

August 18, 2019

“Pride and Humility”

Matthew 23:1-12

FCF: Our haste to assess things and its impact on our approach

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Jesus has ushered in an upside-down kingdom.

(magnet) This transforms how we assess ourselves and our approach to God.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Conflict can be messy. In fact, it can often be helpful to pause, to take a step back, even in the midst of the disagreement. Here’s a scenario. Two church members are jammed up on something. A wise approach could be to allow some time to pass before we respond to what the other party has said. Meaning we should draw them out, listen, and then stop. Perhaps even say something along these lines. “I appreciate you sharing your convictions with me. I want to take time to pray and process it. Could we connect again later?” To stop and pause can be golden.

Our haste in how we assess gets us into trouble in all sorts of things. Which can really bungle our approach not just with one another but with ourselves and our relationship to God.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Matthew 23:1-12](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

I’ve been rewatching the 2018 Netflix reboot of *Lost in Space*. It’s a sci-fi series based on a reimagining of the 1960’s series of the same name (itself a reimagining of the classic, *The Swiss Family Robinson*). The idea is that a group of families have set out to colonize the Alpha Centauri star system. But before they reach their destination, they crash on a planet. And then have to deal with all kinds of dangers along the way. This is not like the cheesy original. This is a grittier galaxy. They are truly lost - not just off course but adrift without any bearings. Their star charts are useless. Again, far from home. Which means they must rethink everything.

Not unlike what we see with Jesus and the kingdom He has ushered in. It has rightfully been called an “upside-down kingdom.” Not that it’s nonsensical but that the values have been reversed. Jesus is a subversive, bringing a revolution - not fine-tuning but overturning. How so? Think about it. We want power, comfort, success, and recognition. He says, “Be prepared for weakness, sacrifice, grief, and exclusion.” Or, as we see in our text ([READ Matthew 23:12](#)).

Jesus has ushered in an upside-down kingdom. This transforms everything, including what I alluded to a few minutes ago - the ways we assess ourselves and our approach to God.

How so? It comes out in Jesus’ words to the religious leaders of the day. First, in what He condemns. And then, second, in what He affirms. This is vital insight we dare not dismiss.

I. WHAT JESUS CONDEMNS

So, first, what Jesus condemns. That may seem rather odd to you. “Isn’t Jesus loving?” It may not seem to fit. I was driving home the other day and had to stop because a 2-foot long lizard was in the road. It was a bearded dragon. Now, they hail from Australia, not mid-TN. I assume he must have escaped or been released. Before I could grab him, he scurried into a pipe.

So I drove on, thinking, “That just doesn’t belong there.” Much like what we think when we hear of Jesus condemning something. But there are things it is unloving not to condemn.

A) *Antinomianism*

The first of the two is not actually in the text but it’s worth a mention - antinomianism.

1. Definition

It means “anti-lawism.” It is a downplaying or outright denial of God’s commands. We see it in those who misunderstand what Paul means when he says we are “free from the law” and ignore what James says when he declares that “faith without works is dead.” It’s a real problem.

2. Origin

At a fundamental level, it says, “I know better. And this is how I will live.” Its roots are pride.

B) *Legalism*

As with its cousin, legalism. Legalism looks like the polar opposite but it has the same root. And it is what Jesus is speaking to here in the strongest way, especially among leaders.

1. Definition

Again, obedience to God’s commands has a place in the Christian life ([READ Ephesians 2:8-10](#)). But legalism distorts obedience and the place of works. The delusion is we can earn our way to God’s favor and add to His commands. Both of which are fundamental denials of the gospel.

2. Case study

The scribes and the Pharisees - the officials Jesus warns of - were a case study in this. ([READ Matthew 23:1-3](#)) They failed to practice what they preached. They were hypocrites in the worst way. ([READ Matthew 23:4](#)) Unlike Jesus, whose yoke is easy and burden light, the rules these men laid down were burdensome. Even worse, they refused to help people carry them. ([READ Matthew 23:5-7](#)) They sought out applause, paraded their piety, and loved to be praised.

We must not miss this. Jesus condemns such legalism - especially among leaders.

Illustration:

What are signs of such things in our own lives? What are the symptoms of this disease? One would be a powerlessness. Whatever else we might think, legalism has no power to check our sin. I came across a story recently ([READ “Boundaries Are Not Enough to Prevent Sin”](#)):

Once a man planted a garden and was delighted when shoots emerged. Every day he watered and weeded, and his garden grew until he was ecstatic to see plants bearing produce. However, a few days later, he went to his garden and was dismayed. Every plant showed evidence of hungry rodents and rabbits that had raided his crop. So he decided to erect a fence. A few days later, the man again went to his garden and saw the same thing. So he put up another fence, another, and another. Every time he checked, he found vermin had raided the garden. Finally he realized critters could go over, through, or under each fence. So he built a brick wall with a deep concrete foundation. Weeks later, he climbed the garden wall and was horrified to find it was choked with weeds. The ground was cracked, the plants wilted, and worst of all, his crop gone. Trusting in the wall’s protection, he had forgotten to tend the garden. He failed to realize the wall was blocking the sun’s rays. He also completely overlooked the greatest threat to his garden: the animals that had been inside all along.

Application:

So that’s one symptom - powerlessness. Another is deception. Legalism focuses on the external, measurable, attainable. So it deceives us into thinking we’ve arrived. Which inevitably leads to

division. For legalism fosters pride, boasting, comparisons, and conflict. One last symptom is a noxiousness. Legalism has no reality to it. Which will most surely always drive people away.

The upside-down kingdom. It shifts how we assess ourselves and our approach to God.

II. WHAT JESUS AFFIRMS

Jesus most certainly condemns legalism and the pride that lies within its roots. What then does He affirm? Humility. Let's consider two things here - the marks of humility and its means.

A) *Humility - the Marks*

First, the marks. That is, how you can spot it, its telltale signs and external manifestation.

1. Not status-conscious

For starters, humility is not status-conscious ([READ Matthew 23:8-10](#)). "But you..." There is an emphasis here. Jesus recognizes our tendencies and temptations. We are not to chase after titles. In fact, those He lists ultimately belong to God alone. Not that there is no place for such things in the right sense but we should flee from any hierarchies that elevate a few over others.

2. But service-oriented

We are not to be status-conscious but service-oriented ([READ Matthew 23:11-12](#)). We are not to seek high places but service, even the lowest of places. As with Jesus in His washing of the disciples' feet. "This is what I'm doing for you. And this is what you are to do for one another."

B) *Humility - the Means*

Which takes us from the marks of humility to its means, the way it is cultivated.

1. Looking to the Word

Which starts with looking to the Word, the Scriptures. We look to God's promises and warnings and dwell not only on them but why we need them. We look to His commands and how readily and easily we break them. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, we let them speak to our hearts and convict us of our sin. Which then immediately takes us to our daily need of Jesus and His grace.

2. Looking to Jesus

We look to the Word. And we look to Jesus. There is an active passivity to the Christian life. Meaning that we seek to be transformed. We seek to be transformed, to become more humble, more like Jesus, the One among us who is truly greatest as the greatest of servants, our servant.

This is what Jesus affirms - gospel driven humility that expresses itself in true service.

Illustration:

Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) was a Scottish minister and great preacher. Accounts say his preaching would shut down the town. He began as the pastor of the wealthy Tron Church in Glasgow. But next door was a poor parish, St. John's. Chalmers' heart was drawn to them.

Not all at once. His diary has these entries ([READ quotes](#)) "God give me wisdom, and save me from being enraged at the annoyances of the poor." A few years later, "Got impatient

with a man who called on me.” But eventually, Chalmers gave up the pastorate at Trons and moved next door to St. John’s. Why? It had to do with something that had moved within him.

Which can be understood by these words from one of his own sermons ([READ quote](#)):

(It is) impossible...for the heart, by any innate elasticity of its own, to cast the world away from it...The heart is not so constituted; and the only way to dispossess it of an old affection, is by the expulsive power of a new one.

Application:

And that is the secret - the expulsive power of a new affection. How can we be changed? How can we be rescued from our Pharisaical ways? Not just by hearing how bad Pharisees are but by having the old affections of our hearts replaced by new ones. How does that happen?

As we go to Jesus and say, “Lord, my feet were filthy. And you washed them. They get filthy everyday. And you keep washing them. That’s who I am and what you do. That’s who I am and what you do. Make me a servant. Give me gospel humility. And make me a servant.”

The upside-down kingdom. It shifts how we assess ourselves and our approach to God.

CONCLUSION:

In stark contrast to the scribes and Pharisees is the concept of “servant leadership.” Much has been written about this in recent years. The idea is that such a leader should share power and that their goal is to serve the people under them. There is a lot to this. But it is not original.

Douglas Southall Freeman (1886-1953) was an American author, newspaper editor, radio commentator, historian, and biographer. He’s best known for his multi-volume biographies of Robert E. Lee and George Washington, for both of which he was awarded Pulitzer Prizes. As though all that wasn’t enough, he also taught as a lecturer at the U. S. Army War College for several years. You can still find the manuscripts of the addresses. One of which highlighted leadership lessons from Lee and Washington and explains why they were both so successful and beloved by their men. There are three rules and they are worth remembering. First, know your stuff - study the objective and the means to it and never let yourself be stagnant in your studies. Second, be a man - that is, a man of integrity and good character, someone worth following. And then, third, take care of your men - do all you can to equip and empower them. Again, this wasn’t original to Freeman. He just relayed what he had learned from Lee and Washington.

Now think with me. What lies beneath these basic rules? The rejection of pride and the embrace of humility. That’s what lies beneath them. It’s why things flourish wherever these are applied. But this wasn’t original to Lee and Washington either. In Jesus we see the ultimate and original servant leader. Not just in “taking care of (his) men” but leaving the security of heaven to walk among us, washing the feet of His followers, living and dying in our place. He is the servant. As we grasp that, it will encourage, enable, and impel us to do the same for one another.

Jesus has ushered in an upside-down kingdom. This transforms how we understand everything - absolutely everything - including how we assess ourselves and our approach to God.

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