



Being Spiritual but Not Religious

Matthew 23:1-31

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It's official, as of yesterday, Christmas is over. The drummers have drummed, the pipers have piped, the lords have leaped, the maids have milked, the ladies have danced, the swans have swum, the geese have laid, the rings ... well, they're still golden. With the celebration of Epiphany yesterday, we have brought the Christmas season to an end.

The celebration of Epiphany is marked by the arrival of the Magi, who followed the star that shed light on the birth place of Jesus. This is the very meaning of the word, *epiphany*. The word finds its meaning in the Greek word for 'manifestation.' It celebrates the revelation of God as human in the Son, Jesus Christ. The season of Epiphany lasts through the the start of Lent. It is a season in which we consider how Christ is made known to us, both in the revelation of Christ as king by the Magi, and in the stories of our faith that demonstrate to us the Lordship of Christ.

Through the season of Epiphany this year, we will be taking a deep look at Romans 12 to see how the words of the Apostle shed light on our understanding of and relationship with God, ourselves, and one another.

When I was a junior in high school, I had the opportunity to participate in a Disciple Bible Study program. It gave me more weekly homework than all of my high school classes combined. Each week we read multiples chapters of the Bible, and we answered a number of questions in preparation for a dialogue that would take place on Sunday mornings. There were about 10 high school students in the class, and we had a couple adult facilitators. I call them *facilitators* intentionally – they did not have pre-described lessons to teach us each week, they were present to help us better converse with one another about what we had gleaned from our week's readings.

Following the year in the Disciple program, it was expected that as students, we would go back to the regular Sunday School class. The regular Sunday School class had two *teachers* who used a standard curriculum, which came with a pre-described lesson. Deviation from the topic of the day was not welcomed. We sat, answered questions (whose answers were always 'Jesus,' 'the Bible,' or 'yes'), and rotted for an hour. It was miserable.

What I found was that coming out the Disciple program, I was filled with a holy discontent. I was faithfully dissatisfied with the cut and dryness of the Biblical lessons being offered in the 'standard' Sunday School class. While we were told the Bible was the living and breathing word of God, in Sunday School, it was as if we were being force fed a stagnant text that had been cryogenically frozen a few centuries prior.

Years later, looking back, I can own that my greatest discontent from those classes probably lie in having adults tell me, as a proud and privileged 17-year-old, what I could and could not do. Admittedly, that's what I perceived Sunday School to be: I thought Sunday School was a church-created institution through which the parents in the church colluded with one another to use the Biblical text to convince their kids that if they behaved wrongly, they would spend eternity in a fiery abyss deep below the surface of the earth. I've never been an eternal optimist.

My disdain for the class was strong enough, especially after having participated in the Disciple program, which was built on the insight of the students instead of the collusion of the adults, that I refused to go back. Instead of returning to Sunday School, a handful of my friends and I created our own, *new* class, that was built around us as students educating ourselves and facilitating a conversation on the Biblical text, instead of being told by our elders what we should be believing.

I am not alone in having such disdain for those teachings I was offered by the church. In the past couple decades, such a feeling toward the organized church has become a common reality. Perhaps the disdain has grown because of the many scandals that have come to light regarding priests and church leaders who have abused their power, and abused their flock. Perhaps the disdain has grown because of a generation of privileged young people who just don't like to be told what to think or how to act. Perhaps the disdain has grown because teenagers and young adults have seen the people who taught them live lives that reflected none of the teachings they imparted down.

The disdain for the organized church has led to a full-on movement, which is often defined by this description of being *spiritual but not religious*.

In all but complete rejection of organized religion, "The word spiritual gradually came to be associated with the private realm of thought and experience, while the word religious came to be connected with the public realm of membership in religious institutions, participation in formal ritual, and adherence to official denominational doctrines."ⁱ In such a mindset, spirituality is said in a positive light, wherein religious is often negative; "spirituality is understood as somehow more authentic, religion as having 'a somewhat cynical orientation.'"ⁱⁱ

"To say that one is 'spiritual but not religious' ... is a way of saying, 'I am dissatisfied with the way things are, and I want to find a new way of connecting with God, my neighbor, and my own life.'"ⁱⁱⁱ While some may attribute this *spiritual but not religious* movement to the last decade or two, I'm not convinced the underlying dissatisfaction of those who claim to be spiritual but not religious is not shared with the frustration of Jesus in our reading from Matthew 23.

Matthew's gospel is penned sometime after the fall of the Temple, which took place in 70 CE. At the time of his writing, the Pharisees are the only Jewish community remaining with any stability and numbers. Because of the fall-out after the destruction of the Temple, the Jewish Community is fractured. Without the Temple as their foundational structure, the Jewish identity would have to be re-formed around the Torah (the Jewish law). The Pharisees and

scribes had a goal of reinvigorating Jewish piety among the lay people of the Jewish community, re-focusing the Jewish people on the law, in a hope to rebuild the Jewish identity in the wake of the Temple's destruction.^{iv}

At the time, Matthew's community still considered themselves to be Jewish. They had not fully separated from their cultural inheritance. This newly formed community around belief in Christ as Messiah was still a minority, holding no influence, no power, and consisting of small numbers of people. They were excluded by the Romans and by the Jewish community. Because of the Jewish defeat by the Romans, it is likely the Pharisees "may have tried to preserve their threatened identity by defining themselves more deliberately, perhaps excluding those who still thought of themselves as Jewish but were considered beyond the mainstream,"^v like those who had a belief in Christ.

In this contextual understanding, it's no surprise that Matthew shows Jesus attacking the Pharisees time and time again. He's trying to separate the new community from the Pharisaic leaders. Matthew seems to have his own holy discontent. It's worth a deeper look to see where his dissatisfaction comes from.

In our text today, Jesus begins by offering a word of praise regarding the Pharisees. Don't miss the first two and half verses amidst the condemnation that follows. "Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it.'"

It's thought that Moses' seat was akin to the pastor's chair at the front of the church. These teachers were educated and had rightly taken their place as teachers in the pulpit. Jesus isn't encouraging a disobedience to the law they are teaching. Jesus says the Pharisees are teaching rightly – they are teaching you to follow God's law, and this you should follow.

But for as well as they are teaching the law, they are not living it. "Do not do as they do," says Jesus, "for they do not practice what the teach." "Jesus's condemnation is directed at religious leaders who, charged with the role of leadership, fail miserably. The most frequent charge [in Matthew's gospel] is that they are hypocrites because 'they do not practice what they teach.'"^{vi}

Jesus continues with his critique, saying that not only do they not live what they teach, they also do their deeds to be seen by others. They are showy in their piety – they want people to know that they are faithful religious leaders, and they want recognition for it too. The Pharisees "are status seekers, loving the 'place of honor at banquets,' the 'best seats in the synagogue,' and being called 'rabbi' [(which means, the 'great one')]."^{vii}

These two critiques offer a broad picture of how the Pharisees have failed. The following verses offer flesh on the bones of the criticism. Each of Jesus' critiques begins with this phrase, "Woe to you ...," as he lays out where the scribes and Pharisees have failed to be faithful in their leadership.

Hear this list of problematic leadership that Jesus offers:

- You lock people out of the kingdom of heaven;
- You make converts of the faith children of hell because of the example you set;
- You swear by the gold that adorns the sanctuary, and not the God who dwells in it;
- You have neglected justice and mercy;
- You are full of greed and self-indulgence;
- You care more about the appearance of righteousness than living rightly; and
- You wrongly claim you are less sinful than those who have come before you.

Quite a list of criticisms. No wonder Jesus has a problem with the leadership of the Pharisees, and little question why Matthew continually brings up Jesus' attack on these Jewish leaders. These are not the leaders you're looking for. These are not the leaders one should be observing for guidance on how to live faithfully. God's law is a gift to help humans live in relationship with God and one another, and yet, the Pharisees are teaching the law while abusing their relationship with God – claiming self-importance over and loving gold more than God; and they are abusing their relationship with others – disallowing some from joining the community of faith, caring more about their cleanliness than the care needed by others, and refusing to extend God's justice and mercy.

Perhaps Matthew is right to have a sentiment of holy discontent. And in faithful following, perhaps so too should we have such a sense of faithful dissatisfaction. Our call as people of faith is not simply to follow the practice of the religious leaders who speak the loudest and demand our attention. Our call is to create a deep spiritual commitment to the Creator, who sent the Redeemer to give us new life, and who continues to empower us with the Sustainer, that we may be faithful to the law that leads us to share God's grace and love with the world.

“Not many people think of [being] discontent as a gift ... [yet] only by noticing what is wrong, seeing the systems and structures that do not foster health and happiness, can we ever make things different. If people were satisfied, there would be no reason to reach for more, no motivation for creativity and innovation. Discontent is one short step from the longing for a better life, a better society, and a better world; and longing is another short step from doing something about what is wrong.”^{viii} Our call as people of faith is not to ensure the next generation believes the same rules, interprets the same laws in the same way, or still goes to church at 10am on Sunday mornings. Our call as a community of faith is not to become part of the religious machinery whose only goal is to help more people enter the kingdom of heaven. God's dream and plan for each member of creation is not about blind adherence to rules and religious activity, but about learning to live out the grace and favor we already possess as those made in the image of the Creator.

Over the coming five weeks, we will look at how the apostle in Romans 12 calls us to better understand who we are as God's beloved. Instead of seeing ourselves as Christian robots who are bred to all act, think, and live the same, we will consider who God made us to be as

individuals, and how we are called into relationship with one another and with God as we live out the love of Christ in the world.

I invite you to come with the Biblical dissatisfaction for religious teaching that encourages piety without compassion, for calls to prayer for a person's eternal life without worrying about their temporal well-being, for holiness that encourages isolation instead of hospitality, and for worship that praises the adornments of the room instead of the Host who calls us together. Let us learn and grow together, you and me, for we each are called by Christ to consider the hypocrisy in our own actions that self-promotes and fails to live into the words of the songs we sing and the prayers we pray. And let us learn to be faithfully spiritual, without being religiously stuck.

ⁱ Diana Butler Bass. *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*. New York: HarperOne, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Anna Case-Winters. *Matthew: Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

^v David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved January 3, 2018.

^{vi} Case-Winters.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Butler Bass.