

The Idolatry of Self

Matthew 23:1-12

I spent some time this week trying to decide just how much of chapter 23 I wanted to cover this week, since the whole passage, through verse 36, is really one single topic focused upon the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Typically, I don't like to spend any unnecessarily lengthy amount of time on such passages emphasizing the negative examples of those in sinful rebellion against the Lord, lest the overall emphasis become discouraging or dispiriting. But I do want to focus enough on those examples to gain the benefit of the warning and appropriate self-examination with which we should receive all of Scripture.

The Pharisees are judged quite severely by Jesus here, with the words "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees" being repeated 7 times, seven distinct judgments pronounced upon them beginning in verses 13. Yet I've chosen this week to restrict our study to verses 1-12 in order to more fully understand the root cause of the sinful hypocrisy within their own heart and soul, and we will study those seven judgments next week. Perhaps I will have a seven point sermon next week, defined by each of those seven pronouncements, but today I want to identify the underlying problem of their heart, the underlying cause of their hypocrisy. And that is, I believe, their love of their own glory, the love of their own honor, the love of their own importance. Their pride. I am calling all of that the idolatry of self.

This is a very appropriate subject for our study today because that idolatry remains very prevalent in our day. The love of self, the exaltation and promotion of self, is a familiar doctrine within our culture, it is a familiar theme in the psychology and counseling of our age, not only in the world but all too often in the church as well. One of the prominent idols of our age can certainly be

identified this way, the idol of self. Perhaps I could just streamline all of that and simply call it pride, the pride of life. A person considering himself more important than someone else, considering his own advantage and his own profit as of greater importance than his willingness to sacrifice himself for the well-being and advancement of others.

Let me begin by pointing out, from Jesus' words,

I. THE EVIL OF SELF-PROMOTION.

There are so many different words I could use in this definition, but I have tried to choose one that is broad and comprehensive, a definition that speaks to the overall issue of evil in the human heart in a way that is understandable, and with which you and I can easily identify. I chose to express it as self-promotion. And that is what Jesus confronted in these scribes and Pharisees.

v.1-2

The scribes were the writers, the legal writers. The legal assistants, legal experts, or even, simply, the lawyers. They would draft legal documents exercise much influence and power in the Jewish community. The Pharisees were a religious party among the Jews, always emphasizing the duties and obligations of the law, though known for adding their own traditions to the laws which God himself had revealed. They stressed strict adherence to those laws and traditions, at least in outward form and appearance, so today they would be labelled as the legalists. They were the religious leaders who assumed for themselves the obligation to emphasize the law and to define its duties. There was certainly an overlap between the two groups, and so when Jesus lumps them together we shouldn't try to distinguish between them sharply. They are one in the demonstration of this evil, the evil of self-promotion.

As we begin, however, I want to emphasize our danger of looking at the scribes and Pharisees as though they are others, someone other than ourselves, instead of realizing just how easily the spirit of those Pharisees can invade our own hearts. In that context, I always think of that parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in,

Luke 18:10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ 13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’”

The Pharisee, of course, is the one who was condemned, he who had said, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.” The temptation, however, is for us to say or even just think to ourselves, “God, I thank You that I am not like that Pharisee.” So I am not using the scribes and Pharisees here as the place where we should identify evil, but rather use their example as a warning to us of the very same thing that can all too easily tempt our hearts as well. The evil of self-promotion does, I believe, find a home to some degree or another in every fallen descendant of Adam, in other words, in all of us.

Specifically, then, we see in them,

A. The motive of being seen and recognized by others.

Jesus knows their hearts, of course, and exposes them plainly.

v.5

The phylactery was a strip of parchment upon which Bible verses were written, and then strapped to your left hand and to your forehead before prayer services. Thus making your phylacteries large and noticeable meant that you were showing off. You were boasting of your ability to read and learn the Bible, and the motive was to be noticed! They want to be seen, by men. They want to be recognized, for their virtue, their godliness, their spiritual maturity and greatness. And so they do “good works” in order to be seen. They want to look good, in the sight of others. So they do good in the sight of others. And the Bible is clear, those who try to please others in this way will not, and cannot, please God. For example,

Eph. 6:5 “Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; 6 not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.”

Col. 3:22 “Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. 23 And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men.”

That idea is never clearer than when Paul writes to the Galatians,

Gal. 1:10 “For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.”

I don’t think we can ever let down our guard against this dangerous motive. I doubt that many of us will ever truly get to the place where being seen and recognized by others is of no consideration at all. It’s a part of the fallen nature we inherited from Adam, and Jesus calls it out for us to see so plainly. And he

has also warned his disciples,

Mat. 6:1 “Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. 2 Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 3 But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly. 5 “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. 6 But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

Closely related to that motive of being seen and recognized is,

B. The motive of being honored by others.

Not just recognized, but honored.

v.6-7

They loved the place of honor! They loved the titles of honor. And they sought even the prominence of Moses himself.

v.2 “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat.”

Mark puts it this way,

Mark 12:38 “Then He said to them in His teaching, “Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, 39 the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, 40 who devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater

condemnation.”

The evil of self-promotion. Then, as a natural consequence of these false motives, we see,

II. THE EVIL OF HYPOCRISY.

We will be looking at this in much more detail next week, with those seven declarations of “woe to you, scribes and Pharisees,” but to introduce all of that we see here that,

A. Hypocrites place heavy demands upon others.

Don’t miss that detail. They give a pretense of righteousness and godliness for themselves, but in reality, they demand more than God demands, and they demand it of others.

v.4a “For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders...”

Paul calls this “false humility in,

Col. 2:16 “So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, 17 which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. 18 Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind.”

It is worth noting in this context Jesus’ words in,

Mat. 11:28 “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

Not so the scribes and Pharisees. They lay a heavy yoke of duty and obligation upon others, but in their hypocrisy,

B. They fail to observe in themselves when they demand of others.

v.3-4

That is essentially the very definition of hypocrisy, and, again, we will see that in detail next week. For example,

v.25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. 27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. 28 Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Again, let me warn you of the danger of thinking to yourselves, “I am sure glad I am not like those Pharisees.” As soon as you indulge those sorts of thoughts, you actually become one of them. Far better is Paul’s perception of himself,

1 Tim. 1:15 “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.”

And whatever good there is in you, never forget that it is the work of God in you, and thus rather than the evil of hypocrisy you are compelled to cry out with all sincerity,

1 Cor. 15:10 “But by the grace of God I am what I am.”

Jesus then speaks to those scribes and Pharisees in an unmistakable way, emphasizing...

III. THE JUDGMENT OF GOD UPON THE EVILS OF PRIDE.

They liked to be called Rabbi, and Jesus says,

v.8

He continues,

v.9-10

What’s the point? I believe it is this, that before God, we are equals. No one is exalted. In the presence of God, no one is to be exalted as Rabbi, or teacher. No one is to be exalted in preeminence by title as teacher. And the reason for that is that only Christ is to be exalted. And in submission to him, in relationship to him, we are all on the same level.

A. We are all equal in submission to God.

God does define some relationships among men in which he grants the responsibility to exercise authority, specifically in marriage, in the family, in the church and in civil governments. But those relationships of authority and submission are a subset the one much more broad category in which we are all equals. Jesus’ words are plain,

v.8 “But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren.”

v.10 “And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ.”

Ultimately, only Jesus is exalted! We are all on the same level in submission to him. Again, that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have teachers in the church, because the Bible also prescribes that, but human teachers don’t have any of their own inherent superiority. Ultimately, only Jesus is your teacher. And only Jesus is your father. So we don’t achieve glory and honor for ourselves by any position or title we might obtain. Only Jesus is worthy of that glory. Only Jesus is worthy of that honor. And,

B. We achieve greatness by assuming the role of a servant.

So much for self-promotion! So much for self-advancement. So much for the idolatry of self. So much for human pride. Here is the path to greatness in the sight of God, and it is not the path of special titles or human advancement. Instead,
v.11

Do you remember,
Mat. 20:20 “Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. 21 And He said to her, “What do you wish?” She said to Him, “Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.” 22 But Jesus answered and said, “You do not know what you ask...25 But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. 26 Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. 27 And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Beloved, this call to humility is at the very heart of the gospel. It is the very heart of the Christian life. This is the definition of greatness—not a title of honor bestowed by men, but the call of Jesus to be a servant. “Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave.”

We read further in,
Luke 22:4 “Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest. 25 And He said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called ‘benefactors.’ 26 But not so among you; on the contrary, he who

is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. 27 For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves.”

I quote often from,
Phil. 2:3 “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. 5 Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”

So it is that we are to be like Jesus. And in that context,

C. We receive the honor of God’s blessing by means of humility.

v.12

I should say that this is not the way of the world. This is contrary to the wisdom of the world. But humility is the way of God. It is everything, humility is everything.

1 Peter 1:5 “Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for “God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.”

So, writes Paul,
Rom. 12:10 “Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.”

Eph. 5:15 “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, 16 redeeming the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is...21 submitting to one another in the fear of God.”

Submitting to one another, “in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.” That is the path to greatness. That is the way by which we receive the only true honor worthy of our pursuit, the honor of God’s blessing.

v.12 “And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

So the Pharisees will be judged, they will be condemned. We will look at that in more detail next week, but in the meantime, beware the spirit of the Pharisee that can all too easily find a home in our own hearts. It is the spirit that wishes for yourself to be promoted and exalted. It is the idolatry of self. And as John so pointedly ends his first epistle,

1 John 5:21 “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”