Denouncing Our Hypocrisy - 2
Matthew 23:15-24
XXVII. Jesus Deals with Us

Years ago while walking out of a theater in which Emily and I had just seen the movie *The Apostle*, I turned to her and said, "I no longer recognize my country or my religion." The Jesus served by the preacher in *The Apostle* was a different Jesus from the One I knew.

We began this series, "Jesus Deals with Us," with a consideration of "The True Jesus," based on 2 Corinthians 11:1-4. There the apostle Paul warns us of those who would proclaim not the Jesus whom the apostles proclaimed but "another Jesus" and a "different gospel." Since New Testament times, there have been those who wish to add to or subtract from the biblical record in order to make Jesus more palatable to their personal tastes. If we wish to know the true Jesus and how He will deal with us, we must go to the Bible, the whole Bible, to find out. All that we know about Jesus is found there. There is simply no other source. This means studying Scripture comprehensively, not selectively, factoring in all that it says, not editing the portions we find uncomfortable or implausible. Once we head down the road of accommodating the biblical record to our preferences, we are creating "another Jesus." Once we leave the Bible, adding to it or subtracting from it, we simply are making things up.

My concept of Jesus must accommodate the portions I least like. My understanding of how Jesus deals with us must incorporate the righteous indignation He displays, particularly in Matthew 23, against sin and especially against hypocrisy. He denounces, He thunders against seven points of religious practice about which the scribes and Pharisees were proud but in which Jesus finds serious defects. We've examined two thus far. Were they guardians of the truth as they claimed? No, they

were biased against it. Were they devoted to prayer as they pretended? No, they were devoted to self-image and self-interest, which is why they prayed long prayers ostentatiously "to be seen by others" (Mt 23:5). As we continue in Matthew 23, the issues Jesus raises continue with devastating effectiveness as He exposes their and our religious hypocrisy. Were they (and are we) …

Zealous for souls or sectarian success?

> [15] *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.* (Matthew 23:15)

The scribes and Pharisees were zealous evangelists. They would "*travel across sea and land*," Jesus concedes, a proverbial expression for making exceptional efforts to get a thing done. "Climb every mountain… ford every stream," Oscar Hammerstein II (1895-1960) had the Mother Abbess sing to Maria in *The Sound of Music*. Keeping in mind the difficulty and danger of travel in the ancient world, climbing mountains and crossing "sea and land" indicates that one is going to a great deal of trouble and risking considerable danger. This they would do for the sake of just "*a single proselyte.*" All that effort was made for a solitary convert. Jesus is highlighting the degree of religious zeal involved in their commitment to evangelism. Even one convert was prized.

Recent scholarship demonstrates that from the first century to the fall of Jerusalem was "the most remarkable period of Jewish missionary zeal and corresponding success," D. A. Carson points out.[1] At different times the Jews may have been uninterested in making converts, and at other times they may

[1] Carson, *Matthew*, 478.

have been more eager. At this time the Pharisees were actively pursuing converts. This of itself is a good thing. Zeal for outreach is a good thing. Those, characterized by a burden for souls, who cross oceans and climb mountains to evangelize the lost are to be commended and even admired. Christianity is incurably a proselytizing religion.

To what end were these exceptional energies devoted? Party spirit and personal reputation motivated them. "They did this from no desire to benefit men's souls in the least, or to bring them to God," says J. C. Ryle; "they only did it to swell the ranks of their sect, and to increase the number of their adherents, and their own importance."[2] They were not leading the people to God. They were leading them to Pharisee-ism. The effect of their zeal was to make their converts "son(s) of hell," that is, owning all the characterization of hell's inhabitants, hell (Gehenna) being the place of fiery eternal punishment. Jesus is not criticizing the mission effort itself, but its results. They made their convert "twice as much a child of hell *as yourselves*"—in other words, the Pharisees instructed their converts in the way of soul-destroying Pharisee-ism. The new converts learned to interpret Scripture and practice religion after Pharisaic fashion, that is, legalistically, externally, formally, and ultimately superficially and hypocritically.

"*Twice as much*" refers to the often-observed phenomenon of a "convert's zeal." Converts sometimes lack a broader base of knowledge about their new religion. They only know what their teachers tell them. Those who indoctrinate them typically highlight the distinctive tenants of their peculiar sect. Consequently, converts often lack the broader awareness and nuance that might have tempered their zeal. They came to out-Pharisee the Pharisees. "The most converted were the most perverted," as it is sometimes said.

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[2] Ryle, *Matthew*, 303.

The disciples of Christ must guard themselves from sectarianism, from dividing up into factions saying, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Apollos" (1 Corinthians 1:12). I confess to wanting everyone to become psalm-singing, Sabbath-keeping, Bible-preaching, serious worshipping Presbyterians. I want this because I believe the Reformed faith is the most faithful, and consequently, the healthiest form of Christianity. "Calvinism is the gospel and nothing else," said C. H. Spurgeon.[3] "Calvinism is evangelicalism in its pure and only stable expression," agreed B. B. Warfield.[4] I agree with them. At the same time I, and all of us, need to be careful that we rejoice in the salvation of sinners *even if* their conversion swells the ranks of non-Reformed and other so-called "rival" churches. Still today, importance in the church world correlates directly with the size of one's group. We easily can shift our motives from the honor of God and the glory of Christ to the success of our group and the resulting prestige that gathers around our leaders.

How does Jesus deal with us? He warns us that we may witness to unbelievers on a daily basis and go on mission trips regularly or even permanently, and still be a "son of hell." How can that be? Because our motives may be sectarian, party-spirited, power-grasping, honor-seeking, and otherwise hypocritical. We may, in our religious proselytizing, be driven by corrupt motives and aiming at selfish ends. If so, we are hypocrites, fakes, frauds, phonies.

Ethical precision or moral evasion?

Making careful ethical distinctions is a good, even helpful, exercise. Truth and error are so often separated by a "razor's edge," as John Murray (1898-1975) of Westminster Theological

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[3] C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography Vol 1: The Early Years, 1834-1859* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1897-1900), 168.

[4] B. B. Warfield, *Shorter Writings* I, 390.

Seminary said.[5] We typically think of a great chasm separating the two. No, said Murray, the differences often are subtle. Focused attention on definitions, distinctions, identification of primary versus secondary concerns, and careful applications can make a positive contribution to our pursuit of the good and God. However, the careful ethical distinctions of the scribes and Pharisees had come to be exercised in the service of obfuscation. Theirs had become a "loophole" morality, ever clouding issues and finding exceptions in order to evade compliance with God's law. The particular case study under consideration is their handling of oaths. Jesus broached the subject of oaths in the Sermon on the Mount (5:33-37). However, because the discussion of the relative validity of oaths among the Pharisees was "exhaustive," as France says, He returns to it once more.[6]

The background to the discussion of oaths was the popular tendency to substitute trivial oaths which may be broken (or so it was argued) for serious ones which may not. The religious leaders may originally have had good intentions, aiming to protect the sanctity of oaths which involved the name of God, differentiating it from the oaths which did not. In the process they came to make silly and meaningless distinctions. Still today children may cross their fingers to invalidate an oath or cross their hearts and repeat the formula "cross my heart and hope to die" to validate one. In Matthew 5 Jesus urged the disciples to avoid oaths altogether in favor of simple truthfulness. "Let your yes be yes and your no be no," Jesus said (Matthew 5:37).

Here, the point of Jesus' reintroduction of the issue is to show the absurdity of the ethical nit-picking on the part of the scribes and Pharisees. They made very subtle distinctions in their

[5] Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 141.
[6] France, *Matthew*, 327.

endless discussion of oaths. Morris calls it "bewildering" and notes that in the end they managed to make perjury legitimate.[7] They were "masters of evasion," says Barclay.[8]

> *"Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obligated.' "*
> (Matthew 23:16)

Jesus says that they were teaching that one might swear an oath by the temple and be unobligated to keep it. However, if one swore by the gold of the temple, one *was* obligated to keep that promise.

> *[17] You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?*
> (Matthew 23:17)

Jesus' words, "You fools and blind men," Henry calls "a necessary reproof, not an angry reproach."[9] Their sort of distinction between the temple and its gold is silly. Morris understandably calls their argument "preposterous."[10] It is designed to avoid compliance. Those who teach in this way are "blind" to the truth and "fools." According to France, these aspersions are used "neither in thoughtless insult nor with personal bitterness, but as a considered indictment of this lack of discernment."[11] It is unthinkable that God would be so concerned with one's precise form of words that what was sworn "by the temple" would not be binding but what was sworn "by the gold of the temple" would be. God requires

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[7] Morris, *Matthew*, 580.
[8] Barclay, *Matthew*, II:322.
[9] Henry, *Exposition*, V:336.
[10] Morris, *Matthew*, 581.
[11] France, *Matthew*, 328.

complete truthfulness in all things at all times. This obligation cannot be avoided by appealing to the verbal formula utilized.

Beyond this, their distinctions are illogical. Which is more important, Jesus asks, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? Gold is not sacred of itself. The temple gives the gold its sacred quality.

Jesus denounces the same pattern in further examples in verses 18 and 19.

> [18] *And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' [19] You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?* (Matthew 23:18,19)

Again, the distinction between the altar and the offering on the altar is meaningless, except as a tactic to evade truth-telling. It is illogical to obligate an oath made on the basis of the offering on an altar and not obligate an oath made on the altar itself. It is the altar which gives the offering its value, Jesus says.

Why did they make those silly and illogical distinctions? So that they could create loopholes in order to justify falsehoods. The simple is made complex as a tactic of evasion. The broader point is that this is the way that they practiced ethics. They talked holiness, but they practiced loopholes and technicalities. They would harbor hatred and lust, divorce their wives on a whim, and manipulate oaths to avoid the truth, and all the while claim compliance with the law of God. They hadn't actually murdered, or committed adultery, or borne false witness after all, they could claim as they harbored murderous anger and adulterous lust (Matthew 5:22ff). There wasn't a specific Bible verse that they had violated, was there? Their lives were an affront to the whole spirit of the Bible, yet they could claim

they hadn't technically transgressed any particular command. Does the Bible say, "Love your neighbor?" Yes, yet one can avoid the requirement to love and justify hatred merely by redefining "neighbor," which they did (Matthew 5:43ff; Luke 10:30-37). This is hypocrisy of the worst sort. Hiding behind technicalities is a strategy of hypocrites.

It is interesting to observe that both ends of the ethical spectrum play this game. *Legalists* look for loopholes in order to *prove* their righteousness (Luke 10:29). *Libertines* look for loopholes in order to *permit* their unrighteousness. Both settle for technical and external conformity while they miss the spirit and purpose of God's laws. Ironically, both may end up saying with confidence something like, "Show me that in the Bible," because they narrow the scope of the Bible's application in such a way that they are able to justify their hatreds and lusts.

One may see this same spirit today in our culture-wide discussions of moral issues. The issues are "complex," some say. Then quickly follows a host of loopholes and exceptions. Be careful when the claim "it's complicated" is made. The Golden Rule is not complex (Matthew 7:12). "Love your neighbor" is not complex. "Love God" is not complex (Matthew 22:34-40). Righteousness is simple.

Jesus' answer to the scribes and Pharisees is simple: tell the truth. All oaths are binding, Jesus teaches (cf Matthew 5:33-37).

> *[20] So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. [21] And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. [22] And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.*
> (Matthew 23:20-22)

Verses 21 and 22 underscore the point that all promises are made in the presence of God and so all promises are binding. If

you swear by the temple, you swear by "Him who dwells in it." If you swear by heaven, you swear by the God whose throne is in heaven. "People cannot escape the force of their oaths by wording them in such a way that, while they sound impressive, they lack the precise wording that makes them valid," explains Morris.[12]

The lesson for Christ's disciples is not that ethical precision or subtlety are wrong. Careful distinctions have their place. How does Jesus deal with us? He warns: careful distinctions must never be used to justify dishonesty. Truth is to be practiced. Honest people don't devise techniques of evasion or plan escape routes when keeping a promise or truth telling are too difficult. They don't evade duty on a technicality. They don't practice ethical "loophole-ism." One's outlook is fundamentally wrong if one's obedience is a constant quest for technicalities and exceptions. Those who do so are hypocrites. They are two-faced. They play at religion. They pretend to be something they are not. Don't adopt the hypocritical ways of the legalists or the libertines.

Meticulously obedient or selectively compliant?

> [23] *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness."* (Matthew 23:23a)

Careful obedience is a virtue, not a vice. We should scrupulously observe a proper Sabbath, refraining from all secular activities. We should meticulously tithe our income down to the penny. The English Puritan Richard Rogers (1550-1618), when mocked for being careful, even precise in his obedience to God's commands, responded memorably, "Oh sir,

[12] Morris, *Matthew*, 582.

I serve a precise God."[13] We *should* be zealous to do all that God requires and to abstain from all that He forbids.

Tithing is an excellent spiritual discipline. The Bible *commands* tithing. Jesus *commends* their careful tithing as a thing they "should have done." It was clear from Old Testament law that all of one's "increase" was to be tithed, including one's primary crops (Deuteronomy 14:21-29; Leviticus 27:30-32; cf Numbers 18:21; Deuteronomy 12:5-19). However, were herbs of the "kitchen garden," as William Barclay calls it, which were grown in small quantities in a little patch, included?[14] Would one tithe a single dill plant? Many would not. The Pharisees did. We might liken this to reimbursing the office for a couple of paper clips that one might have used for personal items. Would one hand the accountant a nickel for 25 paper clips? The "mint and dill and cumin," garden herbs, represent "the most trifling products of the earth" which they "punctiliously exacted a tenth of," says David Brown.[15] They tithed "every kind of garden herb" (Luke 11:42). Only those who were "superlatively meticulous" would bother, says Barclay.[16]

Considered in isolation, this was a fine thing to do. What Jesus *condemns* is their warped priorities. What Jesus objects to is "their sense of proportion," as France explains.[17]
Their obedience was selective. It was their practice to "exalt trifles in religion above serious things," Ryle summarizes.[18]

> [23b]*These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.* (Matthew 23:23b)

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[13] Cited often, eg. Peter Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism* (Sussex: Carey Publications, 1975), 17.
[14] Barclay, *Matthew*, 324.
[15] Brown, *Four Gospels*, 110; see Morris, *Matthew*, 582.
[16] Barclay, *Matthew*, 324.
[17] France, *Matthew*, 328.
[18] Ryle, *Matthew*, 303.

The problem was they applied the tithing law even to their garden herbs, but neglected "weightier matters." Traditionally, Christians have understood that there are *magnalia et minutula legis*, both the greater and lesser things of the law. Neither may be ignored. Yet if one is neglected, it should be the lesser, not the greater. If one is to obey selectively, it should be the greater with which one should comply. The opponents of Jesus provide a classic example of the opposite. They scrupled allowing "blood money" (Judas' wages) into the temple (Mt 27:6), yet conspired to shed the innocent blood of Christ (Mt 27:12, 20, 41, 62). "All hypocrites have this fault," says Lutheran Reformer Philipp Melanchthon, "being very diligent and careful in trifling things but neglecting the principle parts of the law."[19] Trapp sees their spice-tithing as "over and above solicitous, and even superstitious, and all for a name."[20]

Scrupulous tithing was pursued at the expense of "justice, mercy, and faithfulness" or "justice and the love of God," as recorded in Luke 11:42, meaning "love for God."[21] "These are the true duties of man," says Hilary of Poitiers.[22] "Justice" is the concern that each person should get what is his or her due, what is fair and right. "Mercy" is tangible concern for the needy and suffering, helping them even at one's own expense. "Faithfulness" is consistent obedience to God and integrity in relation to man, an honoring of promises, commitments, obligations, and duties in every direction, "in opposition to fraud, and cheating and circumventions," says Poole.[23] "Briefly, then," says Calvin, "the sum of the Law comes back to love."[24] They tithe (a secondary issue) while they mistreat people (a primary issue). They fail to care for others that they get what

[19] Cited in *RCS*, *NT*, III:251.
[20] Trapp, *Commentary*, V:242.
[21] Zerwick identifies it as an objective genitive (*Analysis*, I:227).
[22] Cited in *ACCS*, *NT*, Ib:175.
[23] Poole, *Commentary*, III:110.
[24] Calvin, *Harmony*, III:57.

they need and what they are due. They neglect love "which is the true root," Poole explains, "out of which all things should flow, and is indeed comprehensive of all our duty toward God as well as the root of all our good works towards men."[25] These universal and comprehensive principles are more important than tithing herbs, even as careful attention to tithing herbs is absurd in light of neglect of those "weightier," more important, more central, more critical concerns.

They were, in effect, paying for the odd paper clip or two while running an hour's worth of personal errands on company time to the tune of thousands of dollars a year. "When people concentrate on the trivial they are apt to overlook the important," explains Morris.[26] Or perhaps as a better example, they were fulfilling company policy by buying a birthday card for employees while verbally abusing them the other 250 work days each year. What good is a birthday card once a year if there is no justice, mercy, or faithfulness the rest of the year? They "made a complete mockery of the spirit of tithing and of its true purpose, and turned it into a heartless, mechanical, financial operation," claims Gooding.[27]

Why would they pay such close attention to tithing while neglecting "weightier matters?" As we have seen (23:5-7, 14), and will continue to see (23:25-28), for reputation's sake, "that they might be taken notice of as scrupulous observers of the Divine law," Poole again explains.[28] They would "sound the trumpet" when they gave even as they would "stand… at street corners" when they prayed their long prayers (Mt 6:1-6; 23:14). Why? "To be seen" and "praised" (6:1, 2, 5). Herein lies the problem. Hypocrites say that God is number one. Yet the reality

[25] Poole, *Commentary*, III:110.
[26] Morris, *Luke*, 223.
[27] Gooding, *Luke*, 232.
[28] Poole, *Commentary*, III:110.

is that earthly rewards are their true priority. For hypocrites, it really is all about social recognition, or money, or success, or getting the dream house, or the finest furnishings, or the beautiful wardrobe, or the other excitements and enticements of this world.

Jesus' words recall Micah's summary of true religion:

> [8] *He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* (Micah 6:8)

Justice, kindness, and humility are at the foundation of the righteousness that is superior to that of the scribes and Pharisees and to which Christ's disciples are to strive (Matthew 5:20). As one commentator said, "They concentrated on the minor and practicable pieties, to the neglect of the broad and inexhaustible principles."[29] The problem was not what they did but what they left undone.

> [24] *You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!* (Matthew 23:24)

Gnats were considered "unclean" (Leviticus 11:41). So were camels (Leviticus 11:4). Muslin gauze was used to strain gnats out of wine lest one be contaminated. Jesus shows the absurdity of their lack of proportion with this cartoonish picture of one straining a gnat out of a drink (which one should do) while leaving a camel in the drink and swallowing it whole. It was

[29] G. B. Caird, cited in France, *Matthew*, 328; Morris puts it this way, "The trouble was that in their concern that these small matters be properly attended to, the Pharisees neglected weightier matters that were much more important" (*Matthew*, 582).

fine and good to strain out the unclean *gnat* but absurd to do so if one left in the unclean *camel* and swallowed it.

All of God's commandments are to be kept. Jesus is not relativizing any of them or providing an excuse for neglecting minor commands at the expense of major ones. What He is requiring is a sense of proportion. If I tithe but I cheat my customers; if I tithe but I mistreat, even humiliate, my employees; if I keep a strict Sabbath but I am cruel to my spouse and children; if I dress up for church but dress down my neighbors; if I am careful about the marks of visible piety but brutally negligent about the weightier matters of justice, mercy, and faithfulness, I am a woeful hypocrite.

How does Jesus deal with us? He warns us to flee from the hypocrisies of selective obedience and disproportionate concern for relative trivialities over vital spiritual and moral concerns. He warns us to beware of warped priorities, of obsessing over minor issues while neglecting the major ones. He warns us of compliance shaped by self-serving motives. These warnings are themselves mercies meant to bring about our repentance. Maybe I'm in church every Sunday, but my real concern is how I look – my hair and my clothes– and what other people will think. Maybe I'm at church whenever the doors are open; or maybe I'm only at church only Sunday morning because that's when the largest crowd is present. Whichever may be the case, if my concern is to maximize visibility, to be seen, to advance my reputation or project an image, I am a woeful hypocrite. I am a fake, a fraud, a pretender. This is playing at religion and draws down His indignant rebuke from Jesus. If these things are true of us, let us then repent of our hypocrisy, cleanse our hearts, and serve God with pure motives. Let us strive for integrity so that what we claim matches how we act. Let us seize hold of the mercy veiled in the rebuke and get right with God.