



LENTEN SERMON SERIES

Following Jesus or Following the Rules?

Matthew 23:1-32

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Skyline Presbyterian Church

In the 2004 Olympic Games, Matt Emmons was one shot away from claiming victory in the 50-meter three-position rifle event. He didn't need a bull's-eye to win; his final shot merely needed to be on target. Normally, the shot he made would have received a score of 8.1, more than enough for a gold medal. But in what was described as "an extremely rare mistake in elite competition," Emmons fired at the wrong target. Standing in lane two, he fired at the target in lane three. His score for a good shot at the wrong target: 0. Instead of a medal, Emmons ended up in eighth place.

This is a picture of what can happen to a lot of us. It's not a question of effort or desire. What might be the problem? This is what Jesus is getting at in Matthew chapter 23.

In this chapter Jesus preaches one of His last sermons before going to the cross and it's directed right at the most religious people we can imagine. Now, if we grew up thinking of Jesus as always smiling, always soft spoken, the tone He takes with these religious leaders may surprise us. He doesn't hold anything back. In this sermon Jesus tries to get the attention of a group of people who have put in a lot of effort and demonstrate a lot of desire. They would have received high scores for their religious rule keeping, but it appears that's not the target about which Jesus was most concerned.

Read the Bible Passage

Seven times in His sermon Jesus says, "Woe to you..." Each "woe" is followed by a scathing rebuke. This isn't a warning by Jesus. He isn't cautioning the religious leaders. He isn't offering them counsel or advice. Jesus is strongly opposing these religious leaders because He doesn't want people to confuse following the rules with following Him. The word "woe" is an onomatopoeia—a word where the definition comes from its sound. The word "woe" is both an expression of grief and curse. His indictments against these religious leaders should serve as a warning to those fans who consider themselves followers because of our religious rule keeping and Christian credentials.

In this group of religious leaders called the Sanhedrin, there are two sub-groups called the Sadducees and Pharisees. And these two groups did not get along.

When interpreting the scriptures, the Sadducees were considered quite progressive and the Pharisees were considered quite conservative. The Sadducees served the role of the Chief Priests and Elders over the people. They were born into the position. To be a Pharisee didn't depend on your family but on your work ethic. And what I have noticed is fans fit into one of these two camps.

Some fans are like the Sadducees. Their faith was something they were born into. It's been more about honoring your heritage than surrendering your heart. On the other hand, some fans are like the Pharisees. They would measure their faith by their hard work at learning and following their denominations rules and rituals. Even though you are saying and doing the right things, it isn't a true reflection of who you really are.

Many of the adults here this morning have heard of Andre Agassi, especially if you're a person who likes to play tennis. Andre turned pro when he was 16 and has won 8 Grand Slam tennis tournaments in his 20-year career. In 2009, People Magazine ran a feature article on him called "My secret life." Turns out Andre Hated tennis. He is quoted, "I never chose this life." On the outside, we would never have known his heart wasn't in it. He put in countless hours of practice and battled for championships. He was really good at what he did. But he was wearing a mask. See, you can pray the prayers and sing the songs, you are just going through the motions. You're putting on a good face but it's not real. Your heart isn't in it. So, my question to all of us this morning is: Might we be more focused on the outside than the inside?

It appears that that's what's bugging Jesus. The main problem He has with the religious leaders was they are hypocrites. He called them that 7 times to their faces. Jesus said in verse 5, "Everything they do is for show." (New Living Translation)

The word hypocrite comes from the Greek ancient classical theater. The actors would play several different parts in the same play, often having to wear several different masks at a time. These Greek actors were called hypocrites. And we can see how the word came from use in the theater to indicate other people who wear masks. Fans get caught up on what people see on the outside but it's not real, it's only a mask. What people see doesn't reflect who the people really are.

In verses 1-3, Jesus said to the crowds and 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. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." The problem with these teachers is that what they were teaching wasn't a reflection of who they were.

In verses 27-28, Jesus says, "You are like a white washed tomb, which is beautiful on the outside but, on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy." That would often describe the faith of a fan. On the inside their faith has grown cold and is dying, but they are determined to keep up appearances.

Usually fans prefer rules over relationship. In verse 13 Jesus says, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut up the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to."

Fans choose laws over love! Fans would give their time to following religious rituals but would neglect to show love to people around them, which was kind of the point to the rules in the first place.

Fans prefer guilt over grace. In verse 4 Jesus said, "They tie heavy loads and put them on people's shoulders." The key word for guilt is "do." We try to do enough to make up for our mistakes and earn God's favor. The key word for grace is "done." Our punishment was taken by Christ. He has made a way where there was no way so that we live a freedom of what has been "done."

The gospel of Jesus Christ contains a promise and the promise is that the faithfully faulty can become the faithful follower. As it is true of moving from fan to follower, it requires a choice.

It requires choosing relationship over rules, choosing love over law, choosing grace over guilt or we might miss what really matters.

In Galatians 2:16, we read "... yet we know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and

not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no human being will be justified.”

Becoming a Follower means...choosing relationship that empowers us to follow the rules and it means choosing grace as the answer for guilt.

The gospel of Jesus Christ also comes with an invitation. An invitation is given to people who have been selected by a person to attend or participate in an event, celebration. The invitation often comes with an RSVP for those who would choose to attend. Attendance may not be mandatory, but you can't experience the benefits if you are not there.

Dear Friends,

We are invited to...STOP PLAYING GAMES AT THE CROSS

We are invited to...JOIN JESUS ON THE JOURNEY OF IFE

We are invited to...BECOME FAITHFUL FOLLOWERS

So, let's not lose sight of what really matters the most—Giving ourselves to Christ completely and stop aiming at the wrong target.