Lesson Twelve

Be Genuine, Show Grace, Be Humble

Focal Text
Matthew 23:1-12

Background
Matthew 23:1-36

Main Idea
Disciples of Jesus are to practice their faith with genuineness, grace, and humility.

Question to Explore
Why do religious people sometimes become hypocritical, harsh, and arrogant—lacking in true discipleship?

Quick Read
Jesus calls us to model his servant leadership to a skeptical world.

Commentary
Woodrow Wilson was one of our most religious presidents. The son of a Presbyterian minister, his faith motivated all he did. Yet he claimed that “there is no higher religion than human service. To work for the common good is the greatest creed.”

Jesus agreed: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

How did Jesus love us? Sacrificially (1 John 3:16) and unconditionally (Romans 8:35-39). Imagine a society in which we imitated Jesus’ altruistic commitment to each other. The Founders did: our Constitution exists to “form a more perfect Union, establish
Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." The government it formed can and must work to fulfill this vision. What other institutions can help promote this common good?

Our schools should teach and reinforce the ethic of public service that motivated the founding of our republic. Service organizations, many in numeric decline today, should find ways to engage a new generation. But Christians have an especially crucial role to play.

Jesus consistently taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves, to serve as he served us. He proved his compassion by his actions and called us to do the same. In this week’s study we’ll examine the perils of hypocritical religion and the power of servant love. As we do, you might keep in mind a line by Ken Medema, the Christian singer and composer: “Don’t tell me I have a friend in Jesus until you show me I have a friend in you.”

**Practice what you preach (23:1-4)**

We left Jesus at Caesarea Philippi with his disciples. In coming days he would reveal himself on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13), heal a demoniac (Matt. 17:14-23), and deal with the temple tax in Capernaum (17:24-27). He taught his disciples about true humility and forgiveness (Matt. 18). He dealt with Pharisaic opposition (19:1-15) and the rich young ruler (19:16-30), and then taught his disciples about humility in serving the King (20:1-16).

As Jesus prepared for his final trip to Jerusalem, he warned his disciples about his impending death (20:17-19), called them to humility and service (20:20-28), and met two blind men outside Jericho (20:29-34). Following his triumphal entry (21:1-11), he cleansed the temple (20:12-17), cursed the fruitless fig tree (20:18-22) and taught in the temple courts (20:23-46). He called the people to prepare for the coming of the King (22:1-14) and defeated the Pharisees (22:15-22) and Sadducees (22:23-33) in debate. He emphasized the Great Commandments (22:34-40) and confounded his opponents (22:41-46).

Now Jesus’ last public sermon begins: “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples . . .” (23:1). It was late Tuesday afternoon of Holy Week. It seems that most, if not all, of the Pharisees and Jesus’ other opponents had left Jesus’ presence by this time. To the remaining crowds and his disciples, Jesus addressed what follows.

Jesus’ statement related first to “the teachers of the law and the Pharisees [who] sit in Moses’ seat” (23:2). Who were they?
Meet the scribes and Pharisees
The “teachers of the law” were a specific group of religious authorities in Jesus’ day. After the Jewish people returned from their Babylonian captivity, a group of scholars known as scribes or rabbis emerged. They were not Levites or priests, but laymen. Their passion was the transmission and teaching of the Law in its every minute detail.

In Babylon, the people had learned to worship apart from the temple in homes and houses. They brought this new tradition back to Israel in the form of synagogues (from the Greek for gathered together), now built in any town where ten Jewish males resided. Here the rabbis or “teachers of the law” could do their work. Ezra was such a “teacher” (Ezra 7:6); Gamaliel was another “teacher of the law” (Acts 5:34).

By the time of Jesus, they were closely aligned with the Pharisees. “Pharisee” comes from the Hebrew root prs, meaning to separate or detach. The Pharisees were the spiritual heroes of their day, the most religious people in the nation. Ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel would serve as an analogy today.

The Pharisees were never more than 6,000 in number. But their influence outweighed their size; they are mentioned often in the New Testament. Their movement may have begun during the Second Temple period, when they rejected the Hasmonean dynasty in power (134-104 B.C.) with its alleged secularisms. But most think they were named for their separation from ritual uncleanness and the impurities of daily life in Israel.

The Pharisees were devoted to the oral tradition that explained and expanded on the written Law. In this regard they disagreed sharply with the Sadducees, who accepted only the written Law. The Pharisees also believed in the resurrection of the body, unlike the Sadducees (Mark 12:18-27), and focused on personal piety above all other priorities. They tried to obey Leviticus 11:44, “I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy”; and Exodus 19:6, “you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

As a result, they fasted regularly (Matt. 6:16; Luke 18:12). They sought converts to the faith (Matt. 23:15). They prayed frequently (Matt. 6:5). They tithed their goods and possessions (Luke 11:42; 18:12). They were zealous in their desire for a purified Jewish faith (see Galatians 1:14). Some of the Pharisees became followers of Jesus (Nicodemus, John 3:1; 19:38-42), but many Pharisees opposed Jesus’ ministry and supported his execution.

Reject their example
Jesus described their prideful zeal in a phrase: they “sit in Moses’ seat.” “Seat” translates kathedra, from which we get the word cathedral. To sit in “Moses’ seat” was to take the place of their supreme law-giver in Israel, the most esteemed teacher in their history. This would be akin to assuming the academic chair of a venerated professor.
Jesus did not reject their teachings as much as their example: “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” (Matt. 23:3). The Law required the people to follow the teachings of their authorities:

You must act according to the decisions they give you at the place the LORD will choose. Be careful to do everything they direct you to do. Act according to the law they teach you and the decisions they give you. Do not turn aside from what they tell you, to the right or to the left (Deut. 17:10-11).

The problem was, they were unwilling to do what they required of others: “They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them” (Matt. 23:4). The religious authorities called the people to lives of unrealistic legalism, but they did not help them fulfill these requirements or set an example in their own lives.

By contrast, Jesus issued this invitation to experience his grace: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

Like the Pharisees, we are tempted to call people to higher standards than we fulfill. If our personal lives do not match our public profession, God cannot use us effectively. The nineteenth-century evangelist Dwight Moody was right: what we are in the dark is what we are.

Are you the same in private as in public? Do you say the same things to people that you say about them? Are you the same on the telephone as when you hang up? Are there thoughts and practices in your life that you don’t want anyone to know?

To be a servant leader, we must first be true servants.

Seek the glory of God (23:5-12)
Why was Jesus so upset with the authorities’ influence and example? Because Jesus knew their true motives. Our text continues: “Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long” (Matt. 23:5).

“Phylacteries” were small boxes known as tefillin, strapped to the head and left hand during morning and evening prayers. This practice was intended to obey Deuteronomy 6:8, “Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.” They
contained four strips of parchment on which were written the words of Exodus 13:1-10, 11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21.

The black strip used to affix the box to the hand was wound seven times around the arm and three times around the hand. When they were “wide,” they were more obvious and indicated greater religious zeal.

Their “tassels” were worn in obedience to the Law:

Speak to the Israelites and say to them: “Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes. Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the LORD your God” (Numbers 15:38-41).

The longer their tassels, the more obvious their religious fervor. This practice would be something like wearing a very large cross or carrying a giant Bible everywhere you go.

Furthermore, “they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues” (Matt. 23:6). The “place of honor at banquets” would be near the host or significant guests. “The most important seats in the synagogue” refers to the most visible seating, near the bema, the platform where the Law was read. While most hearers sat on the floor or mats, the distinguished guests were given chairs.

Continuing his critique, Jesus stated that “they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi’” (23:7). “To be greeted in the marketplaces” was to recognize them as religious authorities, something like saluting an officer in the military. “Rabbi” means teacher; in Jesus’ day it was a title of respect, something like Reverend today.

Now Jesus made his application, shifting from “them” to “you”: “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers” (23:8). “You” is emphatic in the Greek: “You are not to be called ‘Rabbi’” (Italics added for emphasis). “Rabbi” in this context referred to an esteemed spiritual leader, a master of men.

Our Master continued: “And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven” (23:9). Jesus did not forbid us from addressing our earthly fathers by this word, of course (see Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children”). Rather, Jesus insisted that we not elevate one another spiritually, for God as our heavenly Father is our only King and Lord.
Jesus’ point is that we are all equal at the foot of the cross, the children of one Father:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:26-29).

We are not to elevate a person above God or others: “Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ” (Matt. 23:10). “Teacher” translates kathegetai, found only here in the Greek New Testament. (Didaskalos is the more common word for one who taught the people.) It meant professor and was a title of great respect, akin to “Master.”

To the contrary, “the greatest among you will be your servant” (23:11). This was Jesus’ consistent requirement of his disciples: “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (20:26-28).

With this result: “For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (23:12). Jesus taught us that “whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (18:4). Peter cautioned us to “humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time” (1 Peter 5:6).

This principle is taught consistently in the Hebrew Bible as well:

- “Do not exalt yourself in the king’s presence, and do not claim a place among great men; it is better for him to say to you, ‘Come up here,’ than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman” (Proverbs 25:6-7).
- “The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day” (Isaiah 2:11).
- “Man will be brought low and mankind humbled, the eyes of the arrogant humbled. But the LORD Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness” (Isa. 5:15-16).
- “All the trees of the field will know that I the LORD bring down the tall tree and make the low tree grow tall. I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. ‘I the LORD have spoken, and I will do it’” (Ezekiel 17:24).
- “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Take off the turban, remove the crown. It will not be as it was: The lowly will be exalted and the exalted will be brought low” (Ezek. 21:26).
The axiom is true: to learn whether you’re a servant, see how you respond when people treat you like one.

**Conclusion**
Max DePree, the former CEO of Herman Miller and author of bestselling business literature, defines leadership:

> The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor. That sums up the progress of an artful leader.³

Jesus modeled such leadership and called us to do the same. Would those who know you best say that you are the same person in private that you are in public? Would they agree that you seek God’s glory rather than your own advancement? When you stand before your Lord one day, will he humble or exalt you?

None of us knows when we will step into eternity. But each of us can choose to be ready, today.

---

See [www.baptistwaypress.org](http://www.baptistwaypress.org) for additional study materials on

**The Gospel of Matthew: A Primer for Discipleship**

and more than forty-five other Bible studies by BaptistWay Press®, or call 1-866-249-1799

(M-Fri 8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m. central time).

A recent book by Dr. Denison, *The Bible—You Can Believe It: Biblical Authority in the Twenty-First Century*, is also available from BAPTISTWAY PRESS®. The price is only $4.95 each plus shipping and any applicable taxes. A *Teaching Guide* is available for only $1.95 plus shipping and any applicable taxes.

---
To receive Dr. Denison’s free daily e-mail, “Denison Forum on Truth and Culture,” see www.denisonforum.org. The brief essay discusses current events and issues in light of God’s word and provides practical applications to life.

Twitter @JimDenison

---