

Christ's Righteous Wrath

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[0 : 0 0] I used to work for a church in southeast Edinburgh that ran a youth group every Friday afternoon! Every week 20 to 30 teenage boys between 13 and 17 with no Christian background!

Usually for all of six minutes before they demanded we start playing football. But it was a wonderful opportunity. But it would also be fair to say that behavior was not always angelic. We would have four or five leaders helping out each week, and every single week the youth group, the hour and a half long youth group, would test the patience of every single one of us. Some leaders had shorter fuses than others. The young guys knew exactly kind of which buttons to push to get a reaction. But one of the leaders, one of the leaders was the most patient and gentle man. Certainly the whole church, I think you would have had to travel a long way to find someone more patient. For week after week, month after month, year after year, he would put up with that and deal with all sorts of absolute nonsense without ever even raising his voice. But one day, the young guys, they really crossed a line. That's saying something. And this leader walked into the room, sat them down, and for 15 minutes with an assertiveness and an anger that no one had ever seen come from him. Let them know exactly where they had gone wrong, and sent them out of the building so that these young guys who lived for a fight were stunned into silence and left visibly shaken. These were guys who saw people angry all the time, who loved to make people angry, but they knew, right? They knew when this unbelievably gentle, patient leader was this angry, they knew it wasn't his temper that was the problem.

They knew that they had really messed up. But this chapter, Matthew 23, I think should leave us a little bit like that. For 22 chapters in Matthew's gospel, what we have been learning, haven't we, about the character of Jesus. By this point, we know he is the most gentle, the most patient, the most kind, the most loving person you will ever meet there has ever been in the history of the earth.

Matthew rightly says that it was Jesus that the prophet Isaiah spoke of when he said, he will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench. Diane read for us earlier from Matthew 11, where Jesus himself says, doesn't he, I am gentle and lowly in heart.

Here is a gentle and lowly Savior who came to lay down his own life to save his enemies.

[3 : 4 9] So when someone like that speaks like this, we're not to think, oh, he's just lost his temper again.

No, we are to sit up, to take note, to almost be stunned into silence. Because if the most gentle and patient man to ever walk the earth feels the need to speak like this, someone or some people have messed up big time.

In verse 1, we learn that Jesus is speaking here now to the crowds, and I think most specifically of all to his disciples, we see that from the language in kind of verse 9 and 10. He's clearly expecting his audience to be those who submit to him and his teaching. But we'll see as we go, I'm sure you picked up there in verse 13, that as he is addressing this crowd and his disciples, partway through, he directs his gaze, doesn't he, specifically at one particular group within the crowd. So we're just going to follow that structure this morning, Jesus kind of addressing that the whole crowd and his disciples in verse 1 to 12 before narrowing in on the scribes and Pharisees there in verse 13. So just the two points flowing kind of from verse 12 there, those who humble themselves will be exalted, and those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

Let's just begin with the verse of those, those who humble themselves will be exalted. We've seen, haven't we, over the last couple of chapters, Jesus has been at war. He has been engaged in a war of words, primarily with the Pharisees, these religious leaders who were determined to dethrone Jesus and enthrone themselves, exalt themselves over him. But last week we saw, didn't we, that Jesus landed the knockout blow at the end of four rounds. And so the Pharisees, having been kind of soundly beaten, have had to shrink back into the crowds. And now Jesus says to the whole crowd and to his disciples, quite simply, don't be like them. Do not be like them.

He begins, interestingly, by saying, actually, listen to what they say. Right? When they tell you what the Bible says, listen, but do not become like them. Do not become like them because their hearts are full of pride. Jesus shows us in the next 10 verses what that pride looks like. First of all, it's pride that does not practice what it preaches, verse 3 and 4. Now, the Pharisees were like those, you know, those celebrities that kind of travel around in a private jet to tell you, right, that you need to have a shorter shower to save the planet. Or prosperity preachers who say you must give and give and give and give while they're busy building themselves a seven-bed mansion.

[7 : 08] Do as I say, not as I do. And they act that way, don't they? These people act that way because their prideful hearts tell them they are above the average person. They are more important.

And so they overwhelm others with tasks they think should be done while refusing to lift a finger themselves. The Pharisees would burden people with heavy loads, right, piling bricks into their backpacks and sending them up Everest while they sit on the sofa at home. Now, that is obviously not good, is it? And when it is so flagrant, it is easy to point our fingers and shake our heads.

But Jesus' point here isn't, is it, for us to kind of just sit in judgment over the Pharisees. He is warning us not to be like them. I think Jesus wants us, through these verses, to see where this same attitude might lie in our own hearts so that we can guard against it and rip it out if it is there.

Because, while it might be obvious in certain people, you don't have to have a worldwide audience to be this kind of person, do you? It is any heart that looks at anything and thinks, that's beneath me. That is for other people to do. I'm too good for that.

Right, right, a heart that says, yes, absolutely, people should, people should do the cleaning and serve the tea and coffee and tidy up and give up their spare time and open up their homes. Of course, people should do that, but not me. I think if we dig deep enough, we'll see there is a little bit of that in all of us, where there is something, anything, that we think we are just a bit too good for or too important to get involved with. That, I think, is what Jesus is warning us against here.

[9 : 15] They did not practice what they preached. And secondly, they lived for public praise. See that there in verse 5? Even when they do what might well be good, they do it for the wrong reasons.

Jesus mentions two things there in verse 5 that might leave us scratching our heads initially, phylacteries and fringes. Neither of those are bad things. Phylacteries were kind of little boxes that people carried around, little bits of scripture in. Fringes were part of what they considered appropriate religious clothing. Maybe think of it simply like, you know, coming to church suitably dressed with a Bible in your hands. That is no bad thing, is it? That is good.

But the Pharisees were the kind of people who would go online and buy the biggest, most expensive Bible they could find. A nice, chunky Hebrew and Greek interlinear and put on the most expensive three-piece suit that money could buy, all so that the person sitting next to them in church would look at them and think and hopefully say, wow, right, they must be really holy.

It's like when people record themselves giving food to a homeless person only so that they can upload onto social media later and watch the compliments come rolling in.

The thing itself might well be good, but it is all pure performance. They are only interested in being seen and praised by others.

[10 : 56] And again, I think Jesus wants us to take this message home to our own hearts. I think the most Pharisee-like thing we could do when we hear these words is to think about how it kind of only describes those people over there.

Instead of letting it penetrate our own hearts. There will be things we do for sure. Or at the very least, just long, desperately to be seen by others, right?

You just want to slip into the conversation. How much you've been reading your Bible lately. You wash the dishes when no one is around and you need to make sure someone knows. When you can't do something good without seeking someone's praise for it.

Now it is, it's more to say, isn't it? It is to be encouraged. It is good to encourage others. The heart problem Jesus is diagnosing here is when that is our sole motivation.

When we do things simply to be praised. When that becomes our motivation, we need to put off the pride of the old self and put on Christ in all his humility.

[12 : 11] Who loved to do what was good because it was good. Even, even when it meant getting rebuked by people like the Pharisees who didn't like what he was doing.

The Pharisees, they don't practice what they preach. They long to be praised by others. And thirdly, verse 6 to 10 there, they love to be put on a pedestal. These are the guys who want the red carpet for them and the best seat in the synagogue reserved with their name on it.

It reminds me, actually, very much of about 10 years ago now when I was in a church in Ethiopia. Myrtle was there too.

We went to a church on a Sunday and it was a fairly large church. And the whole auditorium was filled with those, you know, those kind of really flimsy plastic garden chairs.

The, like, stackable ones. Do you know the ones I mean? The ones where if you lean on the back it feels like it's going to snap in half. The whole church was filled with them. None of them very clean except for the front row.

[13 : 25] And on the front row was a line of brand new leather sofas. And, of course, not anyone could go and sit in the leather sofas.

That was for the minister and for the other leaders of the church. Ask me Asperger about the sermon. It was memorable.

Now, again, that is at the extreme end of the spectrum. But it shows, I think, a couple of things. That mindset still absolutely exists. And we need to be aware, don't we, of the seed of it in our own hearts.

Even if it has not yet become a fully grown weed. It is, I think it's safe to say, a particular danger for those of us in ministry, in positions of leadership.

I once heard an older, wiser Christian say to a room full of trainee ministers, everyone will want to put you on a pedestal and you will want to be there. It is a particular danger to us.

[14 : 28] But it is still a very real danger to everyone. Because it is so easy, isn't it? To long for the limelight. To take on particular privileges.

To convince yourself, right, it is kind of allowing other people to do a nice thing when they offer you special treatment. But that is not the way of Christ.

He is the one who washes his disciples' feet. In the church of Christ, no one is on a pedestal. No one is above anyone else because we are all equally under Jesus.

That is what Jesus is saying there in verses 8 to 10. No one is rabbi because we are all brothers and sisters. No one is father because we all share one father in heaven.

No one is instructor because we all sit under Christ's instruction in his words. That is what you and I are doing right now. I am not kind of instructing you in what I think you need to know.

[15 : 33] I am, I hope and trust, showing you what Jesus instructs all of us. Me included. That there is no leaderboard in church.

There are no rankings. There's no superior titles. There's just a family living under the headship of Christ. Learning from him alone, each using whatever gifts we've been given for the good of others.

In this family, no one can boast. No one can exalt themselves. No one can elevate themselves over others because no one, not one of us have done anything better than anyone else to be here.

It's telling, I think, isn't it? Or helpful to think that the more mature you are as a Christian, the more sinful you realize you are. So if you want to look for the most mature Christians, don't look for the people getting the most praise.

Look for the people who depend entirely on Jesus because they know their own unworthiness. The Pharisees, in their pride, loved their works.

[16 : 51] They loved what they could bring to the table. They loved themselves. But Jesus says, not so with you. Be humble.

We are to be humble knowing our own weakness and our own sinfulness and so leaning wholly and only on Christ's grace. Knowing that there is no one.

There is no one more or less deserving. There is no one above others. We are all the same because we are all saved by the very same grace of God. So Jesus warns his disciples against Pharisee-like hearts.

They don't practice what they preach. They live for praise. They love to be put on a pedestal. That is what Jesus says, not so with you.

We must turn away from that. We'll think when we get to the end of this passage about what that humility must turn us to.

[17 : 55] But before we get there, before Jesus comes to that, he first issues the most solemn of warnings to us all through the most severe of condemnations.

Our second point this morning, verses 13 to 16, those who exalt themselves will be humbled. As I mentioned earlier, Jesus begins to address that the scribes and the Pharisees directly in verse 13, but clearly that the crowd and the disciples are still there.

And Matthew records these words, doesn't he, for disciples. So this, while directed at the scribes and Pharisees, is in a very real way for us, for us to hear, and I think fear.

Because listen to what will happen to those who exalt themselves. Woe to you.

Woe to you. Woe to you. Woe to you. Woe to you. Woe to you.

[19 : 13] Woe to you. Woe. Woe. Woe being the word of divine judgment. Seven being the number of wholeness in the Bible.

Or completion. Nothing is lacking from the judgment coming the way of the scribes and Pharisees. And Jesus, that the gentle and lowly Jesus, does not hold back in the language he's using here.

Just look down there with me to verse 33. You serpents. You brood of vipers.

How are you to escape being sentenced to hell? For Jesus to speak so severely.

This must be serious. I think we can summarize that the sinfulness of the Pharisees in two words that Jesus uses repeatedly here.

[20 : 24] That they are hypocrites. And they are blinds. Six times in these verses, Jesus calls the Pharisees out for their hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy particularly being the idea, not just of saying one thing and doing another. That they did that. We've seen that. But more so of kind of wearing a mask. That they are living a lie.

They are false. Everything they show outwardly is completely different to what they are inwardly. Let me just run through the ways that Jesus calls out their hypocrisy.

But verse 13, they pretend to open the way to heaven while slamming the door in people's faces. Verse 15, they pretend to call people to life when they are leading them to death.

Verse 23, they pretend to give generously but are in fact greedy. Verse 27, they pretend to be righteous but underneath they are lawless.

[21 : 34] Verse 29, they pretend to be different from their fathers who killed the prophets. But in fact, they follow in their footsteps. Their hypocrisy was wicked.

Now we rattled through that list and we bid just come back with me there to verse 13 and just let us just sit in that for a moment. These men shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces.

Imagine someone you knew was dying and a paramedic arrived in an ambulance and they said, don't worry. Don't worry, I can save them.

I'll take them to the hospital so that they might live. So in the ambulance, they go, the paramedic, they drive them off to A&E.;

They arrive at the door, they hop out the ambulance, they lock the doors of the ambulance and walk away. That would be unspeakably evil, wouldn't it?

[22 : 47] Only the scribes and Pharisees are doing that with eternity. People's eternal souls are on the line and the scribes and Pharisees are locking the door in their face.

You cannot come in. Can you see why Jesus speaks so seriously? They are hypocrites, pretending to be righteous, pretending to open up the way to heaven when they are in fact wicked and slamming the door shut in people's faces.

They are hypocrites and they are blind. Verse 16, woe to you, blind guides. Again in verse 24, you blind guides.

Jesus calls them blind another three times throughout. They are guiding people blindly. Going down a deadly path is bad, isn't it?

Being so confident, so full of pride in the direction that you are going that you take others with you is worse. I'm sure you remember that the absolute tragedy of the Titan submersible implosion.

- [24 : 09] It dominated the news for days and weeks when this sub that would take tourists down to the wreck of the Titanic just disappeared, it vanished. It was a tragedy.
- But the more information that came out, the more avoidable it seemed. Stockton rushed that the founder of the company and the pilot of the sub, right, he was so confident, wasn't he?
- So assured of the product he was offering that he ignored countless warnings. He didn't bother getting any certification for the vessel because, in his own words, safety protocols hindered innovation.
- The sub had never been cleared as seaworthy. He refused to listen to multiple warnings by friends and experts. He continued to use the sub even after it had suffered structural damage.
- He was so confident. There was so much pride, so much self-assurance that not only was he willing to go, he was happy to take a quarter of a million pounds off other people to lead them into that hatch and take them down to the depths of the ocean too.
- [25 : 31] A blind guide who led himself and four others to a tragic death. It was a tragedy, but one that occurred because of a lethal level of pride.
- Again, as awful as that tragedy was, these scribes and Pharisees are doing the same thing with eternity. People's eternal souls are on the line and the Pharisees are blindly guiding them on their path to hell.
- They set themselves up as the real deal, but they were in fact complete fakes. It all looked good on the outside, but underneath the polished surface were rotten hearts heading towards death's door.
- Foolishly going your own way to destruction is bad enough in itself, but taking others down with you is worse still. Blind hypocrites.
- And so Jesus is angry. And rightly so. They are serpents, deceivers, a brood of vipers who will rightly receive a particular judgment.
- [26 : 59] A particular judgment. It is a fearful fate that awaits them. Those who pretend to lead people into God's kingdom while slamming the door shut in their faces.
- Who tell people to fall in behind them as they march towards hell because they refuse to put their trust in Jesus. They refuse to put their trust in Jesus and they tell people to follow them.
- There will be pulpits up and down this country this morning where people claim to be preaching the way to heaven but are pointing people away from Jesus.
- Telling people to follow them while they pridefully go their own way. That is no small mistake. It is no small mistake.
- It is wickedness. And at the heart of it all is pride. It is the religion of self-righteousness.
- [28 : 19] The heart that longs to exalt itself. To feel good about itself. To consider itself more important than others.
- Look at how Jesus condemns the adherence of that religion. So heed the warning against self-exaltation.
- But also hear the heart that Jesus still has for these people. Just look at the final few verses there with me.
- Verses 37 to 39. These are amazing verses. This is true wickedness in action but Jesus he takes no delight in their destruction.
- His heart yearns. It is desperate for them to turn from their wicked ways and come to him. How often how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you were not willing.

[29 : 37] Jesus is waiting for them with open arms. He is saying as he said in Matthew 11 come to me come to me but they will not come.

It is a glorious picture isn't it of the grace of the grace of our Savior. No matter the wickedness no matter the amount of deadly pride that resides in someone's heart no matter how severe a judgment they deserve Jesus still wants them to come under his wings.

They would not come. The question is will we come? the humility that Jesus calls for that we were thinking about at the start of this sermon the humility that Jesus calls for is not a kind of self-deprecating life where we go around telling everyone how terrible we are.

It is a humility that acknowledges and confesses there is nothing worthy of pride in us. It is a humility that heeds the warning of verse 112 a humility which recognizes we are no better than anyone else.

A humility that does not live for our own glory a humility that does not think we deserve better rather it is a humility that confesses there is nothing we can do to save ourselves.

[31 : 01] There is nothing we can do and so it is a humility that comes to Jesus under his wings under his wings knowing that we are as little chicks are with their mother wholly dependent on him confessing our neediness for salvation and for everything and when we come like that even if there are still seeds of pride buried in our heart he will gladly gather us up no matter what wickedness we have lived and even if we have lived the life of a Pharisee leading people away from Jesus and lurks blindly astray Jesus still opens his arms he still says come to me because there is no one in his kingdom who deserves his grace but everyone everyone who comes and says blessed is he who comes in the name of the

Lord heart everyone who does that they will find the gates of heaven opened wide to them so that they too might enter in so let us let us come humbly before Jesus not that we might be exalted but that he might be exalted let us pray together Lord these are heavy words that rightly weigh on our hearts but they are your words and we need to hear them for there is pride in our hearts but Lord we pray that you by your grace would take us under the wings of the Lord Jesus that we would humbly come before him confessing that there is nothing in ourselves worthy of praise that we can do nothing in ourselves to earn our salvation but only by coming to you and you alone will we find rest for our souls so help us all now to do just that that we would be willing to come humbly before Jesus that he might be exalted in all things in his name we pray amen chewing