prophets like their forefathers did. In short, they seek to display their religious fervor by idolizing the prophets who were murdered by their forefathers and claiming that they would not have participated in their murder but would have listened to and obeyed what they said.*

**14.** What does Jesus say about them and their claims in vv. 31-33?

*Jesus, in v. 31, tells them that they have born witness that they are the sons of those who murdered the prophets. While they claim differently, they are of the same character as their fathers. They build the memorials to the prophets and boast of their superiority over their fathers all the while they rejected John the Baptist's ministry and were plotting the murder of the greatest prophet to ever live, Jesus Christ. They honor and admire dead prophets whom they do not hear rebuking them and hate the living prophets who confront them with their sin. So Jesus in v. 32 tells them to go ahead and finish the work their fathers started. He tells them, "Complete the rejection of God's salvation that your fathers began by killing me and those I will send to you." Then he calls them snakes and a brood of vipers and declares the inevitability of their going to hell. There is no way for them to escape hell because they share the same nature as their murderous fathers. They, like their fathers before them share the same nature as Satan himself. They are by nature cunning, deceitful and murderous just like their father, the devil (see John 8:37-47). They are a family of venomous vipers who delight in killing. It is impossible for venomous snakes to not kill other animals and people that they are threatened by. It is in their nature to strike and kill what they believe to be their enemies.*

**15.** What does the "therefore" that begins v. 34 tell us about what Jesus is going to do in light of what he just said in vv. 31-33?

*Verse 34 begins with "therefore" or "because of this". Because they are descendants of murderers and are going to complete the rejection of God by killing his own Son and because they share the same nature as Satan and are a family of venomous snakes and because they are destined for hell Jesus is going to send to them more prophets and teachers for them to kill and flog.*

**16.** According to v. 35 what will be the result of Jesus' sending more prophets to them for them to persecute and kill? In other words, why is Jesus sending more prophets?

*So that he can justly pour out on them his wrath, which he has been holding back these many centuries. The OT screams out, "How long, O God, are you going to put up with these people?" Their ongoing destruction of God's prophets and rejection of God's salvation will result in their receiving the full brunt of God's just wrath against them. This entire wrath will come upon this generation who, like their fathers before them, persists in rejecting the many appeals of God, through his prophets and teachers, to repent of their false religion.*

**17.** According to vv. 37-39 what has God (notice how Jesus speaks with God's voice here, making himself equal to God.) been doing in sending these prophets? How has Israel responded and what is God going to do about it?

*They have refused, time and again, to take refuge in God and his promises. They have rejected and killed and stoned the prophets and are now rejecting the last and greatest offer to ever be made, the offer of Christ as Savior from sin and death. God compares himself to a hen chicken who spies a hawk diving to snatch up one of her chicks or hears the rumble of approaching thunder and feels the first drops of a savage storm and she clucks to her chicks to come and take refuge under her wings so as not to be snatched up by the hawk or to be destroyed in the flood of rain. How God has tenderly, for centuries, invited this nation to take refuge under his wings to escape his wrath. How they have persisted in rejecting him. They have taken refuge instead in lies and ceremony and false religion. Rather than fleeing to him for refuge they flee to one another, they flee to other gods, they flee to their own goodness and ability. So God turns his back on this nation, as a nation, and declares that their house will become desolate and they will never see God's Savior again until that final day of judgment when they admit, to their own shame, that the one they pierced and killed is indeed God's only Son and the Savior of the world.*

**18.** Are you fleeing from God's wrath to take refuge under the wings of Jesus?

**False religion refuses the refuge Jesus offers while true religion takes refuge in Jesus.**