

“Reformation of Presbyterianism”

Matthew 23:11-39

12/2/2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Have you ever wondered what God would say *in Person* if God showed up and addressed the main religious leaders of our day? It already happened and Matthew told us about it in the 23rd chapter of his gospel account. When we compare his content with the other gospels, it is clear that Matthew has the most detail about Jesus’ condemnation of the religious leaders of 1st Century Judaism. Jesus’ words were a scathing and electrifying indictment of their leadership failures. Although Jesus was a highly respected friend of some leaders, often invited to their private dinner parties, Jesus might not have been asked to dinner more than once by some of them.

The religious leaders had become so focused on their own organized system of religion – so fixated on their procedures and creeds – that they had become spiritually bankrupt. As in all human efforts, these pious and highly devoted religious leaders had put their way of doing things before God.

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In the case of the **Priests**, they were so focused on the importance of performing the temple cult rituals and holiday traditions that the living, breathing, loving God Whom they worshipped had been set aside to make way for ‘the way we’ve always done it before.’¹ They were so attentive to the mechanics and the precision of following the Jewish worship rituals that they couldn’t even see that they had turned the temple cult into a three-ring circus and a for-profit currency exchange franchise.

“What would Jesus do?” some might casually ask. He did, in fact, become so incensed that He grabbed a whip and drove everyone out of the temple like someone who had perhaps gone insane with rage.

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¹ Which, as you know, are the seven last gasping words of a dying church.

Take the **Sadducee** political party and their front power-block, the Sanhedrin court. As in all human efforts, these pious and highly devoted religious leaders had put their way of doing things before God. Instead of being open to learning from (at least) an obviously genius and charismatic Jewish teacher, healer and prophet – they remained trapped with their fear of losing their land, social and religious power and they killed Jesus. They had put their jobs, their possessions, their money and their religion before God.

“What would Jesus do?” some could casually ask. He gave them one more thinly veiled warning and then stopped bothering to try – letting them torture and kill Him. He didn’t call up hundreds of disillusioned Jewish Patriots to take them over and kill them. He won by dying.

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And take the **Pharisees**. You know from all of our New Testament studies that they were good guys as well. They were innovative enough to come up with a portable religion that not only revered all of the Old Testament scriptures,² they were smart enough to stay open to the ongoing commentaries of their teaching colleagues. This is why they had more in common in their beliefs with Jesus than they did with the Priests. But as in all human efforts, these pious and highly devoted religious leaders had put their way of doing things before God.

Their daily formulas of devotion in the home and their hierarchical valuing of a person’s worth according to their adherence to these pious rituals were put in front of God. As sophisticated as they were in their jettisoning of the cumbersome

² The Sadducees and the Priests revered only the first five books of the law. The Pharisees respected the entire Old Testament (which included the social justice and changes suggested by the prophets) as well as the ongoing commentaries on these scriptures by their Pharisee colleagues, the Rabbis.

temple cult, they ended up only replacing it with an equally burdensome Jewish fundamentalism. They were scholarly but they were heartless.

“What would Jesus do?” some ask without much seriousness. Jesus told them to their faces that they were making people twice as fit for hell as they were themselves – keeping people away from God with their easy-answer-for-everything control-freak and proud religiosity. As Jesus saw them asking their pious-toned question about ‘what they must do to be saved,’ without an earnest sincerity to seek God, He told them that they were like white-washed graves – decorated on the outside with rotting death and bones within.

What Jesus was so scathingly criticizing in their religious leadership was not that they were just reflecting the top-town leadership pattern of the Roman government. He wasn’t urging them to adopt a more participatory democracy in their leadership style. He was declaring to every religious leader that no matter what denomination or faith expression they lead, if they put their tradition, their rules, their creeds and even their interpretations of the sacred scriptures in front of the sovereign God of the universe, they were committing idolatry.

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“If we believe in the absolute sovereignty of God, that *only* God is absolute, . . . then we must never allow any *thing* else to become absolute in our life. We must insist that everything (in our life and faith) is open to reformation.” “. . . To acknowledge Jesus is Lord is to acknowledge that Christ is supreme and occupies a place that no one else, no book, no doctrine, no church, no nation, nothing else can occupy.”³

So always remember that I, your colleagues in other Presbyterian churches, all other churches and all leaders and the entire collection of Presbyterians, Protestants, the Catholics – every

³ So said Douglas Oldenburg in “Trusting the Sovereignty of God” in his commissioner convocation dinner address at the 2001 Covenant conference on 11/1-3/2001 for the Covenant Network of Presbyterians.

religious institution – is fallible and that only God is God. You and I and they are not God. The Bible and our most disciplined and scholarly interpretations of it are not God.

We need, however, to be repeatedly reminded to read these scriptural testimonies of Jesus’ radical criticism of the religious status quo of His day. In so doing, “we need to be reminded that history is filled with evidence that over and over again, conscientious, committed, Bible-believing, praying, devout Christians have been dead wrong” on some things.⁴ So wrong and so entrenched in fear that in several instances, it took generations to be open to new light, to risk and to change. In every generation, prophetic people have been killed for going against the religious status quo and Jesus was one of them. Never gloss over how radically upsetting Jesus was to status quo religion.

By consistently disciplining to be reforming our faith and looking for new understandings of true spirituality, it means that we should ‘live with a deep assurance about God – combined with a modesty and humility about all the statements we make about God and God’s will for humankind. It means utterly trusting in God and at the same time, never *absolutely* trusting *any* human account of God, including our own. It means working for what we believe to be right and just and God’s will for the Church, taking a stand, making a decision, casting a vote – but never being too categorical or dogmatic or arrogant about the place on which we stand or the vote we cast.’

‘In always reforming, it also means we have an eagerness and a willingness to share our own convictions but also actively listening for correctives and insights that may come from the most unusual sources. It means disciplining ourselves to accept some degree of ambiguity, intellectual struggle, wondering and questioning because we never stop learning until we choose to stop learning.

That’s the ultimate security that enables us to be free from the fear and threat of diversity. That

⁴ Oldenburg

is the security of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ that keeps away the fear that makes us defensive and creates so much destructive conflict. That is the security that enables us to see and remember that God's supreme revelation in Jesus Christ was always reaching out to those who were marginalized, left out and firmly judged as unworthy.⁵

Take Jesus' stern words to all the religious leaders of the first century and let them speak to your life. Believe in the supreme authority of God in Christ over any human organization. Because if we think that God is only in the hearts of people dressed like you and me, looking like you and me, sitting in these pews, then we have a pathetically tiny and insignificant god who isn't going to do much good for anyone. ☛



⁵ See Oldenburg