



Matthew 23:1–4

23 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 2 “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. 3 So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. 4 They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

Reflection

(Today's reflection is given by Craig Tubman)

In our home, my wife and I have a special artwork. It's made up of five fence planks artfully screwed together, with these words painted on it,

To have and to hold
From this day forward
For better, for worse
For richer, for poorer
In sickness and in health
To love and to cherish
As long as we both shall live.

It was a gift given to us by one of our brides-

maids on our wedding day, expressing the vows we made. Those words that hang in our home could be used in one of two ways: they could be used as a foundation for a life of love; or they could be used as ammunition for relational warfare. Those words that we have hanging in our home could signify freedom or they could signify slavery.

They are vows. They are rules. They are the frame within which a loving, life-long relationship is meant to be designed and painted. However if you stop painting the picture and just focus on the frame it soon becomes restrictive. Why these rules? Why this frame? Why do I have to commit 'for better or worse'? Why 'for richer or poorer'? Why do I have to 'have and to hold'?

You see love in all its majesty needs a frame, it needs boundaries. In large part that's because in life our auto pilot setting does not seem to be love of others, but rather love of self. It's very hard to build a loving relationship if you cannot trust your partner. It's very hard to grow closer together if your partner is not faithful to you. It's very hard for love to flourish unless it has rules.

Within those rules amazing transformation and growth can occur. But only if you set up those boundaries and then put your energy towards living and growing within them. If you stop living and growing and changing and simply focus on the rules things start to get ugly.

In Matthew's Gospel he has recorded the attempts by the religious leaders – the Pharisees and Sadducees to catch Jesus out in theological debates. Every time Jesus has answered them with authority and left them silenced.

Now in chapter 23, Jesus turns to the crowds and warns them about these teachers. He notes that these teachers sit in the seat of Moses, in other words they declare the law of God. Since God's law is good it should be listened to, but as for the teachers themselves, Jesus makes it clear that they are to be avoided.

But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

How is that they do not practice what they

preach? Jesus continues,

They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

These religious leaders seem to be focusing solely on the frame rather than creating the beautiful picture within the frame. What they are preaching is the Mosaic law, which are laws designed with the specific purpose of guiding human communities in the ways of love, justice and mercy. But the very people declaring them are not seeking love, justice and mercy in the community they are fostering!

Like a marriage which has lost its way, the

vows have become burdensome. Jesus sees God's people under these leaders burdened and weighed down by the very law that was designed to set them free to love.

It's so easy to turn Christian faith into a life of rules: 'Tell me what I have to do and I'll go do it.' But the problem with this is there is no transformation, there is no joy, there is no deepening of relationship.

As opposed to the Pharisees and Sadducees Jesus said these words in Matthew 11;

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

Why when the burden of the religious leaders is so heavy, is Jesus' burden so light?

It's not because Jesus doesn't give clear rules and frames, he's been doing that throughout all his teaching! But rather because he sets the Law of Moses in the context of grace. These laws are not rungs in a ladder that leads you to God, they are the frame within which a life is slowly but deliberately painted that is loving, other-person centred, God glorifying and wholly beautiful. It reminds me of a line by the poet Wendell Berry, 'By thy wide grace show me thy narrow gate.'

Think

If you are burdened by following Jesus, then something is not quite right. It may indicate that you're seeking to enter the life of faith and obedience through the gate of performance rather than grace. It may indicate that you've forgotten that what God offers you in Christ is something you receive as a gift not a test score you receive from a teacher. It may indicate that you haven't yet grasped that Jesus has fully taken your punishment for sin and given you his eternal inheritance. 'By thy wide grace show me thy narrow gate.'

Take some time today to call to mind the commands of Jesus. Imagine them as the frame within which a beautiful life can be lived. When you look at the artwork that is

your life give thanks for the beauty of what is within that frame.

Take some time to reflect upon God's grace. It is by grace you are saved and this is not from yourself, it's a gift.

Pray

If following Jesus is burdensome and wearisome for you, something is not quite right. Why not sit with God for a while, in a quiet space and ask him to show you.