

THE
KINGDOM
IS HERE

matthew

sermon series

10.24.2021 | 11TH STREET BAPTIST CHURCH



AN IDOL OR JESUS: MATTHEW 23:1-24:2

Pastor Anthony Ferguson

Holy Week in Matthew has highlighted several important facts about Jesus, the people, and his mission. One detail has been that the religious elite misses Jesus because they love power and position more than the Messiah. Matthew emphasizes this idea again today. We are going to see today that the religious elite's idol for power and position cause them to resist even the protective and loving care of the Lord (37-39). In other words, idols attempt to kill us for eternity. That's what we'll see today.

I hope that as we study this truth that the Holy Spirit will cultivate within us deep faith in Jesus and true repentance of sin. Let's be a people who know the idols of our heart, and let's be a people who pursue Jesus, not idols.

Serving Idols or Jesus: Matthew 23:1-12

The Scribes and the Pharisees serve the idol of power and position, so Matthew compares serving idols with serving Jesus in verses 1-12. Let's notice several things. **First, serving idols is hypocritical and makes the religious elite hypocrites.** Jesus says in verses 2-3 that the crowds should do what they say but not what they do. Jesus is likely being sarcastic here since Jesus did not agree with many of their teaching such as the practice of Corban (Mark 7:9-12) and their

interpretation of healing on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:10-12). The point of verses 2-3 is to highlight a truth Jesus will return to often in this passage: the religious elite are hypocrites.

Second, serving idols causes the religious elite to focus on appearances rather than the heart. This fact is evident in verses 4-7. In verse 4, for example, we see that they teach that the way to God is hard and burdensome. You must keep lots of laws and rules, and never, ever go outside of the lines. Your devotion to religious things must be intense for God to be happy with you. They teach burdens, church family, yet they are unable to carry these burdens (4).

At this point, let's make an important comment. Many people conceive of Christianity as fundamentally restrictive and burdensome. Christianity is portrayed as a list of dos and don'ts and it is hard to do the dos and fun, satisfying, and fulfilling to do the don'ts. This perception is satanic in many ways since Jesus is the one who alleviates our burdens (Matthew 11:30), and this is not new. In the OT, God looks at the burdens of his people in Egypt and acts to alleviate them (Ex 1:11). Coming to Jesus is about Jesus taking our burdens and casting them far away so that God's commandments are not burdensome. Rather, they are joyous and good (1 John 5:3). The teachings of the religious elite have nothing to do with God.

The religious elite's obsession with appearances is also evident **in verse 5** since they misuse phylacteries and fringes. Phylacteries were small scrolls with portions of Exodus and Deuteronomy (Exodus 13:1-10, 11-16; Deut 6:4-9; 11:13-21) strapped to their foreheads and around their heart during prayer (see Ex 13:16; Deut 6:8; 11:18). Fringes were twisted wool at the edge of their garments (Num 15:37-41). According to Exodus 13:16 and Numbers 15:38-40, the purpose of these items was to remind them of the Lord's grace: God saved them from their

burdens in Egypt. As Jews wore these things, their hearts should have been stirred to love God and obey him, not because it was a burden, but because God had literally freed them. Obedience to God is always accompanied by freedom, not by burdens. Yet, the religious elite misused them. They made them broad to get the attention of the crowds.

The same idea is repeated in verse 6-7: the religious elite are obsessed with their appearances. They love to be first at feasts and in the synagogues (6), and they love to be addressed as “rabbi.” The term rabbi came to mean “my great one” and later came to mean “teacher.”

Third, serving idols is hypocritical and focused on self, but serving Jesus is completely different. Serving Jesus is about humility and care. The religious elite’s mission is about themselves, but Jesus’ mission is about serving others. This reality shapes the way we view kingdom greatness, a topic we’ve discussed in a few places already (see Matthew 18). Kingdom greatness means that we see one another not as rivals to compete with but children to care for. Jesus highlights that theme again here. We serve one another; we do not use each other.

Serving idols is the opposite of serving Jesus.

Serving Idols is Hypocritical and Marked by Blindness:

Matthew 23:13-36

In verses 13-36, Jesus pronounces seven woes upon the religious elite because they love an idol more than him. Woe is an interjection of grief and signals intense distress. When a prophet of the OT announces judgment, the prophet often signals his speech with the phrase “woe to X.” X refers to the person who will be judged. Let’s notice several things about these “woes.”

First, Jesus highlights from various angels the truth that he began this section: the religious elite are hypocrites. Jesus directly calls them hypocrites in verses 13, 15, 23, 25, and 27. The hypocrisy of the religious elite is defined by **false promises**. In essence, the religious elite markets their religion as leading to eternal life but, it leads to hell. Jesus says, “You neither enter yourselves” (13), you “shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces,” (13) and you “make a proselyte twice as much a child of hell” (15). The religious elite teach about the kingdom of God but are far from it. Their religion is marked by false promises.

Their hypocrisy also expresses itself in **false appearances**. For example, their emphasis on small matters like precise tithing communicates that they also prioritize the weightier issues like mercy, faithfulness, and justice (23). They emphasize laws about ceremonial washing while their hearts are rotten with greed and self-indulgence (25). Overall, the religious elite appear washed and cleaned but are nothing but decaying corpses (27-28).

Their hypocrisy further expresses itself in **false hope**. They deceive themselves into thinking that they are unlike their ancestors. Interestingly, when you evaluate the religious elite in Israel’s history, you find that many are evil, corrupt people. Prophets often prophesized falsely (1 Kings

22:24, and priests treated God’s law lightly (see Leviticus 8). These corrupt religious leaders often killed God’s prophets as Jesus points out in verse 35: Zechariah was one of these martyrs as was Abel. That detail is significant because it communicates that the religious elite are just like Cain, and John calls Cain figuratively a child of the devil in 1 John 3:8. The religious elite of Jesus’ day play the role of God’s enemies, not his friends, and yet they are deceived. They have false hope.

Second, the religious elite are blind (16-21). Jesus calls them blind guides in verses 16, 24, blind fools in verse 17, blind men in verse 19, and blind Pharisee in verse 26. The image of blindness indicates that they are unable to discern spiritual truths: they cannot see them, and this blindness leads them to misjudge spiritual realities. They believe that an oath sworn by the gold of the temple is more binding than an oath sworn by the temple itself (17) and that an oath sworn by the offerings are more binding than an oath sworn by the altar itself (18). The Pharisees are happy to emphasize a religion expressed in offerings and gold, but miss the nature of true religion – justice, mercy, and faithfulness (23).

The concepts of justice, mercy, and faithfulness are very important to God's people since God is just, merciful, and faithful. Justice is a commitment to do what's right, and God always does what is right. Mercy is a theme expressed throughout the story of Scripture. We constantly see God withholding judgment from his people, and these two themes fit together because God is faithful. God is faithful to his plan despite us: he will do good to us even though we do not deserve it. Because of these realities, the religious elite should have emphasized these things instead of dill, mint, and cumin, but instead their attention is on spices. Mercy is certainly better than cumin, but the religious elite error because they are blind.

Serving Idols is Contrary to the Gospel: Matthew 23:37-24:2

The religious elite serve the idol of power and position. Thus, they are hypocrites and blind to true religion. This context makes the words of verse 37-39 remarkable. Jesus says, "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Let's point out several details here.

First, notice the emphasis on the idea of “desire.” The idea translated by the words “would have” describes Jesus’ desire. Jesus’ desire has often been to gather sinners into his protective care. Yet, the religious elite were not willing. How remarkable that our king, king Jesus, would delight in gathering into his protective care even those who seek to kill him! This is our king, and this idea provides a truth that we can hold onto despite our thoughts of condemnation and feelings of shame. Yes, our sin makes us guilty and condemnable, but Jesus delights in gathering the condemned into his protective and loving care. This is our king.

Second, notice the end of those whose desires clash with Jesus. Ultimately, the end for those who resist Jesus is destruction. In verse 38, Jesus explains that the temple, the landmark of Jerusalem, is desolate – a reminder of Daniel 9. The word “desolate” means that it is under the curse. Judgment is coming upon the religion of the religious elite. Jesus reiterates this point in Matthew 24:2 – soon, the temple will be destroyed.

Third, Jesus gives a condition to the religious elite. Judgment can be averted only if they adopt the perspective of the crowds who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. They shouted, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord all.” Meanwhile, the religious elite thought, “Cursed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (39). Judgment is averted by recognizing that Jesus is blessed and brings blessings to his people.

Application

Idols make us fight Jesus because they resist and kill anything that attempts to dethrone them for the center of our hearts. Idols not only seek to kill any potential rival, but their mission is also to kill you. The

end of the religious elite is destructive – a sevenfold announcement of “woe.”

Let’s be a people who pursue Jesus, not idols. First, let’s be aware of any potential idols in our hearts. What would we sin to get or keep? Is there anything in our life that would make all things better? Do you worry about anything? Your answers to these questions may indicate an idol.

Second, if there is an idol in your heart, and sadly, on this side of eternity, they easily sneak in, then reorient your heart around Jesus by remembering, loving, and prioritizing the gospel. Jesus pursued us even though we, like the religious elite, did not want Jesus. This is the truth Matthew reminds us of at the end of this chapter – Jesus loves to gather into his protective and loving care those who war against him. How can this truth not move us to reject idols and embrace Jesus?

Perhaps there is a non-Christian here today. Would you come to Jesus truthing that he lived your life and died your death? Would you confess him as your master and follow him? If so, let us know that we might care and disciple you.

Prayer

Oh God, help us to follow you and pursue you, not idols. Draw people to you we pray in Jesus’ name, amen.

