

Ministry of Grace Church

Matthew 23

Preface:

Even though the Pharisees, Scribes, Sadducees, and Herodians thoroughly examined Jesus, they were unable to find any fault in Him or His teaching. The Passover Lamb of God was without spot or blemish from a theological standpoint. Up to this point, Jesus had taken primarily a defensive posture. Now that His critics had been silenced, He changed tactics. His first lesson against the religious leaders was aimed at the hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees. Theirs was a self-centered religion focused on themselves instead of God, and Jesus confronted them about it.

Denunciation of False Religion

Matthew 23:1-12

¹Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ²"The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, ³so practice and observe whatever they tell you--but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice. ⁴They 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. ⁵They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, ⁶and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. ⁸But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. ¹⁰Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. ¹¹The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹²Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Mark 12:38-40 – ³⁸And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces ³⁹and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁰who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Luke 20:45-47 – ⁴⁵And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, ⁴⁶"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁷who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Notes:

Moses' seat was a name for the chair from which the religious leaders taught in the Synagogues. It was the normal custom for the teacher to stand and read a passage of Scripture and then to sit as He was teaching. An example of Jesus doing this is given in Luke's gospel account.

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has

sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."
(Luke 4:16-21)

Obviously, Jesus approved of this practice and style of teaching because He did it Himself. In the passage here in Matthew, He instructed the people to listen to those who taught from Moses' seat. At the same time, however, he cautioned the people to do as they were instructed, but not to do as the instructors themselves did. The Pharisees and Sadducees, not unlike many of us today, were good at telling other people what to do, but not so good at practicing what they preached. In the upcoming verses, as we look at these religious leaders, let's keep in mind what Jesus taught His disciples only a few days earlier:

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."
(Matthew 20:25-28)

Jesus told the crowd that they should listen to and learn from what the Scribes and Pharisees taught. This must have been encouraging to the religious teachers. However, the next thing out of Jesus' mouth was a condemnation. Instead of the teachers trying to make it easier for the people to learn and practice what they've learned, the teachers intentionally made it difficult for the people to obey. They were more concerned with how the people saw them than they were with helping the people become closer to God. Jesus went even further in His denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees. He said that they do their deeds to be seen by others, they take the best seats in the Synagogues, and they love being called "Rabbi," which means, "my master."

Consider what the Apostle John teaches in his first general letter?

For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. (1 John 2:16)

It's pretty easy to understand what he means by "the lust of the flesh" and "the lust of the eyes." However, few really understand what "the pride of life" means. The word translated "pride" is *alazoneia*. This is based on *alazon*, which means "a boaster" or "a braggart." "The pride of life" refers to the desire to be someone important or special. In other words, it means the desire to be looked up to as better than others.

The Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day were filled with the pride of life. Jesus finished off this part of His teaching with:

Neither be called instructors [masters], for you have one instructor [master], the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. **Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.** (Matthew 23:10-12)

This pretty much sums up the whole of Jesus' teaching over the last three years of His earthly ministry. Remember what He taught His disciples just a few days earlier when James and John wanted the best seats in the Kingdom? He said,

“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave” (Matthew 20:26-27)

He even used this as an example of how we should approach God in our prayer life. In Luke 18:9-14 Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the Temple. The Pharisee was proud and arrogant, but the tax collector was humble, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Jesus’ response to that was,

“I tell you, this man [the tax collector] went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:14)

And in both James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 we are told:

God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble [MKJV]

Do we notice a theme here?

Woe to Scribes and Pharisees

Matthew 23:13-36

¹³“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. ¹⁴[Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive the greater condemnation.] ¹⁵Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. ¹⁶“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' ¹⁷You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸And you say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' ¹⁹You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. ²¹And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it. ²²And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it. ²³“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ²⁴You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! ²⁵“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. ²⁶You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. ²⁷“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. ²⁹“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' ³¹Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³²Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. ³³You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? ³⁴Therefore I send you prophets and wise

men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town,³⁵ so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.³⁶ Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

Luke 11:37-54 – ³⁷While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table. ³⁸The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner. ³⁹And the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. ⁴⁰You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you. ⁴²"But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ⁴³Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. ⁴⁴Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it." ⁴⁵One of the lawyers answered him, "Teacher, in saying these things you insult us also." ⁴⁶And he said, "Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers. ⁴⁷Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. ⁴⁸So you are witnesses and you consent to the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. ⁴⁹Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,' ⁵⁰so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, ⁵¹from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation. ⁵²Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering." ⁵³As he went away from there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, ⁵⁴lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.

Notes:

After Jesus condemned the Pharisees and Scribes for being hypocrites because of their “Do as I say, not as I do” attitude, He proceeded to pronounce seven woes upon them. I never noticed until my study time this past week how closely these seven woes align with the blessings of the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. I give credit to Warren Wiersbe for this amazing insight. Let’s look at these woes proclaimed against the proud and powerful. And one at a time let’s compare them to the blessings Jesus promised to the humble and meek.

Pharisees Shut up the Kingdom of God

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in.
(Matthew 23:13)

The Pharisees were proud of how religious they were and their pride prevented them from humbly receiving God’s grace. But, worse than that, they changed God’s grace into a set of rules and traditions that nobody could ever obey completely. Therefore, they denied those who tried to follow their teachings from ever reaching the Kingdom. They condemned their own disciples to outer darkness.

Jesus, on the other hand, had taught that it better to be poor in spirit, that is, to recognize our utter spiritual bankruptcy and unworthiness.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3)

Those who are willing to humble themselves before God will be the ones who enter into His Kingdom, not because we deserve it, but because we don't. The key to the gates of heaven is to humbly recognize our unworthiness.

Pharisees Prey on the Weak and Act Righteous

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive the greater condemnation. (Matthew 23:14)

Even though this verse is not present in the best Greek texts, it is included in both Mark's and Luke's account of the seven woes. Therefore, we will include it in our list. If you recall from our study of James, he described pure and undefiled religion as

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:27)

The Scribes and Pharisees took advantage of those who were weak in order to rob them. Instead of helping the orphans and widows in their times of need, they used their religion as a cloak of covetousness. They neither mourned over their own sins nor did they comfort others who were in mourning. And, to cover up their sinful selfishness, because they were filled with the pride of life, they pretended to be very righteous by praying long and loud. I learned early in my Christian walk that we should pray long in private and short in public. The Scribes and Pharisees never learned this lesson. Their outward pride showed that the sin stain of the world was all over them.

In contrast to that, Jesus taught:

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (Matthew 5:4)

We are not to parade around as holier-than-thou Christians. But Jesus didn't teach us to hate ourselves and claim that we are worthless, either. In fact, He taught that we have such great value that He was willing to die for us. But, our attitude in response to His sacrifice needs to be one of humble obedience, not pride or even false humility. We have worth because of Him, but only as we submit to His will. Remember, the Bible describes our own righteousness in the vilest and most disgusting manner. But, in response to humble faith, God sees us as righteous as Christ.

Pharisees Proudly Focus on the Letter of the Law

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. (Matthew 23:15)

The Scribes and Pharisees put great effort into getting new converts to their religion, but they were not introducing them to the God of their fathers. They were, instead, introducing them to a set of rules that prevented their converts from developing faith. The new converts were zealous for their new found religion and this made it even harder for them to accept the truth when it was presented to them. They were destined for the eternal flame of the lake of fire. The word in this verse translated "hell" is the Greek word *gehenna*, referring to the trash fire that always burned in the Hinnom Valley, south of the temple mount. It became synonymous with the fire of Hell.

The Pharisees were proud of themselves, they were proud of their accomplishments, and they were proud of their converts. But Jesus said,

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:5)

Pride was a hallmark of the Pharisee's religion. They were proud of the righteousness they thought they had. Imagine how they will feel when they meet their God as their Judge. Jesus taught that pride was wrong and that meekness is what God wants in us. The word translated "meek" does not mean "weak," it means "humble and gentle." Both Moses and Jesus were referred to as meek. It is the word that was used to describe a horse that has been "broken." It refers to "power under control." In a Christian it refers to the strength of character that a person has when he or she is submitted to his or her Lord.

Pharisees Hunger for Riches and Glory

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath." You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, "If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath." You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? (Matthew 23:16-19)

The Pharisees focused on riches, while they pretended to focus on God's holiness. They viewed the gold of the temple as more valuable than the temple itself. They viewed the value of a gift as more important than the sacred altar. Their righteousness and holiness were a sham, but that was OK with them as long as they were rich and were looked up to as righteous by the people.

In contrast to the pretense of righteousness that the Scribes and Pharisees had, Jesus taught:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. (Matthew 5:6)

The Pharisees did not hunger for righteousness, they just pretended to be righteous, believing that God would bless them for it. But, God says that diligently seeking righteousness is what produces favor with God. Anyone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness will constantly keep the two great commandments in mind:

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-39)

The Pharisees focused on themselves. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, focus on God and on others. And – they are the ones who will have satisfaction.

Pharisees Reject Mercy

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. (Matthew 23:23)

The Pharisees focused on the minutest matters of the Law, like tithing even the herbs they grew in their gardens, but the important things like justice, mercy, and faithfulness were frequently neglected. After

all, things like justice, mercy, and faithfulness require personal sacrifice of time, energy, and resources. Such sacrifices could not be placed on the altar for others to see, so the Pharisees ignored them.

But, Jesus taught:

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. (Matthew 5:7)

Mercy is a virtue that can't be faked. It requires that we act against our own will and against our inner instinct for self-preservation. When someone wrongs us it's okay to retaliate, right? (pause) Is that how God treats us? Remember, grace is giving someone something that they don't deserve, while mercy is *not* giving someone something that they *do* deserve. Again, mercy is *not* giving someone something that they *do* deserve. But in order to show mercy, we have to give up our own need for retaliation. We have already received God's mercy. Therefore, we are obligated to show others mercy. Remember the unjust steward who refused to forgive the small debt that was owed to him, after he had been forgiven a huge debt by his master. How big a debt has God forgiven each of us. How much are we willing to forgive others.

Pharisees are Outwardly Clean but Inwardly Defiled

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (Matthew 23:25-28)

The Scribes and Pharisees were meticulous when it came to appearances. They wanted to be seen by others as righteous observers of all the laws and traditions of the elders. However, this was meaningless ritualism. They were careful to wash the outer part of the cups and bowls, but the inner part was overlooked and dirty. This is a perfect illustration of their religiosity. On the outside they observed all the legalities and traditions. However, inwardly they were filled with greed and arrogance because their entire focus was on themselves, not on God or on others. The Law forbade a person to touch a dead body, or even the tomb it was buried in. That touching caused them to become unclean. In order to counter this, the Pharisees and Scribes would whitewash the outside of tombs so that if they were accidentally touched it would not be them. That's why Jesus called them whitewashed tombs. They were spotless on the outside, but on the inside they were defiled and spiritually dead.

Jesus condemned all such external observances. Instead, He taught:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. (Matthew 5:8)

The Scribes and Pharisees were so soiled that their spiritual vision was obscured. They could not see their own Messiah even when He was standing in front of them. One day, they will stand before their Messiah while they are being judged and condemned to eternal punishment. Those who cultivate a pure heart, on the other hand, will be able to stand in the presence of their Lord and Savior without condemnation. They will see Him face-to-face without fear. Righteousness does not spring from proper actions, it springs from a pure heart.

The Pharisees were Persecutors

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? (Matthew 23:29-33)

The Pharisees and Scribes were not content to just put on a show for the less fortunate and less righteous common people. They also did everything they could to eliminate any competition. It was their forefathers who killed the prophets that God had sent to them. They claimed that they would have treated them differently, yet they are the ones who condemned the Prophet, Priest, and Messiah. They not only condemned Him, they turned Him over to the Romans to perform the most agonizing torture man has ever invented. Because of this, Jesus referred to them as a brood of vipers. The Viper was a common expression for that serpent of old, the Devil. He was calling them the Devil's children.

While the Pharisees and Scribes persecuted anyone who made them look bad, Jesus taught:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:9-12)

Faithful Christians have always been the target of unbelievers. There has not been a time in history when the righteous have not been persecuted. Many a Christian has given his or her life because they would not deny their Lord. The days are coming and are very near at hand when we, too, may experience the same kind of persecution. Are you ready?

Lament over Jerusalem

Matthew 23:37-39

³⁷"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! ³⁸See, your house is left to you desolate. ³⁹For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Luke 13:31-35 – ³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³²And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. ³³Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.' ³⁴O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! ³⁵Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'"

Notes:

This was Jesus' farewell address to the Israelites and it is one of the most tragic love messages ever delivered. As Jesus addresses Jerusalem, He is actually referring to all of the children of Israel. God

had chosen them through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God had nurtured them and rescued them from slavery in Egypt. God had tried to instruct them in the ways of truth through Moses and the prophets. But, they did not want what God was offering them. They preferred to make themselves great rather than humbling themselves before their God. They rebelled against the one who had cared for them and even killed the prophets that He sent to help them.

It had been God's desire to gather them and protect them as a mother hen does for her chicks, but they refused. They exchanged the righteousness that God offered them for a system of empty rituals that denied a loving God and elevated man to the throne instead. As a result, their faith, their temple, and their hearts became desolate. Instead of receiving their humble Messiah as He rode into town on a donkey, they would now have to wait until He comes again in vengeance and judgment while they proclaim, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

So What?

When I first got saved, my sister observed the dramatic change in my life and said, "I'm so glad you found religion." What she didn't understand, is that the changes she saw in me were not the result of religion, they were the result of a humble acceptance of an undeserved gift freely given to someone who clearly wasn't worthy of it.

Religion is man creating a process and a set of rules for man to reach out to God on man's terms. It is all man-focused. Christianity, on the other hand, is God reaching out to man, with man humbly responding on God's terms. Religion is all about pride. Christianity is all about humility. A person cannot get saved unless he or she recognizes their need for salvation and his or her inability to do it on their own.

Unfortunately, it is possible to be a Christian and not have a fulfilling Christian life. Just like salvation, a successful, fulfilling Christian life is all about humility. There's a reason that the Christian life is referred to as walking with God. Both Enoch and Noah are said to have "walked with God."

And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him. (Genesis 5:24)

... Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God. (Genesis 6:9)

But, what does that mean? When we walk with God we are in close fellowship with Him. We talk to Him. We listen to Him. We learn from Him. Our entire life focus is on Him. I can say with utmost certainty, if you are not daily in prayer with our Heavenly Father, if you are not daily reading His Word and seeking His face, you do not have a fulfilling daily walk with God. You can't have, because it's not about you, it's about Him. Unfortunately, it's all too easy to get lazy and neglect the needful practices of close fellowship.

And, to make matters worse, we have an adversary who wants us to take our focus off of God. But our adversary seldom attacks us directly. He doesn't have to. All he has to do is distract us and he does this through the world system that he has created. And, he is no dummy! The world system inflames some of our natural God-given desires and then uses them to take our focus off God and place it squarely on ourselves. This causes us to wander away from God. And, this self-focus produces pride, which is the complete opposite from humility. Not only does pride take our focus off God, but – listen carefully,

... God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. (James 4:6)

As a Christian, the last thing we want is to have God against us. You may say, "God will never be against me. He's my father and He loves me!" Do you see God's blessings in your life every day? Or,

does it seem like God is resisting you, or at least, not listening to you. Does God seem far away? If so, who do you think moved? Perhaps you have the wrong focus, and - [God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.](#)

Another way our enemy gets us away from walking with God is with rules. But, rules are good, right? Sometimes. God gives rules to help us direct our path as we walk with Him. But, when the rules replace our relationship, they lead us away from God. We can see from the woes proclaimed against the Pharisees and Scribes that they were focused on obeying the rules. True righteousness, however, a close walk with God, comes from an inner attitude of the heart. It comes from humility, humility with God and humility with others. Remember the two greatest commandments?

The other thing the Scribes and Pharisees were lacking was mercy. Once again, this springs from the fact that they were focused on themselves, not on God or on others. If we truly love others then we will easily be able to forgive them, and mercy springs from forgiveness.

Do you recall the difference between Grace and Mercy? Grace is giving someone something they don't deserve. Like God granting us salvation. Mercy is not giving someone something they do deserve. Like God not sending us to the Lake of Fire.

Now What?

Jesus wants us to walk closely with Him. In fact, it grieves Him when we ignore Him or when we let religiosity hinder our faith walk. Have you ever seen a mother hen tuck her chicks under her to keep them warm and protect them from danger. It's a self-less act of love. This is how Jesus felt about Israel and He feels the same way about us! He wants us to walk with Him every day. He wants a close fellowship with us. He loves us with a perfect love. So, the bottom line is this. Is your Christianity a humble, submissive faith-walk with God? Or is it simply religiosity? Are you in close fellowship with Him, or are you just following all the rules ... or - some of the rules. Maybe right now God seems far away. He didn't move. He will never leave you.

Perhaps you've never really submitted to God. Maybe you've just been playing church-ianity. If that's the case, there's no better time than now to humble yourself before God and accept His gift of mercy. Jesus' death on the cross paid the penalty for your sins. You can be forgiven, no matter what sins you've committed in the past. Now is the time to submit to God and ask Jesus to be your Savior and your Lord!

Let's pray.

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