

**“And this Gospel ,”
shall be preached...”
Matthew 24:14**

Sermon Summaries from Ministers of the Worldwide Church of God

“BEWARE OF THE LEAVEN OF THE PHARISEES”

The scribes and Pharisees of Christ's day appeared to be very good people. They were leaders of the community, respected and admired.

They maintained a rigid schedule of religious activities. They fasted twice a week, prayed regularly with eloquence, tithed meticulously even on the small seeds from garden plants, kept the Sabbath rigidly. And they gave large offerings in the temple treasury. Outwardly they certainly appeared to be models of godliness.

But, Jesus Christ recognized in them a character flaw so serious that He warned they would see the notorious sinners of Nineveh, Tyre and Sidon rise up in the judgment and condemn them and their generation (Matt. 8:12; 11:20-24; 12:41).

That fatal character flaw was HYPOCRISY. We too are warned to beware of this trait that is so deceptive and destructive—yet often concealed and camouflaged by an appearance of good (Luke 12:1).

Hypocrisy

Let's understand this “leaven” of the Pharisees—this religious hypocrisy that is still rampant in many forms in today's world.

In addition to their regular fasts and prayers and other religious works mentioned above, the Pharisees relished their roles as leaders in the public eye. The Pharisees made sure everybody knew how

many badges and medals they had. They made broad their phylacteries. They wore these Scripture passages so everyone would know they were educated.

They spoke “godly” words, and their appearance was “godly.” They traveled out of their way to make proselytes for the Jewish religion.

You'd think that somebody with all those good religious works would be commended. But Jesus said just the opposite because they were missing one huge character ingredient.

“Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat [a teaching position]: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe [tell you to do], that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. 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. But all their works they do for to be seen of men” (Matt. 23:1-5).

They were just out to impress people, not to *humble* themselves before God. They did all their good works to get the praise and approbation of the people, not to *serve* God and their fellowman in sincerity and love.

Jesus went on. “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" (verses 5-7).

But Jesus said, "Be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. 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. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted" (verses 8-12).

In verse 13, Jesus said: "But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men. For ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in."

Be Genuine

The Pharisees loaded people up with the dos and don'ts of their traditions—and obscured the true way of God which is *love* shed abroad in human hearts by God's Spirit (Rom. 5:5).

Now notice verse 23. "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith. . . ."

They couldn't comprehend these "weightier matters of the law," because they are *spiritual* principles. One can legislate actions, rituals, traditions, etc. But it is impossible to legislate *motives*. Humans cannot change the heart. Only God's Spirit can do that and God gives His Spirit to those who humbly seek it, confessing their unworthiness—not to those who are proud and self-satisfied because they think they are good.

I talked with one person recently who was very unhappy and "uptight." He told me: "Well, it's because I'm trying to keep myself in check, and I'm trying to watch this, and I'm trying to watch that. . . ."

I said, "Do you know what? Scrutinizing your attitude is good, because Christ does not want to find any blemishes in His bride—the Church—when He returns. But at the same time, you must remember to constantly be radiating the fruit of God's Spirit—of joy—toward others. God loves you and wants you to overcome things, but you

shouldn't walk around so uptight, saying to yourself, 'If I play the piano, am I playing it out of a right attitude or a wrong attitude? And are people going to clap for me, and if they clap for me, that's vanity, so I should request nobody clap. And I probably shouldn't do a really good job of this because if I do, people are going to say I'm a good pianist. And I don't want them to do that.' "

Do you see from this example how a person can overlook the weightier matters even while striving for perfection? Real perfection comes from God via His Spirit which will lead us to have joy, as well as to obey God!

The Pharisees put everything down to points, merits and demerits. They reasoned that if a person prayed loudly that was good (even if he didn't really mean a word he said!). To them the *physical* act of doing something good was what counted. They had things backward. It is the inner character, which motivates the action, that counts with God. If one has right character, he will have right actions. But works that come from outer restraints or legal requirements, rather than from inner convictions, will not count with God. Jesus warned that even some who do good works in His name will not be recognized by Him—because they do it to be seen of men, or out of their own supposed goodness rather than by the Spirit of God (Matt. 7:21-23).

Christ Magnifies Law

Jesus Christ came to bring more than just literal adherence to the Ten Commandments and other biblical laws. He came to *MAGNIFY* the law. He came to show the *SPIRITUAL INTENT* of the law. He came to show what God's Spirit working and dwelling in individuals can and will produce.

Jesus went on to condemn the Pharisees for their hypocrisy—appearing outwardly righteous while in their hearts they were vicious and evil, even plotting to kill Jesus because He was genuinely righteous and filled with God's Spirit, and He put them to shame.

"Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (Matt. 23:24-28). Jesus knew what was within them.

But notice what Jesus said to His disciples in Matthew 5:20: "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness

of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven."

Did Jesus mean we must have more dos and don'ts and be more strict on diet and fasting, tithing and Sabbath rituals than the Pharisees? Obviously not! Our righteousness must be genuine, produced by God's Spirit, or we will not inherit God's Kingdom. We must grow to have God's own righteous character.

The Great Commandment

One of the scribes came and "... asked him, Which is the first commandment of all? And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Mark 12:28-31).

That was a very difficult answer for the scribes and Pharisees because they did love themselves an awful lot. It was very difficult for them to say to others, "No, don't call me Rabbi. Don't call me master. I'm just like you, I'm your brother."

You see, God wants us to understand that love and conversion involves more than a checklist of dos and don'ts to be mechanically applied. He doesn't give us a checklist on how to love in each specific circumstance. He gives us His perfect law which defines love and His Spirit to lead us to apply His law correctly in its spiritual intent. The law of God, when applied with God's Spirit converts the soul (Ps. 19:7).

This one scribe marveled at Christ's answer: "Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he: And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is *more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.*"

Yes, even the wise of the world can marvel at the profound teachings of God. But without God's Spirit granting continual guidance from within, people cannot apply and understand the profound principles of God which really describe His own absolute righteousness.

This is what Christ meant by exceeding "the righteousness of the Pharisees" -- we must go beyond it. We must be energized and led by God's Spirit, developing righteousness on the inside, not merely practicing religious endeavors as an outward ritual.

"Forgiving Attitude"

Luke 7:36-39 illustrates another important lesson: "And one of the Pharisees desired him that he would eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee's house and sat down to meat. And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, and stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spoke within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner."

She was not just any sinner. She was probably a prostitute. Everyone recognized her as a sinner, and this Pharisee couldn't understand how Jesus could love somebody that rotten.

"And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And he saith, Master, say on. There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most? Simon answered and said, I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most. And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged. And he turned to the woman and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment. Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little. And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven" (verses 40-48).

But you see, the Pharisees couldn't understand. How could a righteous man stoop so low as to associate with a former prostitute—to show love to a person like this former prostitute?

Jesus came to show us how to have God's love. God loves every sinner who repents. God forgets our past sins when we repent and receive a right heart and attitude from Him.

By God's Spirit

God knew that man was not complete, and had planned for man to be given the Spirit of God to dwell in him. That Spirit of God helps us to know how to practice love.

God does not want us to merely appear to be righteous on the outside. He wants us to understand and emanate true righteousness and to have His Spirit.

He said, "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full. This is my commandment, That you love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you" (John 15:11-14).

He went on to say He didn't really consider them servants any more; he considered them friends.

Jesus is not ashamed to call you and me brothers.

In I Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul talks about some of the attributes of love. He said love is very patient, very kind. He goes on to say that love never fails. He said it bears with people, is willing to believe the best. How do you cover all these things with some strict principle of law, written into a book for you and me to follow? How do you categorize it? How do you catalogue it? How do you itemize it? You don't! The Spirit of God dwelling in us will produce the love of God in order for you and me to do what's right in life's circumstances.

But we must be willing to shed the leaven of hypocrisy and begin to walk with our God, beseeching Him for more of His Spirit, asking Him for help to be more like Jesus Christ, reading about how Christ was, and striving to live that way.

Do you know what I hope people see from us? I hope they see, coming from within us, a love of God and a love of our fellowman. I hope they see in you and me godly sincerity and truth. Godly sincerity doesn't come from within. It comes from God.

Not everyone who sees us will be able to tell right away that we're a Christian. But I hope that, if they spend any amount of time in our presence, there'll be no doubt in their minds that a true child of God has been among them.