

Matthew Chapter 23: 1-4, 13-15, 23-28, 37-39

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

13-15: “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

23-24: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

25-26: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.

27-28: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

The Lament over Jerusalem

37-39: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’ ”

John 13:31-35

When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Back in the day, when I taught confirmation classes here, the first thing I told each group of confirmands – right after I told them that God loved them, Bob loved them, and somebody else loved them, too – was that God was great, and Jesus was amazing, but the minute mankind got involved in their story it got completely messed up. I told them about the unconditional love God has for every living thing in God's creation, and I taught them about Jesus being the perfect example of one who was fully human, fully in tune with the God who created us all. My hope was that through the year I had with them, I would be able to give those kids an idea of what the God-and-Jesus story was before we got involved, and that they would also develop the ability to discern for themselves when something didn't fit that ideal.

It's been a while since I've been truly active in this faith community, and a large part of the reason for my absence has been that I've had a hard time fitting myself into the cloak of Christianity I had created for myself. I'm a lifelong Congregationalist. In addition to teaching confirmation, I taught various grades of Sunday school for ten years, I've served on and chaired my share of committees, and I've been preaching for nearly twenty years. I've read scores of books and magazine articles, and spent many hundreds of hours researching our Christian faith, and more and more often I found that the faith of our fathers left me feeling empty and unfulfilled.

I think part of the reason for that is that the practice of Christianity has strayed so far from the example Jesus gave us, and the more I tried to live my life as I feel Jesus called me to, I fit less and less into what Christianity has become today.

I believe there are some things about Jesus that we can all agree are true. One of those is that there was no ambiguity whatsoever in the message Jesus left for us. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Love one another. Period. Love *everyone*. Period.

How do you think that Jesus is feeling about the religion that carries his name today? Would he be proud of everything that is done in his name?

This morning, I'd like to share some examples of exactly how I feel Christianity has lost its way, and then I'd like us to consider what we can do to get it back to the loving relationship with our God – and everyone else – that Jesus taught us it ought to be.

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Those of you who were here last week will remember that I spoke of John Lennon's comment about The Beatles being more popular than Jesus, and all the trouble that caused for the band. What John said was, "Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now. I don't know which will go first, rock 'n' roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary. It's them twisting it that ruins it for me."

I have to admit, I've come to agree with John about those who followed Jesus. The more I studied, and the more I learned about the apostles, the more I came to realize that their humanity was their downfall, and it set the Christian faith on a course for corruption from its earliest days.

Unfortunately, when the apostles finally decided to write the gospels, some twenty to fifty years after Jesus died, they took what was a wonderful story of the ministry of Jesus, and twisted it to “strengthen” the narrative and prove that Christianity was more legitimate than any other religion of that time. That it was, in fact, the one “true” religion. So in the telling of the story, they added a virgin birth and a handful of miracles, and they altered the timeline of his ministry to more closely match Old Testament prophecies, so it would be clear Jesus was the messiah the Jews had been waiting for.

God is great, Jesus was amazing, but those who were there with him in person didn't think that was enough, so they embellished and adjusted and ended up creating a Jesus narrative that is nearly impossible for many to believe today. We don't question it; we accept it – mostly, but not really – and in doing so our faith is weakened.

Throughout history, using Christianity to advance one's own selfish agenda became commonplace. Consider the Crusades, a series of religious wars during the medieval period that were sanctioned by the Christian church. War in the name of Jesus, our “love one another” savior.

Consider also the abuses that grew into indulgences that allowed the Christian church of the late Middle Ages to demand payments in exchange for forgiveness of sins and salvation from eternal damnation. How do you think Jesus felt while that was going on?

It was practices like these that prompted Martin Luther to write his Ninety-Five Theses, which eventually led to a schism in the Christian church and gave birth to the Protestant Reformation. A good move, one that Jesus must have been very proud of, but it wasn't long before the Protestants began having disagreements over doctrine, and they too began splitting off into myriad denominations.

From where I'm standing, it seems that what Jesus wanted for the world was pretty simple, but once again, rather than follow in his footsteps, humans found their own ways to interpret – and complicate – his call.

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The worst assault on the church Jesus tried to create happened slowly – almost innocently – and it was perpetrated by a jolly old man and a furry mammal with big ears. Every year I ask myself, “How did we allow our most sacred religious celebrations to be taken over by secular stories that are even harder to believe than a virgin birth?”

I'm talking, of course, about Christmas and Easter.

How did this happen? *Why* did this happen? Was celebrating the birth of Jesus not enough? Was it more meaningful to turn that celebration into a retail extravaganza, to the point that Americans now spend upwards of \$465 billion every year buying gifts for one another while they – theoretically – celebrate the birth of our savior? How do you think Jesus feels about this?

And now, as we prepare ourselves for the holiest week in our Christian tradition, as we work our way through the season of Lent – a time for preparation and reflection before we celebrate the resurrection of our savior at Easter – we have to remember to get baskets for the kids and fill them with candies and a chocolate Easter bunny.

How did this happen? How did Holy Week turn into a time when Americans will spend another \$17.3 billion on clothing, food, decorations, and other holiday items – \$2.4 billion of which will be spent on candy!?

Does anybody have a problem with any of this? Are Santa and the Easter Bunny really more important than Jesus? Can you imagine how much love we could show for our neighbors, especially the poor, if we had nearly half a trillion dollars to spend on helping them every year?

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Is it any wonder that many of us might question our faith, given how far from our savior's example the reality of our practice is? We've strayed so far from the simple clarity of Jesus that our religion is no longer relevant in our lives, and the sad truth is that Christianity is becoming irrelevant in the lives of more and more Americans.

In 2015, the Pew Research Center released a study called "America's Changing Religious Landscape," in which they compared results of two parallel polls they conducted seven years apart, in 2007, and then again in 2014. They found that, "The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing." I found it interesting that, "While the drop in Christian affiliation is especially true among young adults, it is occurring among Americans of all ages. The same trends are seen among whites, blacks and Latinos; among both college graduates and adults with only a high school education; and among women as well as men."

Here are some highlights from that study:

- The percentage of adults who describe themselves as Christians has dropped by nearly eight percent in just seven years. Over the same period, the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated – describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular" – has jumped more than six percent.
- The number of religiously unaffiliated adults has increased by roughly 19 million since 2007. There are now approximately 56 million religiously unaffiliated adults in the U.S. This group is larger than either Catholics or mainline Protestants.
- Of the major subgroups within American Christianity, mainline Protestantism – a tradition that includes the United Church of Christ – appears to have experienced the greatest drop in numbers, losing 5 million members. And,
- People in older generations are increasingly leaving organized religion. More than 85% of American adults were raised Christian, but *nearly a quarter of those who were raised Christian no longer identify with Christianity.*

I can't help but think that if Christianity was relevant to people – if it was the simple, believable, loving practice Jesus intended it to be – there wouldn't be nearly as many people questioning their faith, or leaving their churches.

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So where are we in this story? Where do you and I fit in these statistics? I realize that in many ways I'm preaching to the choir this morning, but why are there so many empty seats here today? Is it because we had a dusting of snow last night? Were there soccer games to take the kids to this morning? Or dance recitals? Is it because Kristen is away? Or is it because our church is not as relevant in the lives of our members as we'd like to think it is?

Is practicing our faith a priority to us? If it was relevant to us, it would be. But I fear that it's been taken so far from what God and Jesus intended it to be that many people can't connect to it in a meaningful way anymore.

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Unfortunately, we look to our ministers to guide us in the ways of Christ, but we make it nearly impossible for them to do so. In the modern church, ministers can't say anything that might be considered controversial, because they can't risk offending anyone.

I was told once that any minister that wanted to keep his integrity had to also keep a suitcase packed and be ready to move quickly, because it was only a matter of time before he would have to choose to compromise his beliefs or move on.

Ultimately, the sad fact is that money controls the Christian church, just as surely as it controlled the Pharisees' grip on the Temple when Jesus lived. Many of us – clergy and lay leaders alike – are afraid to say anything that might offend anyone, because they may remove their money from our coffers, and we desperately need their money.

If Jesus was sitting on the couch behind me right now, do you really think there would be any uncertainty about how he would feel about what's going on in our world today? Is there any question what Jesus would say about the NRA, or immigration, or the poor, or any other issues that divide us?

We don't talk about those issues in church. Is that because we're unclear about how Jesus would feel about them, or are we avoiding them because we don't agree with what we know Jesus would say, or because we don't want to offend anyone who might disagree with what we know to be true?

The President of our United States lies without remorse. The leader of the free world ridicules handicapped people, says things about women that I can't repeat from this pulpit, and then hides behind catch-phrases like "fake news" and "alternative facts."

And for the most part, our churches are silent.

Think of how different this is from the times of Jesus...how he railed against the Sadducees and the Pharisees. It eventually got him killed, but he did it because of the love he felt for our God – and the love he felt for each of us – along with his intense desire to remove the obstacles that were put between God and us, God's people.

How do we measure up to that example? Are we Christians who live in the image of the Christ who walked this earth over 2,000 years ago, or are we Christians who prefer to focus our efforts on Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and sleeping late on Sunday mornings?

Will you be there when we are called to face difficult issues, as Christ calls you to be, or will you remain quiet because you don't want to make waves?

As one social commentator said recently, "If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor, either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that he commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition, and then admit that we just don't want to do it."

As Christians, we have to have a larger focus...this isn't *our* story, it's *God's* story. For us to support a faith that is afraid to speak the truth is a slap to the face of our kind and loving creator.

I hope you understand that I am speaking today with love. Love for each of you, love for this church community, love for the Christian church. But most importantly, I am speaking from the deep and abiding love I have for Jesus, the man who taught us so much, the man who shared such great truths, the man who was willing to die for what he believed in.

I hope you also understand that I'm not unaware of the many good things that are going on in this community of faith. There are many programs we have undertaken that help those who are in need in our community and around the world.

But we cannot truly call this a Christian church unless we are willing to look through the eyes of Christ, and have the difficult conversations that Christ called us to have. We weren't there when they crucified our Jesus, but we're all here now, and we're making a choice to either crucify him again by turning our backs on his call, or to be courageous and work to make real, lasting change that will improve the lives of *all* who suffer.

The answer of relevancy doesn't lie in the past. The answer of relevancy doesn't lie in more social groups or activities. The only way to make the Christian church relevant is to make sure it resonates with the calling God has put on each of our hearts to be like Jesus, so that we will know in our hearts, and deep down in our subconscious souls, that our church is as Jesus called it to be...and that we are the kind, loving Christians that Jesus calls us to be.

Amen.