

Intro

We've been in Matthew a while. Maybe you've asked yourselves, why was Matthew written? There's several reasons. But two are relevant to today's passage. First, Matthew was written to convince Jews that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Matthew repeatedly argues that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament expectations. Another way of putting it: the scribes and Pharisees got it all wrong. Matthew labors to show that the scribes and Pharisees rejected the Jewish Messiah. If you went along with the Pharisees, you rejected God.

Second, Matthew was written to correct the faulty spirituality of the scribes and Pharisees. They taught a faulty spirituality that harmed those who followed them. This brings us to a question.

What does Matthew say about biblical spirituality?

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Passage Focus

Some passages lend themselves to deep thinking. Some passages lend themselves to deep application.

Jesus' critique of the scribes and Pharisees leads us to ask ourselves, is this the way I go about living the Christian life?

Point 1: Faulty spirituality preaches without practice (23:1-3)

Explanation

Jesus' audience is the crowds and his disciples (23:1). To the crowds: who are you going to follow, the Pharisees or Jesus? A message to the undecided. There's two ways to live: following Jesus or following other religious guides or cultural philosophies. Jesus urges the crowds to reject the self-centered hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Jesus is speaking to his disciples too. Beware of imitating their faulty spirituality!

Jesus highlights the problem: "*they preach, but do not practice*" (23:3).

Jesus' statement to "*do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do*" (23:3) poses a problem. Is Jesus endorsing the Pharisees' teaching? Their failure only lies in their practice? The context indicates otherwise. The heavy burdens they create (23:4) is a reference to their teachings, which indicates their teachings are faulty. Matthew 16:6 is relevant:

Jesus said to them, "Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." – Matt 16:6

16:12 explains their leaven was their teaching. So Jesus wasn't endorsing their teachings. This is likely irony. Why would you follow spiritual guides who don't even adhere to their own teachings?

Application

I want to harp on the concept that **faulty spirituality preaches without practice**. I want to frame this in a couple of ways. First, biblical spirituality is more than head knowledge. Second, biblical spirituality requires a certain posture towards God's word in the Bible.

Spirituality that stops at head knowledge

In Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry, (pgs. 41-42) Paul David Tripp recalls when the light dawned for him. As a seminary student he studied Romans for months, spending hours each day filling his legal-sized notebook with extensive notes. He consulted experts, weighed various opinions, examined syntax, grammar, tenses, contexts, objects, connectors, etymologies, vocabularies, theological ideas, logical arguments. He "tried to connect every minute detail to the overarching intention of the author." After months of meticulous study he had a realization:

"I had been fundamentally untouched by its message...It had been a massive intellectual exercise but almost completely devoid of spiritual power...distant and blurry, somehow not attached to real life, something not having anything to do with me...it all seemed detached from me, my real life, my marriage, my struggles with sin, my past, my future, my deepest hopes, dreams, and fears."

Biblical spirituality ≠ biblical literacy and head knowledge!

This concept escaped me until fall 2018. I was cautious to obey God, keep a tender heart, fulfill my callings, but I did sermons for learning, accuracy, and for others. After a Master of Divinity, pastoral internship, years of preaching, time as an elder. Why had no one ever told me this so plainly? I learned the concept in a class on Andrew Fuller. Reading his writing the theme came out again and again that the preacher must study for their own profit not just to teach others. My heart must first be warmed by the truth before I declare it to you. My church in Louisville hammered the concept.

This is biblical. Elders must be able to teach. But every other requirement has to do with one's character and living.

We're not just trying to get the facts right. I explain the passage so I do care about getting the facts right! But we learn truth to practice truth. We learn about love for God and neighbor to grow in love for God and neighbor. We hear about love and then ask ourselves, am I loving person? My wife? My kids? My elders? My church body? My daily acquaintances? If all we care about is what's a phylactery? we're missing the heart of true spirituality.

We have an evangelism class in Sunday school right now. This class exists to equip and inspire evangelism. Not just to consider biblical data. Am I concerned for lost people? Do I feel the truth of hell? Do I practically believe that the gospel is powerful to save? Do I believe the gospel is good news? Is it good news to me? Does it warm my heart?

We follow the Pharisees when the Bible is a collection of facts unconnected to our hearts and conduct.

Our posture towards the Bible

How can we prevent ourselves from imitating the Pharisees?

Matt Smethurst has a book called *Before You Open Your Bible: Nine Heart Postures For Approaching God's Word*. I'll list the first five:

- 1) Prayerfully: pray for God to help you see and to warm your heart before you open your Bible.

- 2) Humbly: more on humility later.
- 3) Desperately: as if my soul needs God's word.
- 4) Studiously: yes we want to understand what we're reading and ensure our spirituality is grounded in truth.
- 5) Obediently: living according to our design has its advantages.

The Pharisees failed to see that truth is given to shape our practice!

Point 2: Faulty spirituality lays heavy burdens on others (23:4)

Explanation

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. – 23:4

Heavy burdens?

- Requirements added to the law to ensure the law wouldn't be broken.
- Sabbath restrictions like how many letters could be written and erased, how long a distance a person could walk, no trapping a deer, no starting or extinguishing a fire.
- Manmade burdens made obedience harder than it already was.
- Exasperated people who had to live with burdens God never intended them to bear.

Application

When the local church is placing too many burdens on one person something has gone awry. Let's ask the question like this. Is the local church a draining experience? Or a live-giving experience?

Illustration

I've seen a form of spiritual abuse in local churches. Someone is repeatedly used by the leadership for their service to the point of exasperation. Always asked to do more. Taking all of the person's time. Burden after burden. Be there for this. Be there for that. Yet the leadership has no practical concern for the spiritual health of the individual. They'd express deep concern for the person's spiritual health, but practically gave no evidence of it (preaching without practice). Practically the person is treated as a means to the leader's ends. Simply a tool in the toolbox. Not someone who needs to be cared for.

What do we do when one of us is bearing too heavy a load? Someone else needs to take a portion of the load = a need for pool of servants in the church. Or lessening the load by limiting the activities that require labor.

Honest questions. Are people helped or hurt by PCC's ministry? A good rule of thumb is that if a person has too many duties in the church that they can't fulfill their God-given callings well (e.g., spouse, parent, relative, friend, employee, even a church office like deacon), the load needs to load needs to decrease.

Biblical spirituality ≠ psychotic busyness. Biblical spirituality ≠ manmade rules. Biblical spirituality ≠ burden after burden.

Point 3: Faulty spirituality seeks personal honor (23:5-10)

Explanation

The indictment: “*They do all their deeds to be seen by others*” (23:5). Jesus’ examples:

- 1) Broad phylacteries = “a small leather case containing OT scripture verses and worn on the arm and forehead by Jews, especially when praying” – *Louw & Nida* lexicon
 - 2) Long fringes = tassels located on the four corners of one’s garment used as spiritual visual aids
- the problem is that they’re long and broad = excessive size meant to draw people’s attention and say, “boy are you godly”
 - Biblical spirituality = more than externals like bumper stickers, wearing Christian t-shirts (my wife’s generation), Bible verses on the wall, going to Christian concerts, etc.
 - 3) Place of honor at feasts
 - 4) Best seats in the synagogues
 - 5) Greetings in the marketplaces
 - all forms of public recognition
 - 6) Being called Rabbi, father, instructor = noble titles
 - It’s that passion to be called by a title because the title indicates importance. Distinction from lesser people. I used to work at a hotel front desk. I was off and my friend shared his experience. He was checking a man in. He friendly greeted the man as Mr. so and so. The man replied, “It’s doctor so and so. I earned the degree.” My friend was fumed. He said to the other agent, “Could you please check the good doctor in.” Treating someone with contempt because of a desire to be worshipped. Loving the recognition, having to be important, that’s the problem.

Is calling my Dad father a sin? Father in this sense would indicate a revered teacher. Jesus is saying don’t take the honor that belongs to God the Father for yourself. Don’t take the place of God the Father in people’s lives. Paul referred to himself as a spiritual father of Christian (1 Cor 4:15; 1 Thess 2:11), so the term father isn’t some forbidden word.

How might we do this?

- 1) Speaking complicated to sound important
- 2) Sharing everything I do spiritually to appear spiritual (e.g., always talking about a fasting routine)
- 3) Excessively sharing everything that’s going in my life positively to make it sound like I’m especially blessed by God unlike other people (e.g., if I talked about my home as the beacon of Christian excellence or our church as the one church God is choosing for special blessing)

I’ve been told you want a personal touch. As a pastor I need to beware of always painting myself in a favorable light or preaching myself. I need to use stories of my failure or inadequacy to paint myself as a struggler, as a learner alongside you. As one fighting to be warmed by the truth.

Personal fame can never be our goal!

Why do we act like this?

1) Lack of identity in Christ

▪ We place our importance, our identity in what we do or who we know or how much we have or what positions of power we hold. We fail to see our identity as adopted child of God. Redeemed. Justified. Forgiven. Made new. This is our identity.

2) Failure to apply the gospel to our heart

▪ We see ourselves as important and impressive and self-sufficient instead of needy. We think we're great when we're not. We're fundamentally flawed people. We're guilty, forgiven sinners. Any good in us owes to the Holy Spirit in us. We're forever a needy people who have been blessed despite who we are not because of who we are. The gospel tells us we're loved even though we're unimpressive.

Substitutionary atonement here...

Point 4: Biblical spirituality serves the local church (23:11)

Explanation

The greatest among you shall be your servant. – 23:11

Jesus' disciples are listening and Jesus envisions the community that will be as the church forms. "Among you" = the believing community. The Pharisees = negative example to beware of. Spiritual greatness requires making ourselves least (servant), not seeking honor for ourselves.

Application

Spiritual greatness seeks to help where help is needed in the local church.

- 1) Serving the local church by filling a role that's understaffed (using your gifts).
- 2) Serving the local church by opening up your home for hospitality.
- 3) Serving the local church by befriending someone who lacks friends.
- 4) Serving the local church by meeting a practical need (= love).

The Pharisees talked, wore people out, sought personal honor. Biblical spirituality is characterized by serving the body.

Point 5: Biblical spirituality is characterized by humility (23:12)

Explanation

Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. – Matt 23:12

This was an evangelistic call for gospel response. Two ways to live. Humble yourself before God or seek self-exultation. It speaks to the role reversal that will occur at the day of the LORD. The Pharisees are honored today. They'll be brought low when Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of David establishes his eternal government.

So what's the essence of humility?

- 1) Matt 18:4 – humility like a child = people who depend on others rather than themselves
- 2) Luke 18:9-14 – (the Pharisee and the tax collector) = people who admit their unworthiness before God instead of proclaiming their excellence
- 3) Phil 2:8 – Jesus veiling his divine glory and submitting to death on a cross instead of clinging to divine rights
- 4) Phil 4:12 – Paul as a person in needy circumstances (e.g., hunger)
- 5) Jas 4:10 – humility in confessing sin and mourning over it = admitting spiritual lack
- 6) 1 Pet 5:6 – bringing our suffering before God and sharing our anxieties with God = seeing our weakness and bringing it to God for help

What is humility?

Seeing our profound neediness before God and not seeking to exalt ourselves. Spiritually before God we're like a child or a beggar or a vile tax collector. That's gospel identity. We approach God as sinners who lack spiritually (James 4:10 was Christians responding to God). Not as people who think we have no flaws (the Pharisee). We approach God as weak and anxious people who need divine strengthening. Not as people who are strong on our own. The Father calls us to respond to him like Jesus did. Giving up self-seeking to serve the good of others. Will we follow Jesus or the Pharisees?

How do we live the Christian life? Daily admitting our need for God's forgiveness and his wisdom and his empowering grace. Acknowledging our need for God to work courage, joy, and love within us.

Conclusion

How should we understand biblical spirituality?

Faulty spirituality preaches without practice. We learn to live.

Faulty spirituality lays heavy burdens on others. The church exists to bring life not bondage.

Faulty spirituality seeks personal honor. Find your identity in the gospel.

Biblical spirituality serves the local church. How should I serve at PCC?

Biblical spirituality is characterized by humility. Respond to God as one who lacks spiritually and needs divine strengthening.