

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
December 27, 2015

Lesson Text: Matthew 23:1-12; Mark 12:38-44
Lesson Title: Sincere Giving

Introduction

For the whole three years of His public ministry, Jesus had contended with the scribes and the Pharisees on almost every subject imaginable. The scribes and Pharisees were the spiritual leaders of the day and should have set an example for the people to follow. Sadly, that was not the case.

Scribes served the important role of copying Scripture by hand. A scribe was therefore held in high regard and carried much spiritual weight among the Jewish people. Pharisees, for the most part, believed God's blessing and favor on the Jewish people could only come through obedience to God's law. The only problem was the Pharisees believed they were the group to interpret those laws and to say who was right and who was wrong.

These religious leaders, scribes and Pharisees, merely pretended to serve God. They patted themselves on the back for their meticulous rule-keeping and self-righteous living. But, they neither knew God's heart nor cared to submit their desires to His will. Their lives as described by Matthew and Mark show us a picture of *hypocritical* living.

In contrast to the scribes and Pharisees, both Matthew and Mark show us a picture of *sincere* living. Matthew describes what it means to be a true leader while Mark relates a story of a generous widow who gave all she had.

The Hypocritical Life (Matthew 23:1-7; Mark 12:38-40)

Matthew 22 records Jesus' final words directly spoken to the Pharisees. In Matthew 23, Jesus is speaking about the scribes and Pharisee's, but He will not speak to them or interact with them again. He had been patient with them but now He is speaking to the pilgrims gathered at Jerusalem for the Passover, and to His disciples.

Matthew 23:1-7

Verse 1-3

“Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you

observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.”

The “scribes and the Pharisees” were most likely in hearing distance when Jesus spoke to “his disciples.” He told his disciples the scribes and Pharisees “sit in Moses’ seat.” That means they had appointed themselves to be God’s authoritative spokesman. The Jewish nation had great respect for Moses, the man to whom God gave the law, but these “scribes and Pharisees” did not possess the authority and spiritual power of Moses.

Jesus instructed His listeners to “observe and do” everything scriptural the scribes and Pharisees told them. God’s Word is still God’s Word even if a hypocrite is teaching it. Not everything the scribes and Pharisees taught was wrong. However, the people were “not” to “do after their works” because the scribes and Pharisees “say, and do not.” They were inconsistent in their teaching and living (Titus 1:16).

Verse 4

“For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.”

The scribes and Pharisees were not only *inconsistent*, they were also *insensitive*. They did not care about those to whom they ministered. They could be very strict when they were telling you how to live, but very lax in holding their own feet to the fire.

They “bind heavy burdens” or religious rules and regulations that were “grievous to be borne.” “Grievous” means “oppressive, hard to bear.” They “lay” these man-made rules and regulations “on men’s shoulders.” The “shoulders” represent the part of the body where someone would feel the full weight of the load being carried. While oppressing others with their rules “they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.” That means they would not lift a finger to help relieve the load.

Jesus Christ is not a Pharisee or legalist. Jesus said, “*Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me...For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*” (Matthew 11:29-30). The Apostle Paul was intolerant with the Judaizers, who attempted to draw the Galatian believers back into legalism (Galatians 1:8-9). Some preachers and teachers today place themselves in seats of authority and attempt to force Christians to live under their man-made rules and regulations. They are like the false teachers at Ephesus who forbid some to marry and commanded others to not eat certain meats although God said differently (1 Timothy 4:3).

Verse 5-7

“But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.”

The root of the problem in the heart of the scribes and Pharisees was their desire to please men. Jesus said, “But all their works they do for to be seen of men...” They wanted to look good in the eyes of men. Jesus also criticized them for their pride. He said “They make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments...” “Phylacteries” were a pocket like area on clothing in which particular Scripture passages from Exodus or Deuteronomy or other parts of the Law or Prophets were placed usually worn on the forehead and on the left arm while one was praying. Apparently they would widen the “phylacteries” so people would notice them, and say, “Man, they must be really committed to the Lord, look how big that phylactery is.”

They also loved “the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.” When the people were celebrating some special event such as a wedding or public gathering, they would save special seats for the “Rabbi” who would make a dramatic entrance at the last minute and be ushered to his “chief seat.”

The title “Rabbi” means “master.” It was an official title of honor. These religious leaders coveted the *visual* and *verbal* recognition of men. They cared more about how they were perceived than the reality of their holiness.

Mark 12:38-40

Mark’s Gospel gives a shorter account of Jesus’ words against the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. The context of Mark 12 is the final week of Jesus’ life on earth. He is with His disciples each day, going back and forth into Jerusalem and most likely staying the nights in Bethany at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. In our text, Jesus has asked the scribes, “Who is Messiah, the One you are looking for?” His question will be proof that you can know the Bible and the prophecy and still miss the very essence of what the Bible and true salvation is all about.

Verse 38-40

“And he said unto them in his doctrine, Beware of the scribes, which love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the marketplaces, And the chief seats in the synagogues, and the uppermost rooms at feasts: Which devour widows’ houses, and for a pretence make long prayers: these shall receive greater damnation.”

The fulfillment of everything these scribes have written about is standing right in front of them and they do not realize it. That is what Jesus said, “Beware of the scribes...” It is breath taking when you think about the power of hypocrisy. In two days, from the time Jesus spoke these words, He will be crucified and the “scribes” do not have a clue! Instead, they are focused on their “long clothing” and impressive “salutations in the marketplaces.” They are greedy and self-serving individuals. There is nothing sincere in what they are doing except their sincere hypocrisy!

These self-serving religious leaders have on their power clothing and they are “seated in the synagogue” and at the “feasts” in the most notable places. They are proud lovers of praise and position. But worst of all, they “devour widows’ houses...” The word “devour” means “to eat down.” During Jesus’ day, most people, especially “widows,” lived by meager means. Scribes lived off subsidies because they were forbidden to take money for their work. Since supporting a scribe was considered an honorable thing, many widows gave to their financial needs. The scribes would sometimes pray long “prayers” of “pretence.” In other words, they made them up with impressive words in hopes of gaining financial support. Jesus said, “...these shall receive greater damnation.” They will pay for it in the end.

Today the hypocritical religious leaders come in high definition. They are dressed for success, highly trained, and motivated by greed. The power they often attribute to the Holy Spirit is in many cases Satan himself. They look into our living rooms with tears in their eyes while holding a crying child they only met for a photo opportunity. They promise the poor widow if she will sew a seed from her Social Security check, she will have an uncommon harvest. They tell stories of their financial success and perfect health all at the expense of the undiscerning listener. They claim healing for everyone in the room with no proof or accountability for anything. It is nothing more than hypocrisy and spiritual deception (2 Timothy 3:13).

However, there are some authentic ministries in the world that love and help starving children. There are some ministries that are worthy of your financial support. Not every media ministry is corrupt. But Jesus said, “Beware” so you better listen to Jesus! There is nothing comical about hypocrisy.

The Sacrificial Life (Matthew 23:8-12; Mark 12:41-44)

Matthew 23:8-12

Matthew 23:8-12 records the teaching of our Lord concerning how to avoid hypocrisy and develop a life of sincerity and sacrifice. For this to be accomplished, some things must be avoided and truth implemented. If properly adapted, a sincere sacrificial life that is pleasing to the Lord will be the result.

Verse 8

“But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, *even* Christ; and all ye are brethren.”

Sincere disciples do not seek exaltation from others. “But be ye not called Rabbi” is a prohibition from seeking a title that had come to mean a superior teacher. There was nothing wrong with the title “Rabbi,” because it carried the basic idea of teacher. But it had come to mean much more than that in Jesus’ day. Titles are useful and beneficial but we must be careful when we allow them to be elevated above their basic meaning.

“For one is your Master, *even* Christ; and all ye are brethren” presents the wonderful plan God has for His children. Jesus Christ is our only “Master,” and all who are saved by His grace “are brethren.” Jesus is teaching the disciples all are on one level with one “Master.” Any title or ideology that suggests one believer is better or higher than the other is sinful and destructive to the body of Christ.

Verse 9-10

“And call no *man* your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, *even* Christ.”

Continuing to deal with the misuse of titles, Jesus commanded His listeners, “And call no *man* your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven.” Jesus is not teaching we cannot call our earthly dad “father,” neither is he teaching we cannot refer to church leaders by titles such as pastor, reverend, bishop or elder. The title is not the issue. Jesus is directing His commandment to the heart.

Christians should be careful about the titles we use in ministry. It is never biblical to call someone in the church “holy father” or “your holiness.” We simply refer to those who minister by the appropriate biblical titles such as “pastor, preacher, bishop, elder,” or “deacon.” We are forbidden to seek the honor and praise of men when we have been placed in a position of spiritual authority.

Verse 11

“But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant.”

This verse states positively what Jesus has taught negatively in the preceding verses. When a Christian sincerely gives of himself to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, humble service is his goal. A sincere desire to serve others is not only evidence of genuine salvation, it is a great weapon against hypocrisy.

The “greatest” individual in the family of God is the “servant.” The word “servant” means “one who waits on tables or runs errands.” It is the same word used to describe a male deacon or female servant. Jesus Himself is the perfect example of what He is teaching in this text. Although He was God in the flesh, in His humanity He was the Servant of all servants. His mission while here on earth was not to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28).

Verse 12

“And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.”

This verse is a summary statement of everything Jesus has taught. He has given His warning and challenged His listeners to beware of those who are serving with their own interest at heart. If we “exalt” ourselves we will “be abased.” What He means is those who attempt to advance themselves and make a name or position for themselves will be brought low. On the other hand, the one who “humbles himself” will be “exalted.” Those who sincerely serve the Lord from a heart of humility will be lifted up in the work of God.

Mark 12:41-44

As Jesus concluded His teaching to various individuals in the temple, including the scribes and Pharisees, He turned His attention to the sincere and sacrificial giving of a particular widow. Mark records for us what Jesus saw as He watched how the people gave.

Verse 41

“And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury: and many that were rich cast in much.”

“Jesus” is sitting and observing “how the people cast money into the treasury.” He is seated near the wall of the Court of the Women where there were trumpet shaped receptacles which worshipers placed their offerings. As the money was placed in these receptacles, the coins would make noise as they circled their way to the inside of the container. You could not only see people give but you could hear as the coins rattled around in the brass receptacles. “Rich” people putting in a lot of money would create a lot of noise. That would draw the attention of everyone in the temple.

Jesus “sat” and “behold how the people cast money into the treasury.” Every gift and every giver was watched by the Lord. It is not how you look at your gift, how others look at your gift, but how Jesus looks at your gift that matters!

Verse 42

“And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing.”

Jesus focused particularly on “a certain poor widow” on this occasion as “she threw in two mites, which make a farthing.” She was unique because Mark tells us there were “many that were rich,” but only one “widow” is mentioned. She was also unique in that the “rich cast in much,” but she only gave “two mites.” She was “poor” indicating she lived at the point of having to beg for what she had.

The word “certain” seems to stress the fact that she was alone. The “rich” people no doubt had their groups and clicks but this “poor widow” was there on her own. All she had was her “two mites.” A “mite” was the smallest Greek coin which represented only 1/128th of a day’s wages. Best estimates in today’s value would mean this widow had forty cent or less. She had “two” so she could have kept one. Instead, she gave them both in her offering (Acts 20:35).

Verse 43-44

“And he called unto him his disciples, and saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living.”

Remember, Jesus is not sitting in the temple looking at *what* the people are giving. He is looking at *how* they give. After seeing this widow give, “he called unto him his disciples, and saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: for all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living.”

Jesus sees sacrifice and sincerity in this widow’s gift and He wants His disciples to see it too. It is not the amount that Jesus is magnifying here. The heart of the matter is the condition of the heart. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ and a sincere giver is not about figures. It is about faith, trust, and most of all a love to One to whom we give.

How could this widow have “cast more in” with only “two mites” compared to the “rich” who had given “much?” First, she gave more because the rich gave out of their sufficiency while she gave out of her deficiency. Second, she gave more because her giving is still be talked about over 2,000 years later and blessing the body of Christ. The offering the rich gave on that day has long since been gone! Third, she gave more because how she gave demonstrated exactly how Jesus would give Himself in a few days when He suffered and died

on the cross. The widow held back nothing in her giving just as Jesus held back nothing in giving Himself for our salvation.

Sincere giving is Christ-like giving.

Conclusion

The way to sincere living and true Christian service, is to avoid the temptation to be honored by men, and seek only to please the heavenly Father. Our discipleship shows in the honor we crave for ourselves and the pride we have in our service to the Lord. Jesus warns us to beware of doing what we do to be seen of men.

It is important to remember that exaltation comes not by self-promotion. Stay humble and do what you do for the Lord out of a heart of love and devotion and God will take care of your position in life. It can be discouraging sometimes to look around in church and see people who crave to be recognized by men. It can also be encouraging to look around in church and see people like the widow who still give because they love the Lord. May we be like the widow and sincerely give of ourselves and our substance.

Amen.