

## “PREACHING TO THE CHOIR”

*Six Tough Questions - 1*

Matthew 23:25-28 (p. 959)

Are you familiar with the phrase “preaching to the choir?” It is the practice of trying to convince people of things they have already agreed to. When practiced in the church it amounts to telling the righteous to be righteous – or charging the already-penitent to repent – or pleading with those who have already been converted to get saved. It’s an exercise in futility because the preacher is addressing the wrong audience. And if the preaching is at all confrontational, it’s likely to confuse the choir, if not make them downright angry. I’m quite sure that was the case with those theologians and lay leaders to whom Jesus addressed the seven “woes” in our lesson today from Matthew, chapter 23.

“*Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!*” he cried. “*Who, us?*” they responded. “*Hey, Jesus, you’re preaching to the choir. You should be pointing that accusative finger at the real sinners – the tax collectors and prostitutes and backsliders.*” Just how offensive they found Jesus’ preaching is evidenced by the fact that those self-righteous religious leaders conspired to have Jesus executed ASAP.

In light of our lesson today, and in light of a book that Chris and I have been reading, I want us to consider three questions today. First, assuming Jesus’ criticism of those religious leaders was justified, how did things get to that sorry state? Second, what does the sorry state of Judaism in the First Century have to do with the Church in the Twenty-first century? And third, what does all this have to do with you and me?

**I.** First, what provoked the confrontation between Jesus and those religious leaders in Jerusalem? To get a handle on that we have to go back about three hundred sixty years. Around 330 B.C. an ambitious Greek named Alexander the Great decided to conquer the known world. And he did it with such dispatch that at 30 years of age he wept, it is reported, because there was no more world to conquer. Part of the fallout of Alexander’s unprecedented success was that, for the first time in recorded history, the known world was unified by a common language, Koine (Common) Greek. It became the international language of commerce and learning. The Greek way became the normal way of viewing life, and it affected every culture that Alexander conquered, including the culture of God’s Chosen People, the Jews. These people whom God had told to avoid being defiled by the cultures around them found their way of life being gradually and subtly compromised.

Following a relatively brief period of independence, thanks to the Maccabee liberation army, Julius Caesar then came along and crushed any resistance to Rome's political aspirations to usurp Greek rule and dominate the world. And so the Jews, along with everyone else, became the beneficiaries of the so-called "Pax Romana" – world peace, Roman style – in which the occupation army kept the peace by intimidating or exterminating anyone whom they considered a threat to the peace. Now, under this constant pressure, both cultural and political, both Greek and Roman, the Chosen People had to choose between fighting the system, withdrawing from the system, or accommodating themselves to the system.

A comparatively small number chose to fight. The Zealots, as they were called, were the First Century equivalent of a terrorist organization, and the official Roman policy was not to negotiate with terrorists. A second response came from a large and very influential group of laymen called Pharisees (the name means "separated ones"). They decided that the best way to avoid contamination by a corrupt culture and political system was to distance themselves from society and maintain the highest standards of personal piety. (That separatist policy in the extreme was practiced by the Essenes, who went off to the wilderness to be free of any and all contact with a corrupt world.) A third group, the Sadducees, which included many if not most of the well-to-do religious leaders who actually ran the day-to-day business of the country, decided that the best way to survive the Roman occupation was to cut a deal with them.

The Pharisees despised the Sadducees because of their willingness to compromise their ideals. The Sadducees, in turn, looked down on the Pharisees because of their holier-than-thou attitude. And neither one of those group trusted the Zealots. I find it remarkable that these two major power groups who hated each other, somehow managed to set aside their differences long enough to conspire in a plot to get rid of their common enemy, Jesus. They even encouraged the crowd to cry for the release of a Zealot named Barabbas so Jesus would be sure to be executed instead. I suspect they were thinking that, once this obnoxious preacher from Nazareth was out of the way, they could then all get back to business as usual.

Such was the sorry state of affairs with the religious establishment at that time – ruthless, corrupt, and self-righteous. And had it not been for God's gracious intervention on Easter morning, the whole plan of salvation might have died with Jesus on the cross. But God is in charge; and He has the last word.

2. Now, having painted that rather dismal picture of Judaism in First Century Jerusalem, you might wonder what that has to do with the state of the Church in Twenty-first Century North America. Before tackling that subject, I think we should acknowledge that there are exceptions to generalizations in every age. For example, the Pharisees who, in general certainly deserved Jesus' harsh criticism,

nevertheless included men like Nicodemus who came to Jesus as an honest seeker, and to whom Jesus spoke the words, “*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...*” Jesus entrusted those words to a Pharisee. Another Pharisee, a highly-respected scholar named Gamaliel, was the one who at a crucial point persuaded the Sanhedrin to cut the early church some slack, and in the process quite possibly saved the apostles from being executed on the spot.

Now, what was true two thousand years ago is as true today. We could cite any number of exceptional Christians who could put the North American Church to shame. But despite those exceptions, general assessments may still stand and should be taken seriously. And so we come at last to the book that has occasioned this sermon series on “*Six Tough Questions for the Church.*” That is the subtitle of Reggie McNeal’s book, “*The Present Future.*” In that book he challenges the Church to re-think its role in today’s culture, and he does it by posing six tough questions. We’ll be wrestling with one each week during Lent.

Now, let me say this as clearly as I am able. McNeal makes some generalizations about the Church in North America in the Twenty-first Century that you may agree or disagree with. I would expect both reactions. But having read the book twice, now, I find his observations sufficiently convicting that we would do well to wrestle with them rather than to either accept them without question or dismiss them out of hand.

The first tough question McNeal says the Church in North America needs to face is this: *How Do We Deconvert from Churchianity to Christianity?* We may think we have a handle on what Christianity is. But what about “Churchianity?” McNeal describes it this way: “*Church culture (Churchianity) has become confused with biblical Christianity, both inside the church and out. In reality, the church culture in North America is a vestige of the original movement, an institutional expression of religion that is in part a civil religion and in part a club where religious people can hang out with other people whose politics, world view, and lifestyle match theirs.*” What we call “the church” today is largely an empty shell – mostly form with little or no substance.

The problem, contends McNeal, is that people, at least in general, are becoming less and less motivated to join and support religious institutions; and he backs it up with plenty of supportive documentation from conservative evangelical sources. However, and here’s a surprise, people today are generally more and more hungry for a real relationship with God. A growing number of people are spiritually seeking and open, but skeptical when it comes to finding their spiritual needs met by institutional religion. And sadly, the church in North America is largely missing the opportunity. In fact, many congregations and church leaders look at the growing millions of “churchless Christians” and adopt a kind of refuge mentality.

Like the Pharisees whom Jesus confronted, there are those church leaders who withdraw from the culture, hunkering down until the storm passes and the institutional church, they hope, can once again assume its rightfully indispensable place in society. McNeal says that those with this kind of refuge mentality view the world outside the church as the enemy, rather than a field ripe for the harvest. Their strategy is to live inside the bubble in a Christian subculture complete with its own entertainment industry. And when it comes to evangelism, those who adopt this approach, to quote McNeal, “focus on cleaning people up, changing their behavior so Christians (translation: church people) can be more comfortable around them.”

Can you hear in those words an echo of the Pharisees’ approach to gaining converts? “*Do you want to avoid the coming tribulation? Then come, be like us.*” In fact, one of Jesus’ accusations in Matthew 23 is this: “*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.*” That was Jesus’ assessment of the people who thought they were the godliest folks in town. Apparently some things haven’t changed all that much.

McNeal goes on to say that other churches and religious leaders go the opposite direction. Instead of isolating themselves from society and treating the culture as the enemy, they react to the pending demise of the institutional church by selling out to the culture. He writes: *Just today someone told me of a church billboard that promised a \$10,000 winner for some person who would attend and sit in the right seat! This marketing scheme is more informed by the neighboring casinos than by the New Testament.*

McNeal goes on to describe the “worship” service of a church he attended a few years ago on Easter Sunday. He writes: *The only music the congregation sang was the soft-rock tune, “I Can See Clearly Now the Rain Has Gone.” The pastor’s message addressed how to have a better marriage. Not one word about resurrection – and this on the one Sunday of the year guaranteed to have pre-Christians in attendance. No one connected the dots for the attenders by telling them that their ultimate hope for better vision and marital intimacy is secured by divine intervention of the same God who raised Jesus from the dead. What a lost opportunity! What a pathetic and anemic response to the collapse of the church culture – a capitulation and denial of the power of the gospel. Trying so hard to be with it, this church just doesn’t get it.*

Aren’t you glad we’re not like that? Folks, don’t kid yourselves. Please understand, I am grateful beyond words that we seem to grasp the centrality of the gospel and of every person’s need to be in a loving, growing relationship with God. But as a church in suburban Medford, we have a whole lot to learn about engaging the culture around us without embracing its values. No church,

especially one that is as comfortably situated as we are, is far removed from the temptation to look the other way, to compromise a little here and a little there in order to secure our continued favorable standing in the community. We understand, better than we would care to admit, just how seductive protecting our vested interests can be. And it troubles me to think of how easily we might be mistaken for modern-day Sadducees.

3. Well, we could go on citing one generalization after another about institutional religion, then and now. But the question I want you to think about is this. What does deconverting from Churchianity to Christianity have to do with you and me individually? We can talk until we drop about things “the church” can and must do to get its act together. We can talk of how the church must adjust to the tectonic shifts of culture. But bottom line, the revival of the church is going to happen one heart at a time, or it’s not going to happen.

Only the Holy Spirit can rekindle each one of our love affairs with Jesus. You see, Jesus didn’t come to establish an institution – a political kingdom that would change people’s hearts; he came to establish a heart kingdom that would change people’s politics, and that includes church politics. So when we talk about church renewal, the question each one of us must face is this: Where are you with Jesus in your heart? Nobody can answer that question but you. What are you waiting for?

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