

Matthew 23:23-39 – Are we the baddies? (Pt. 2)

Intro

- Last week I started a sermon called “Are we the baddies?”
 - o The title is based on a satirical comedy skit in which an SS officer suddenly realizes that they just might be the bad guys.
 - The skit and many internet memes that it spawned are a reminder of the need for self-examination...
 - ...the need to ask, “have I developed a huge blind spot where I’m missing obvious indications that my life is aligned with some really bad stuff.
 - o If we are not careful, we can live more like Jesus’ religious opponents than like followers of Jesus.
 - In our passage Jesus pronounces woe on the scribes and Pharisees.
 - He is distressed and they should be too because God’s wrath is coming.
 - o This is an anti-checklist...we don’t want any of these things to be true of us.
- Before we continue, let me show you what started me thinking along the lines that ended up at this topic and this passage – recent headlines and the general response to them:
 - o *Iranian Christians feared death in Iran. Then the US deported them to Panama. (USA Today – 2/20/25)*
 - o *US Citizen child recovering from brain cancer removed to Mexico with undocumented parents (NBC News – 3/12/25)*
 - o *3 US Citizen children deported to Honduras, legal concerns raised (Fox 26 Houston – 4/26/25)*
 - o *Same incident: US citizen children, including 4-year-old with cancer, taken to Honduras on mother’s deportation flight, legal advocates say (NBC News – 4/27/25)*
 - o *Tampa woman deported to Cuba gets separated from one-year-old and US citizen husband (Miami Herald – 4/28/25)*
 - o *Man, 31, in US legally for 12 years ripped from family, detained by ICE (KTLA 5 – 5/22/25)*
 - o *ICE arrests mom of 3 in KC, leaving care of US-born autistic daughter in question (The Kansas City Star – 5/28/25)*
 - o *‘What are they going to do?’ Long Island mother of 5 detained by ICE, sent to TX (NBC 4 New York – 6/18/25) – at least 2 of her children have serious health issues*
 - o *ICE detains Marine Corps veteran’s wife who was still breastfeeding their baby (AP – 6/23/25)*
 - o *New Orleans family says ICE detained Iranian-born woman who’s lived in the US for 47 years (Fox 8 – 6/25/25)*
 - o *ICE Goes After Church Leaders and Christians Fleeing Persecution: On Tuesday, Iranian asylum-seekers were detained in Los Angeles, adding to the count of church members taken despite lawful status. (Christianity Today – 6/26/25)*

- ICE detains boy, 6, battling leukemia inside LA courthouse; mother suing for release (KTLA 5 – 6/27/25).
- Note: most of these people committed some form of civil offense in how they came to be in this country.
 - They were brought here as children or fled here in desperate hopes of finding safety, a livable wage for their family, and/or effective medical treatment.
 - As far as I can tell, none of them were accused of any criminal offense (certainly not of any violent offense).
 - All of them were seeking to comply with government orders regarding meetings & paperwork to legalize or maintain their legal status.
 - Many of them were even arrested while attending such meetings.
- We are living in days when an entire people group (immigrants) is being treated as societal scapegoats, villainized and declared unworthy of legal protection or compassion.
 - Sweeping generalizations are made about their criminality, violence, laziness, etc.
 - And overall, Evangelical Christians are very much on board with this view of their fellow human beings.
 - General Christian response to the current treatment of immigrants has been, at best, “Nothing to see here; they’re all criminals who deserve no mercy.”
 - And that brings us to our next woe, the one that first grabbed my attention and pulled me to this passage.

(23-24) Neglecting Justice, Mercy, & Faithfulness

- Jesus’ religious opponents were really good at keeping the letter of the law.
 - Jesus’ example: they were so exact in their tithing that they made sure to tithe even the produce of their herb gardens.
 - “I got 20 mint leaves, 5 sprigs of dill, and 52 cumin seeds from my herb garden, so in my next offering I’ll include 2 mint leaves half a sprig of dill, and 5.2 cumin seeds which I will generously round up to 6.”
- And yet, they missed the main point of God’s principles and commands.
 - Their character, motives, and treatment of others are unaffected by their precise detail-oriented rule-keeping.
 - They fail to value and pursue justice, mercy, and faithfulness.
- *Justice*: the word used is not the usual one that is interchangeable with *righteousness* but rather one with the narrower meaning of *administration of what is right and fair* (BDAG).
 - Of upholding the law in a way that produces a righteous/fair outcome (rather than manipulating the letter of the law for personal gain, vengeance, or oppression).
 - This includes making sure that a given law actually applies to a situation and will produce a fair and righteous outcome.

- We have examples in the OT Law where exceptional circumstances that would produce injustice if the letter of the law were followed lead to God-given rulings that provide more nuance to the law and produce a just outcome.
 - (Thanks to Pastor Ben for pointing me to several of these examples)
 - Numbers 9:1-14 – those who were ritually unclean at Passover could not participate but were given an alternate date on which they should celebrate so that they would not be excluded from this time of joyful remembrance.
 - Numbers 27:1-11 – under Israel’s law, only sons inherited property, but the daughters of a man with no sons could inherit property as if they were sons so that they would not be left destitute.
 - Leviticus 10:12-18 – Aaron & two of his sons are excused from eating holy food that normally should have been consumed as part of the ceremony because they were grieving for two other sons who had just died.
 - Deuteronomy 23:15-16 – even though slavery was regulated by the Law, a runaway slave must not be returned to the man who legally owned him...he was to be given asylum (he is probably fleeing from harsh conditions).
 - We see justice can require wisdom and thoughtfulness that weighs exceptional circumstances rather than pure mechanical adherence to the letter of the law.
 - ...but that takes a lot more maturity, consideration, and understanding of true righteousness so people like the scribes and Pharisees can’t be bothered.
- *Mercy*: Kindness or concern expressed for someone in need; compassion, pity, clemency (BDAG).
- Matthew 9:36 – Compassion is what Jesus felt for people lost in sin.
 - A huge element of compassion is *mercy/clemency* – withholding from someone the punishment they deserve, sometimes at great cost to yourself.
 - Romans 5:6-8 – that is what Jesus did for all of us.
 - Luke 10:33-35 – Jesus’ primary illustration of what this should look like in a person’s life is the parable of the Good Samaritan.
 - The Samaritan had compassion on the half-dead Jewish man.
 - In modern terms this would be like a Russian helping a Ukrainians a Palestinians helping an Israeli, or an undocumented Immigrants helping a MAGA Republican.
- The proper objects of compassion and mercy are not people who are morally near-perfect or somehow “deserving,” but rather people who need help.
- Yes, I will be harping on compassion and mercy toward immigrants because that is who we are currently being tempted to speak of and treat with merciless contempt.
 - In the OT Law, there was a strong emphasis on the Jewish people helping sojourners (poor Gentiles/non-Jews who lived in their midst).

- While we are not bound by the specific commands of the OT Law, it shows us what God values.
 - They must not oppress or mistreat sojourners, especially since they know what it is like to be a mistreated sojourner (Exodus 22:21, 23:9)
 - There must be equal legal protection for Israelites & sojourners (Exodus 12:49, Deuteronomy 24:14).
 - *God* loves & cares for the sojourners (Psalm 145:9, Deuteronomy 10:18-19).
 - *They* were supposed to have this same love and care for sojourners (Leviticus 19:34, 25:35).
 - God will judge oppressors, including those who oppress the sojourners (Malachi 3:5, Deuteronomy 27:19).
 - The greatest love story in the OT is the love of Boaz the Israelite and Ruth the sojourner whom he redeems.
- This same thread continues through the New Testament.
 - 1 Peter 2:11 – We should know what it feels like to be sojourners and exiles if this world is truly not our home and our citizenship is in heaven.
 - Hebrews 13:2 – *Hospitality* is frequently urged in the NT. This word literally means *love of foreigners/strangers*.
 - Matthew 25:31-46 – At one of the final judgments the distinguishing characteristic between those who belong to Jesus and those who do not is how they treated people in distress (including strangers).
 - James 2:12-13 – James ends a passage about the sin of partiality (treating some better than others based on externals) by warning that those who are merciless should not expect mercy when they face judgment.
- I am not a lawyer or a politician or a policymaker who can tell you exactly what our laws, courts, and law enforcement should look like...immigration *is* a complex issue.
 - But as your pastor who God has given the responsibility of watching over your souls, I can tell you based on God's Word that the contemptuous, merciless, slanderous attitude, actions, and words that have infected much of our country, including many professing believers are unacceptable.
 - Some of us are looking an awful lot like this woe about neglecting mercy.
- The third thing that Jesus says the religious people are lacking is faithfulness: fidelity to Godly teaching and commands (definition adapted from BDAG).
 - They meticulously keep the rules that make them look or feel good, but there is no true commitment to godliness.
 - Their religiosity is a mask to be worn in public, not a lifechanging relationship with God who is holy, just, loving, compassionate, merciful, and gracious.
- (24) Jesus describes them in a sarcastic way that points out the ridiculousness of obsessing over tiny details while ignoring godly principles, motivations, and character traits.

- They strain their drink to make sure they don't accidentally swallow a gnat that fell in it and drowned (after all, gnats are unclean animals)...and then they somehow manage to swallow an entire camel (a far bigger unclean animal).
- This is what it is like to publicly follow all the good little Christian rules but then speak with prejudice and contempt of desperate people made in God's image.
- The last three woes, sum up the kinds of things that go along with this lack of justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

(25-26) Cherishing Greed & Self-indulgence

- Jesus uses another comparison: they are like people who meticulously clean the outside of their dishes but leave the inside (the most important part) filthy.
- The filth with which they are filled is greed and self indulgence.
 - The word used for *greed* emphasizes acquiring things in a way that harms others.
 - Harming others isn't necessarily the goal, but if there's some collateral damage, oh well.
 - As long as everything works out to *my* advantage, I'm happy.
 - *Self-indulgence* is the opposite of self-control (a fruit of the Spirit).
 - The attitude that if I really want to do something, I'll do it.
 - If God forbids it, I'll find a way to explain why that prohibition doesn't apply to me and my situation.
- They are not driven by love for God and love for their neighbor, but by love of themselves.
 - The determining factor in their life is "will this make my life better?"
 - Will it make me richer?
 - Will it give me pleasure?
 - Will it give me an advantage (or at least a level playing field)?
 - Will it allow me to exercise more influence?
 - Will it make people admire me?
 - Any good and pious behavior flows from a desire to appear holy rather than the inward purification & transformation that comes from faith in Jesus Christ.

(27-28) Hiding Hypocrisy & Wickedness

- This woe is a summary that has yet another vivid comparison: they are like tombs, carefully painted so that everyone sees them and can admire them from a distance.
 - But, as we all know, tombs are full of death and decay.
 - In the Jewish way of thinking this is especially bad because touching a tomb renders you ritually unclean and unable to participate in worship for a while.
- Outward ability to be seen doing good things and heard using pious language can be nothing more than a mask, hiding unrepentant sin.

- Unrepentant sin: you know there is something in your life that God says has no place there, but you refuse to ask him for forgiveness and for help to cut it out of your life.
- It can very well be a sign that a person is spiritually dead/unsaved.

(29-36) Attacking God's Messengers

- The final woe further describes this kind of unrepentant sin: when confronted about it by God's messengers, they choose to attack the messenger rather than heed the message.
 - (29-31) Jesus' original hearers piously build monuments to the martyred prophets even as they demonstrate the exact same attitudes as those who killed them.
 - "The prophet killers & prophet buriers belong together" – D. A. Carson
 - (32-33) They are about to continue the grand tradition of slaying God's messengers & thus prove themselves to be of the devil and destined for hell.
- (34) They are already seeking to kill Jesus, and they will show the same antagonism to those whom Jesus will send after him.
 - This will include more prophets (men who receive words straight from God).
 - This will include wise men and scribes (those who study God's written Word and proclaim how it should be applied to live godly lives).
 - The attitude exemplified by these men is still with us today: when the teacher or preacher says something I don't like, *he* is clearly the problem.
 - He's hateful or he's too conservative or he's a bleeding-heart liberal or he's unamerican or he's naïve or he's attacking me personally, etc.
 - ...any explanation other than the Holy Spirit is using the Word of God to convict me of persistent sin in my life...we gotta get rid of this guy.
- (35-36) the generation Jesus is speaking to will face severe judgment for this as they cap off all the murdered prophets by murdering the Messiah himself.
 - The hypocritical religiosity that forsakes justice, mercy, and faithfulness is the spirit of those who opposed and killed the one we claim as Lord and Savior.
 - This thundering denunciation is not given in a spirit of contempt or gloating triumph.

(37-39) Epilogue: Jesus Weeps

- Luke records this same lament and adds that Jesus weeps over Jerusalem as he says this.
 - Jesus knew that for many in Jerusalem, their opportunities to repent and turn to him in faith had run out and they were about to face severe judgment.
 - This brings him not smug satisfaction that they are getting what they deserve, but grief that they have not been brought under his loving care.
 - Unlike them, he is moved by compassion for the undeserving.
- Who will we be like? Jesus or his opponents?

Conclusion

- Are we going to sneer and cheer when the letter of the law gives people “what they deserve,” or is our heart moved by pity?
- Are we going to look out for our own interests no matter what harm it causes to desperate people, or will we consider others more significant than ourselves?
- Will we have the mask of a hypocrite or the mind of Christ?
- Read Philippians 2:1-8.