

Spiritual Leaders None Should Follow

Matt. 23:1-12

Intro. *On November 18, 1978, in what became known as the "Jonestown Massacre," more than 900 members of an American cult called the Peoples Temple died in a mass suicide-murder under the direction of their leader Jim Jones (1931-78). The mass suicide-murder took place at the so-called Jonestown settlement in the South American nation of Guyana. Jones had founded what became the Peoples Temple in Indiana in the 1950s then relocated his congregation to California in the 1960s. In the 1970s, following negative media attention, the powerful, controlling preacher moved with some 1,000 of his followers to the Guyanese jungle, where he promised they would establish a utopian community. On November 18, 1978, U.S. Representative Leo Ryan, who had gone to Jonestown to investigate claims of abuse, was murdered, along with four members of his delegation, by Jonestown gunmen. That same day, Jones ordered his followers to ingest poison-laced punch, while armed guards stood by. One third of the 909 who died that day were children. There are spiritual leaders none should follow!*

Isn't it true that we spare no effort to protect those we love? Since Matthew's Gospel is dedicated to the King and His Kingdom, it was entirely appropriate for King Jesus to seek to protect the citizens of His Kingdom He loves. And listen...the greatest danger in the world is spiritual in nature. Spiritual deception is real and the stakes couldn't be higher. At stake is life in Christ's presence or the second death that separates people from God for eternity.

Notice to whom Jesus was speaking. **v.1 - Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:** Jesus was speaking both to His disciples and to crowds that gathered around Him. He was speaking to those who were already members of His kingdom and to those who might one day believe in Him. The warnings of this chapter form a sequel to the blessings of the Sermon on the Mount in **Matt. 5** where the blessed are characterized by 8 heart attitudes. What follows **Matt. 23:1-12** are 7 **woes** pronounced against those who don't have these heart attitudes and would consequently be excluded from His Kingdom. The blessings one day and the woes another day remind us of the instruction given to Moses in **Deut. 11:29 - When the LORD your God has brought you into the land you are entering to possess, you are to proclaim on Mount Gerizim the blessings, and on Mount Ebal the curses.**

So, in this His final sermon, Jesus again speaks to matters of the heart. Three years have passed since He gave the Sermon on the Mount. His teaching ministry began with the promise of great blessings. It now it concludes with a series of sober warnings and judgments. Jesus knew that deception was already present. He knew it would become more onerous and oppressive after He ascended to heaven. He knew the danger to His Kingdom wouldn't come from the realms of science and learning / politics and international conflict / or even from natural disasters. The danger of greatest concern and consequence would come from false religion and from religious men who deny the faith in hypocrisy...teachers who come in like wolves disguised as sheep.

As the NT unfolds, the warnings Jesus gave in **Matt. 23** were echoed by the Apostles John, Paul, Peter and Jude. These warnings have special importance for those living in the last days before Jesus returns. In fact, if you glance ahead to **Matt. 24, 4, 5** – the first sign or world condition prior to Christ's return is stated this way..."**Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many.** Here and in numerous other passages, believers are warned that the greatest threat we face this side of heaven is the threat posed by deceivers and their subtle deception. They are Spiritual Leaders None Should Follow. Look again at **Matt. 24:24 - For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect--if that were possible.**

So this morning I hope you'll look beyond the harshness of the rebukes and the woe's Jesus pronounced on Israel's leaders to sense the loving heart of a King who is passionate to protect His citizens...the people He loves. We must never forget...just as sure as there is a heaven to gain, there is also a Hell to avoid! Though out of step with world's notions where right and wrong are subjective and almost anything goes, Jesus provides clear marks that distinguish those who are true from those who are false. Yet contained in this series of identifying marks are practical applications for each of believer...especially for those in leadership positions. In practical terms, Jesus gave a series of tests which equip us to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith.

In **vs.1-3** the stage is set as Jesus drew attention to the specific spiritual leaders He would address and how true believers should respond to them. **23:1-3 - Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you.**

David Platt writes, *"In a statement of pure irony, Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat...that is, they have Moses' authority...authority to teach God's Word."* God's Word is true no matter who holds it in their hands or who teaches it. God's Word is the ultimate infallible authority. So whether the preacher is a curmudgeon or the highest example of moral integrity, God's Word is true, pure and faultless. And it doesn't matter if the preacher's motives are pure or tainted...the Word preached is still the Word each person is responsible to obey. The fact is...every human teacher is a flawed and fallen man or woman. There is no alternate category. Paul alluded to teachers with flawed motives in **Phil. 1:15-18 - It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice...**

So, irrespective of who they are and what they're doing...when God's truth is spoken, (in so far as it is His truth) Jesus said, **you must obey them and do everything they tell you.** This calls for discernment, doesn't it? God's Word must be carefully distinguished from the words of a man or a group of men. People follow deceivers like Jim Jones / David Koresh / L. Ron Hubbard because the leader impressed them and because he claimed to speak the truth. Like Israel in the OT, the prophet spoke and the people blindly followed. Yet the Lord instructed His people this way in **Jer. 23:16 - This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD."** In this same chapter the Lord spoke again and said, **"Therefore," declares the LORD, "I am against the prophets who steal from one another words supposedly from me. Yes," declares the LORD, "I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, 'The LORD declares.'**

So while each person is responsible to obey God's Word irrespective of the preacher, every teaching must be tested to be sure it agrees with God's Word. This primary test should be applied to every teaching. Does the word of the preacher match up with the Word of God? Is the preacher speaking God's Word or his own? **I Jn. 4:1 - Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.** Aside from testing religious teachings by the Word of God, Jesus authorized His followers to consider the teacher's manner of his life...the way he conducts his life and ministry.

Earlier in **Matt. 7:15-20 - Jesus said, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them.**

Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. The fruit Jesus spoke of here represents the patterns of their life and ministry. When what we observe seems more like thorns and thistles than sweet fruit like grapes and figs...we have every right to question their legitimacy.

1. What false leaders do – vs. 3b-7

In **vs.3-7** Jesus described 4 things false leaders do.

a. They don't walk their talk – v. 3b – (they lack integrity) But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

Even though they may preach with eloquence and apparent enlightenment, we must not follow the example of those who don't practice what they preach. The essence of what Jesus condemned here in **Matt. 23** is hypocrisy. In Matt. 23 Jesus called Israel's leaders **hypocrites** 6 x's. The most serious judgments Jesus ever made were reserved for this particular sin. Hypocrisy is play acting. It's pretending to be someone we are not or claiming to do things we don't do. The Greek word translated hypocrite derives from the Greek drama and stage where actors wore masks to conceal their true identity. Yet spiritual hypocrisy is deeper and more consequential than being fooled by an actor on stage. The hypocrisy that angers Jesus is deception employed to create vulnerability. Before luring a child into his vehicle, the child molester often smiles / speaks softly / and offers the child a gift. He's a wolf disguised in sheep's clothing. False teachers have the same MO. They create vulnerability.

The sin Jesus so vehemently opposed was directed against those who used their aura, authority and appearance of piety like bait piles to deceive people and draw them in. Credentials, degrees and even a superior knowledge of the Scriptures can be used to ensnare people. Here Jesus again authorizes His people to be fruit inspectors...to look past the tinsel to the tree. The teacher's life must demonstrate harmony between what they preach and what they practice. Israel's leaders were hypocrites who lacked integrity. They didn't live out the standards they preached.

The strongest proof of a teacher's legitimacy is his changed life. The lesson for you and me is obvious and hard to overlook. It's imperative for each of us to bring our practice into conformity with the truth we embrace. Each of us must learn what it means to walk in the Spirit. Though none of us will do this perfectly, we must press on toward a life of increased consistency between what we say and how we live. The faith we profess isn't validated in a pew on Sunday morning. It's validated as parents in our home / as workers in our workplace / as students on campus / by the way we relate to our husband or wife / and in our friendships. We must bring a hard stop to every form of hypocritical inconsistency so that Christ may be seen in us.

b. They load down without lifting - v.4 – (they lack sympathy and compassion) They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

The picture Jesus created here is that of a donkey or camel so heavily loaded down that it can hardly move. The owner walks alongside carrying nothing but beating and berating the animal if it should stumble or refuse to go any further. The owner has no concern for the animal's feelings or welfare. This is how the scribes and Pharisees treated their fellow Jews...people they were called to love and to serve. They had people on a leash. They piled on heavy loads of religious regulations, rules and rituals...burdens that were unbearable and impossible to carry.

When the people faltered and failed to keep every requirement...they were despised and ridiculed. To failure, they added the burden of guilt. They constantly reminded people that the only way to please God was by good works. This lie has been perpetrated by virtually every religion in the world. Christianity is unique because all the work necessary to salvation and acceptance by God was done by Christ when He died on the cross for us. Amen? Yet certain false leaders in the early church required certain works while prohibiting marriage and the eating of certain foods. To this day, Catholicism insists on these and certain other legalistic and unscriptural teachings. And despite the message of grace that saves and sanctifies us, churches often load people down with unreasonable expectations. They use guilt motivation for just about everything. I know some of you have been delivered from that. Let me read something more about the situation at Jonestown, Guyana.

“Jonestown did not turn out to be the paradise their leader had promised. Temple members worked long days in the fields and were subjected to harsh punishments if they questioned Jones’ authority. Their passports were confiscated, their letters home censored and members were encouraged to inform on one another and forced to attend lengthy, late-night meetings. Jones, by then in declining mental health and addicted to drugs, was convinced the U.S. government and others were out to destroy him. He required Temple members to participate in mock suicide drills in the middle of the night.” This is just a sample of the burdens heaped on the members of the People’s Church.

Let’s be reminded of what Jesus said in **Matt. 11:28-30** - **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."** The way of Christ is to lift us up not load us down. Now don’t get me wrong. Jesus deserves the best of our affections / our time / our talents / our energy / and our resources. But something is out of whack when church and serving the Lord become an impossible burden and we find ourselves feeling guilty and unable to say “no” to anything asked of us. Unlike ranchers who drive their cattle, true spiritual leaders are shepherds who lead their sheep. They gently lead them to green pastures and still waters along paths of righteousness. Yet Israel’s leaders drove the people because they lacked sympathy and compassion for them. **Mk. 6:34** says, **when Jesus...saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.** Israel’s leaders were merciless in the demands they heaped on the people they were called to serve. They had no interest in grace or forgiveness.

There’s a lesson for us here. **Gal. 5:1** says, **It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.** The grace of God lifts and liberates where legal demands and obligations only weigh down and enslave. Our prayer is that this church will always be a place where burdens are lifted!

c. They view holiness as a photo op - v.5 – (they lack true heart level devotion) "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long;

Having been through a raucous campaign season, we know what a photo op is. It’s a situation arranged or staged to portray someone or something in a favorable way. Notice the phrase... **everything they do is done for men to see.** The highest motivation in Christianity is the glory of God. But these leaders were all about self-glory. What we do as believers must be done for God’s praise, not our own. As one Christian coach so accurately said, “We play for an audience of One.”

But Israel’s leaders were all about looking good. They made the leather verse packets worn on their foreheads extra wide, because like the Pontiac ad insists...“wider is better.” *“Mine is wider than yours and we all know what that means!”*

4 x's in the Pentateuch, God commanded that His Law was to be upon the hands and foreheads of His people as a reminder of Him. His intention was that their thoughts and actions be guided by His Word. Yet as time passed, God's true intention was replaced by this artificial display of piety. There's no record of phylacteries being worn until about 400 BC. So in effect, a packet of verses worn on their foreheads replaced the obedience God desired from the heart.

Like a wedding ring on the finger a married person, tassels or fringes were to be worn as a reminder that God's OT people were set apart to Him. **Num. 15:38-40 - "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute your-selves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes. Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God.** Jesus Himself wore tassels. It was these tassels or fringes the woman with the hemorrhage touched and was healed. Yet in their passion to look good, the Jewish leaders distorted the tassel's meaning. If wider phylacteries were more spiritual, then longer tassels had the same effect. Once again, these false leaders were all about appearances and looking good.

Earlier, Jesus addressed this matter of wanting to be seen. In **Matt. 6:1** He said, "**Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.**" Then in **v.5** He said, "**And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.** Do you know when true spirituality shows up? It shows up when nobody's watching. Heart level devotion doesn't need a platform or the applause of a crowd. It doesn't need anyone's recognition. Jesus said, true spirituality consists of righteous deeds done anonymously and prayers prayed in the seclusion of a closet. True spirituality proceeds from our hearts simply because we love God and want to please Him. He is the solitary audience we play for.

So beware of those who seek men's approval and play to the crowd. Many do this in the name of Christ. They sit on ornate golden furniture surrounded by elegant draperies and impressive statuary. They wear long flowing robes which make them appear to glide instead of just walking like normal people. They boast of their sacrifices and contributions to humanity. But all of this is done selfishly to be seen and applauded by men.

The lesson for believers is clear. Like a spiritual EKG, we're challenged to consider why and for whom we do what we do. In **I Cor. 10:31** Paul wrote, **So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.** Again in **Col. 3:23,24** he wrote, **Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.** The false leader uses the ministry for his own aggrandizement, but the true leader is in it for the Lord.

d. They seek recognition and pre-eminence – vs. 6, 7 - (they are self-serving and lack humility) - they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'

The religious leaders in Israel competed with each other for seats at the table where they could be closest to the host and the center of attention. They loved designated parking and to be promoted to first in line. It was this ego-centered spirit that prompted James and John to persuade their mother to ask Jesus to appoint them to be seated at his right and left hands in the kingdom. (**Matt. 20:20-21**)

Today pastors are sometimes tempted to use their positions and the activities they're involved in for their own gratification and glory. Churches contribute to this when they prop their pastor up with unjustified distinction. At the root of this posturing is pride and the desire to be exceptional.

Notice, they **love to...have men call them Rabbi**. In that day, to be called **Rabbi** was equivalent to supreme one / Excellency / most knowledgeable one / great one. The Jews loved to hear people call them by titles like these. It was like a burst of helium to the balloon of their egos. So here King Jesus gave 4 characteristics of spiritual leaders none should follow or trust. He gave them to protect His citizens from deception and error. False teachers don't walk their talk / they load down without lifting / they view holiness as a photo op / and they selfishly seek recognition and pre-eminence. Yet just before Jesus addressed the scribes and Pharisees, He turned to address His followers.

2. What true leaders and followers must not do - vs. 8-10 - "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ."

Here is a passage that must be interpreted in light of its context. Did Jesus intend that a ban be put on every title, including Rabbi, Master, Father and teacher? I don't think so. We know from the NT that titles like apostle, elder, pastor, deacon evangelist and teacher appear frequently. What Jesus forbids is not the title itself, but the attitude of superiority that so often attaches itself to a title. He forbids His people from requiring others to refer to them by one of these exalted titles. I love how Chuck Swindoll counsels men seeking a doctorate degree. He says, "*get it, then get over it.*" Its that "*get over it*" part that some really struggle with. Degrees and titles can so quickly go to our heads.

The fact that Jesus isn't opposed to every title is confirmed by several statements. He said, **You have only one Master and you are all brothers / You have One Father and he is in heaven / and you have one Teacher, the Christ**. What Jesus prohibits is those who egotistically claim that they are special in an exceptional and exclusive way. And this is the claim often made by religious and cult leaders. They claim that God revealed Himself to them and God has given them secret insight not given to others. Because of this special revelation and superior insight, they should be honored and followed. But more than just bearing a title, they demand that others recognize their superiority.

Diotrephes was such a man. **III Jn. 9** says, **I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us**. Then too, in Christ's letters to the Churches in **Rev. 2, 3**, Jesus said, **But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate**. The Greek word *nicao* means to conquer and *laitan* refers to the laity or the common people. In the development of the church there arose a religious hierarchy where titles and a pecking order were of great importance. This hierarchy conquers and rules over the people. Men of title and position tend to draw people to themselves and away from Christ. So Jesus prohibits His followers from taking to themselves titles that usurp the glory, honor and praise that belongs to God alone.

3. What separates the true from the false - vs. 11, 12 - The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

The hypocrisy exposed in **vs. 3-10** can be reduced to one characteristic...selfish ambition. Jesus here warns His followers of spiritual leaders who are in it for themselves. They lack Spirit-produced integrity / they lack sympathy and compassion / they lack true heart-level devotion / they lack humility / and they crave the recognition their title demands. In every respect, they are unlike the Jesus they claim to represent. Their example must not be followed.

A model of true leadership is found in the example of the Apostle Paul. In **I Cor. 11:1** he wrote, **Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.** And to the Philippian believers he wrote, **Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Phil. 2:3-5**

So in these verses, King Jesus seeks to protect His citizens from ungodly men who masquerade as spiritual leaders and truth-tellers. There will always be spiritual leaders none should follow. Just as we lovingly protect our children, Jesus wants to protect us from spiritual deception and error. But within His judgments, we see the kind of leaders and followers we ought to be. May God help us to be true.