

Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Orcutt Christian Church

A Grace Driven Church for Grace Needing People!

Burning Question #59 ***How Does the Bible Compare to the*** ***Quran and the Book of Mormon?***

**Proverbs 30:5-6; John 20:30-31;
Revelation 22:18-19; Jude 1:3**

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- 1 🎵 **How Majestic Is Your Name** 121
- 2 🎵 **Christ is made the sure foundation** [ALL] 403
- 3 🎵 **Bind us together** 425
- 4 🎵 **Doxology**
- 5 🎵 **I love thy kingdom Lord** [ALL] 405
- 6 🎵 **Standing on the promises** [v. 1, 2, 3] 410
- 7 🎵 **456 - Find Us Faithful** [Once] 456

Proverbs 30:5-6 (NASB)

⁵ Every word of God is tested; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. ⁶ Do not add to His words Or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar.

John 20:30-31 (NASB)

³⁰ Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus

is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

Revelation 22:18-19 (NASB)

18 I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.

Jude 1:3 (NASB)

3 Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.

I appreciate the opportunity to rethink the place of what we call The Holy Bible in our lives.

Perhaps you simply call it Scripture.

Alexander Campbell referred to it as The Living Oracles.

The word "**oracle**" comes from the Latin verb *ōrāre*, "to speak."

How does it differ from the Koran?

How does it differ from the Book of Mormon?

So, thanks to whom ever asked this question.

I. Where Did The Holy Books Come From?

Every "major" faith group has what they consider their sacred writings.

How does The Bible differ from all those supposedly Sacred Books?

Today, I am only going to look at the Koran and BOM, but in doing this, I think you will be able to apply this reasoning to all those supposedly Holy Books.

And, this will not be some scholarly sermon, as I want it to be simple and practical.

If you want to get into some deep, deep, scholarly reading, I suggest you visit our website: www.OrcuttChristian.Org.

Over 32 thousand visitors have been on our website, and there are some regular readers from Korea, Russia, Germany, England, Brazil, Mexico, and the Philippines; plus all across the USA.

I sometimes wonder just how many from Orcutt Christian Church utilized our website.

I admit it probably could be better organized.

Most church websites have a link on the front page to the minister. You will not find that on ours.

You will have to go through some other information pages before you discover a link to me.

But, I digressed.

The point is there is some valuable information on our website for your study.

A. Commonalities of the BOM and the Koran.

1. The Koran

The Koran, sometimes Quran, was supposedly given to Muhammad ibn 'Abdullah, the founder of Islam, in 607 A.D. by the angel Gabriel.

Most Arabs thought he was possessed when he told them he had been given revelations by Gabriel, but his wife and 10 year old nephew convinced him he was a prophet and needed to preach what he allegedly had been told.

His revelations were written down in what we know as the Quran. However, it underwent several revisions, and when Muhammad died in 632 A.D., there many versions being used by Islam.

When Muhammad died, there was a bitter struggle among some of his followers to seize control, and the third person who succeeded him, Caliph Uthman, 10 years later, destroyed all version except the one he approved of.

The two major branches of Islam, the Sunni Muslims and the Shiite Muslims, have different opinions of the validity of the Koran.

Due to the purging under Caliph Uthman we cannot check whether *The Koran* today is what Muhammad "received".

The claims that *The Koran* is unchanged and identical to words in heaven are asserted by faith because there is no way to substantiate the claims.

Dr. Stuart Robinson, Ph.D., graduated from the Baptist Theological College of Queensland in Australia, the University of Queensland, the Melbourne College of Divinity and Fuller Theological Seminary.

For 14 years he pioneered church planting among Muslims.

In his book: *Mosques & Miracles: Revealing Islam and God's Grace*, Dr. Robinson says: "There is no copy of the Quran in existence from the period of the first one and a half centuries of the existence of the Muslim communities."

And, these are significant points to keep in mind:

No written copies for the first 150 years, and

No way to confirm the Koran is unchanged.

And, then the Quran teaches that it as well as the Scriptures of the Torah of the Jews and the New Testament of the Christians were "revealed" / "confirmed"/"inspired" by Allah:

As for that which We inspire in thee of the Scripture, it is the Truth confirming that which was (revealed) before it. (Surah 35:31. Also 3:81; 9:33; 46:12)

Now, if God / Allah inspired all three, would there not be consistency?

But, The Koran often contradicts the Bible.

A few examples are that it:

- Claims Abraham lived in Mecca whereas the Bible says he originated in Ur (in Mesopotamia) and moved to Canaan;
- Claims Haman served Pharaoh whereas the Bible says he served the King of Persia (about 900 years later);

- Denies Jesus was the "Son of God". (Surah 4:171; 9:30)
- Denies that Jesus was murdered. (Surah 4:157)

How do they get around this inconsistency?

They claim the Bible has been corrupted.

And, I'll come back to this allegation in a few minutes.

2. The Book of Mormon

About 1220 years after the angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad and told him he was the last prophet, the angel Moroni appeared to Joseph Smith and allegedly told him about some gold plates that had been buried centuries earlier.

A man named Mormon who was a Nephite, wrote the BOM on gold plates in "reformed Egyptian." (Mormon 9:32)

His son Moroni completed the Book.

Around 1827 Moroni – now an angel – visited Joseph Smith.

Joseph dug up the plates, although no one ever actually saw them, and with the aid of the angel translated them into what is known as the **Book of Mormon**.

Many researchers conclude that the BOM began as a novel by Solomon Spalding (1761-1816) a minister of the Congregational Church, who wrote a fictional account of where the American Indians came from.

Sydney Rigdon (1793-1876) who had been a minister in the Restoration Movement, began urging Communism, and this was soundly rejected by other Restoration Movement preachers.

Rigdon, then left the Restoration Movement, and allied with John Smith.

Rigdon convinced Smith to adopt Communism, which Smith did for about 5 years.

And Rigdon obtained the Spaulding manuscript, remodelled the story, and passed it to Smith, where it became the BOM.

And, that may be a possibility.

The *Book of Mormon* narrates that an Israelite family fled Jerusalem in 589 BC and sailed to America.

William F. Albright dates the end of Zedekiah's reign and the fall of Jerusalem to 587 BC.

So this Israelite family fled Jerusalem 2 years after it was destroyed.

The father had a number of sons including Nephi and Laman, who here in the Americas started two nations, the Nephites and Lamanites.

The BOM says The Nephites were "white ... and delightsome," but the Lamanites were miraculously made black and were more primitive.

The BOM names about 40 cities built by Nephites!

In 385 AD the Lamamites exterminated the Nephites and became the Indians.

The BOM teaches that Jesus Christ went to America in 34 AD after his resurrection to preach to the Jewish descendants and then ascended to heaven again.

But, did He?

When Paul is describing the priestly sacrifice of Jesus Christ, he says

Hebrews 9:26-28 (NASB)

26 ... now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. ²⁷ And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, ²⁸ so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without *reference to sin*, to those who eagerly await Him.

Obviously there is a contradiction here.

The Bible, however, teaches that Jesus came, appeared and died "**once.**"

And, His second appearance here on earth will be when He returns to judge the inhabitants of the earth.

Which book then is correct?

Did Jesus preach in America in 34 AD?

Were the American Indians descendants of Jews?

With no proof for the BOM's authenticity Mormons hoped the new science of **DNA research** would link the Indians to ancient Israelites and prove that the BOM is a translation of an ancient document.

However, the opposite happened. DNA research confirmed what anthropologists concluded long ago – Native Americans originated in East Asia over 10,000 years ago, not in Israel 2,600 years ago.

Eight scientists including Mormon anthropologist, Dr. Thomas W Murphy, were interviewed.

The conclusions are:

- Genetic research shows American Indians resemble Mongolians and Siberians more closely than other people.
- Linguistic data shows similarities between American Indians and East Asians.
- Human skeletal remains show that people in North, Central and South America are of East Asian descent.
- Archaeology has shown similarities between East Asian and American cultures in the artifacts they used.

Dr Murphy concludes,

"It is genetically, archaeologically, historically and linguistically impossible for American Indians as a whole to be descendants of Lamanites who came from Israel."

And what about all those **cities the Nephites** supposedly built? No remains of the 40 American cities named in the BOM have been found.

The Old Testament, in contrast, names about 900 geographical locations of which over 500 have been identified.

No event in the BOM has archaeological support.

1 Nephi 18:25 says:

25 And it came to pass that we did find upon the land of promise, as we journeyed in the wilderness, that there were beasts in the forests of every kind, both the cow and the ox, and the ass and the horse, and the goat and the wild goat, and all manner of wild animals, which were for the use of men. And we did find all manner of ore, both of gold, and of silver, and of copper.

Horses?

Horses didn't appear in the Americas until the Spanish explorers brought them in 1493 with Columbus second expedition.

Furthermore, there are at least two versions of the BOM. Mormons actually use a revised version with almost 4,000 alterations!

The "Reorganized Church" which split off after Joseph Smith died still uses Smith's first version of the BOM.

Joseph Smith said the gold plates were written in "**reformed Egyptian.**"

Egypt was the land of slavery.

Why would a Jew write in the language of an avowed enemy?

1 Nephi 3:19 says

19 And behold, it is wisdom in God that we should obtain these records, that we may preserve unto our children the language of our fathers;

Remember that Nephi and his family were Jews.

How does writing in Reformed Egyptian assist in the preservation of the Jewish language?

How then does one explain the numerous appearances of words that are translations of Greek words and which contain New Testament ideas?

These include the words; Christ (a Jew would have used the word Messiah), church, bible, speaking in tongues [occurs prior to the resurrection of Jesus in the BOM], crucifixion, epistle, disciple,

apostle, martyr, anti-Christ, gospel, baptism, baptize, carnal, elected, type and Alpha and Omega.

Are we now supposed to believe that a Hebrew man wrote in Reformed Egyptian using Greek words?

So, both the Quran and the Book of Mormon were given to the recipients by angels who should be consistent, but neither book is.

II, The Authenticity of The Bible

Both Islamists and Mormons declare the Bible was corrupted, and that the text we have today differs from the original.

Both imply that Muhammad and Joseph Smith only quoted uncorrupted texts

And, we've gone over this in the past, when discussed whether we could trust the Bible.

So, let me summarize some of the things you already know.

Remember, we can't do this kind of verification on either the Quran or the Book of Mormon.

We have numerous manuscripts available for scholars to test, and with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, there are nearly 6,000 ancient manuscripts, or portions of manuscripts available to scholars.

And, since they have all been entered into computer data banks, these scholars can fairly quickly compare and contrast the various versions.

Of these nearly 6,000 manuscripts there are about 200,000 variants.

Are they significant?

They mainly deal with spelling, or placement within sentences.

Sir Frederic G. Kenyon, the pre-eminent British authority on New Testament manuscripts at the turn of the twentieth century, says:

"We may indeed believe that He would not allow His Word to be seriously corrupted, or any part of it essential to man's salvation to be lost or obscured; but the differences between the rival types of text is not one of doctrine. No fundamental point of doctrine rests upon a disputed reading."

And the brilliant Presbyterian theologian, Dr. Robert L. Dabney, wrote:

"If all the debated readings were surrendered by us, no fact or doctrine of Christianity would thereby be invalidated, and least of all would the doctrine of Christ's proper divinity be deprived of adequate scriptural support. Hence the interests of orthodoxy are entirely secure from and above the reach of all movements of modern criticism of the text whether made in a correct or incorrect method, and all such discussions in future are to the church of subordinate importance."

So, just how accurate is the Bible?

Dr. Norman L. Geisler, is a noted New Testament Scholar.

Dr. Geisler says when you comb through all the nearly 6,000 manuscripts, and overlay them on the New Testament, the reconstructed text of the New Testament is 99.9% free from real concern.

99.9% accuracy is simply miraculous, in my book.

I want to conclude with some thoughts on prophecy.

The Koran says Jesus predicted a future messenger – "the Praised One". (Surah 61:6)

And the name Muhammad means "the praised"!

Similarly, the Book of Mormon foretells and gives the name of a "choice seer."

And the name is Joseph! (2 Nephi 3)

However, these things are not in the Bible, nor in any ancient manuscript.

To prove something was predicted requires a copy of the prediction published before the alleged fulfilment!

With many Bible predictions we DO HAVE ancient manuscripts written before the fulfilment.

For example the prophecies that:

- A world ruler would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5);
- The "anointed prince" would come in 69 weeks – interpreted as 69x7 years (Daniel 9);
- Christians will outnumber the Jews (Galatians 4:27).

And, there are over 300 prophecies that Jesus fulfilled.

I handed out a pamphlet on this years ago.

How possible is it that Jesus could fulfill these prophecies?

Let's say I give you a crazy assignment.

I am going to build a fence around California.

I'm going to cover the entire state with silver dollars to a depth of two feet.

I will pick one of those coins, paint it red, and mix it somewhere in that deep pile of silver coins somewhere in this fenced in state of California.

Your task is to fly in a helicopter over the state and pick up my coin.

You must select my coin the first time you reach down into the silver expanse.

You can take as much time as you like.

That is the statistical impossibility of Jesus fulfilling all those over 300 prophecies.

Remember, *The Koran* calls the Scriptures "confirmed" and "revealed" and Joseph Smith called them the "Word of God."

The book's accuracy of transmission is tested by comparing its present-day text with ancient copies.

To do that we actually need ancient copies but for the BOM we have none.

As for *The Koran*, Muslims themselves destroyed the oldest versions.

A book's accuracy of content is tested by checking the book's testable statements against science, including geology, archaeology, biology, astronomy, and so forth.

The Bible, the Quran and the Book of Mormon cannot all be true.

Only The Bible can survive any test of authenticity thrown at it.

The Bible warns that attempts, such as by Islam and the Mormons, will occur:

2 Peter 2:17-19 (NASB)

17 These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. **18** For speaking out arrogant *words* of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, **19** promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved.

2 Peter 3:3-4 (NASB)

3 Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with *their* mocking, following after their own lusts, **4** and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For *ever* since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation."

Second Peter was written about 65 AD.

The book of Jude quotes 2 Peter 2:18 & 3:3

Jude 1:17-21 (NASB)

17 But you, beloved, ought to remember the words that were

spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁸ that they were saying to you, "In the last time there will be mockers, following after their own ungodly lusts." ¹⁹ These are the ones who cause divisions, worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit. ²⁰ But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life.

The New Testament book of Jude may be the last New Testament document written.

And Jude 17 speaks of the Apostles in the past as if all deceased.

Now consider verse 3:

Jude 1:3 (NASB)

³ Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.

Textual criticism has shown no reason to consider this verse "corrupt."

Textual scholars say it's a genuine part of the Scriptures.

So what is Jude telling us in verse 3?

There would be no more God-inspired messengers or books!

So, What's your conclusion?

How Does the Bible Compare to the Quran and the Book of Mormon?

Prayer and Invitation

July 8 Lesson 6 (NIV) **Jesus Criticizes Unjust Leaders**

Devotional Reading: Luke 14:7-14

Background Scripture: Matthew 23

MATTHEW 23:1-4, 23-26

1 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.”

23 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

25 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.”

KEY VERSE

“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. 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.”—Matthew 23:2, 3

Introduction

A. Homes and Hearts

Real-estate agents often emphasize the importance of good “curb appeal” in an effort to sell houses. That expression refers to presenting an attractive outward appearance of the house or property so that passersby will have a favorable first impression. Foliage should be well-trimmed and pruned, fencing and sidewalks should be in good repair, etc.

The intended effect is that potential buyers will want to stop and take a look inside. Needless to say, it is important that the inside be just as well-kept as the outside. But people will likely not go inside the house if the outside shows too many signs of wear and tear. The reasoning is that a poorly maintained exterior signals similar neglect on the interior whereas a well-maintained exterior points to the opposite.

The teachers of the law, or scribes, and the Pharisees in Jesus' day were known for their religious "curb appeal." But in their case a well-maintained exterior did not indicate the same on the inside.

B. Lesson Background

Today's lesson from Matthew 23 covers an incident that occurred during what is often called Passion Week, the final week of Jesus' earthly life and ministry. The week began with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11) and climaxed with his crucifixion and resurrection.

It is generally believed that the events recorded in Matthew 21:23-24:51 (part of which is today's text) occurred during Tuesday of Passion Week. This segment of text includes Jesus' authority being questioned by the chief priests and elders of the Jews, a series of parables, and various questions directed toward Jesus.

I. Warnings

(Matthew 23:1-4)

Matthew 22 concludes with a question *from* Jesus to the Pharisees, a question to which they gave no answer. Having silenced his opponents, Jesus then had some preliminary things to say to his audience before launching a series of condemnations at the teachers of the law and Pharisees. These men were already seeking to arrest Jesus (21:46); no doubt his words of condemnation in Matthew 23 intensified these efforts.

A. Esteemed Position (vv. 1, 2)

1. Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:
Jesus has been attracting *crowds* of people throughout his ministry (Matthew 4:25; 8:1, 18; 9:8, 36; 12:15; 13:2; 15:30; 19:1, 2). Since

this is the week during which Passover will be celebrated, the crowds gathered in Jerusalem are much larger than usual. Some estimate that Jerusalem's population, which generally numbers a few hundred thousand, swells to around two and a half million during Passover week. Jesus is also addressing more specifically *his disciples*.

2. "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. *The teachers of the law and the Pharisees* are considered the scholars in Jesus' day. To *sit in Moses' seat* describes their esteemed position; they are the expounders and interpreters of the law given by God to Moses. In the Old Testament, the scribes were at first primarily officials who kept records of various kinds in a king's administration (2 Samuel 8:15-17; 1 Kings 4:1-3; 2 Kings 12:9, 10). The office appears to take a more religious turn with Ezra, who is described as "a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6) and who was also adept at teaching the law (7:10).

The term *Pharisees* comes from a Hebrew word meaning "to separate." The Pharisees could be described as "separatists" or "separated ones." They came to be during the period between Old and New Testaments; many believe their origin may be traced to the time of the Maccabean revolt in the second century before Christ. They interpret the Law of Moses very rigidly in an attempt to protect it from being violated; their added traditions and regulations have become of equal importance with the Word of God, sometimes even serving to negate the intent of Scripture.

How to Say It

cuminkuhm-mun or cue-mun.

fastidiousfah-stid-ee-us.

MaccabeanMack-uh-be-un.

NicodemusNick-uh-dee-mus.

The Pharisees may be considered a religious "party," while the teachers of the law hold an office. However, the majority of teachers of the law are Pharisees. Both see Jesus as a threat to their teachings and their authority. Paul, in his staunchness as a Pharisee

by the name of Saul (Philippians 3:5), will later “do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth” (Acts 26:9).

B. Exploited Position (vv. 3, 4)

3a. “So you must be careful to do everything they tell you.

Jesus encourages his hearers to respect the teachers of the law and the Pharisees’ positions and their interpretation of the Law of Moses. Jesus has not come to overthrow these authorities, any more than he has come to start an uprising against Rome.

3b. “But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

Even so, Jesus goes on to expose the inconsistency between what the teachers of the law and Pharisees *preach* and the example that they actually set (*what they do*). See examples on Matthew 23:23, 25, below.

It is worth noting that Jesus encourages his listeners not to allow the hypocrisy of the teachers of the law and Pharisees to diminish their respect for the authority of the law. The law is still from Moses (and ultimately from God) in spite of how the teachers of the law and Pharisees have failed to live it out.

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.”

The *heavy, cumbersome loads* are the many traditions that the teachers of the law and Pharisees have instituted to guarantee faithfulness (as they see it) to the Law of Moses. But as Jesus noted during a confrontation with the teachers of the law and Pharisees, in certain cases they “break the command of God for the sake of [their] tradition” (Matthew 15:3; see the commentary and Lesson Background to lesson 3).

At the same time, the teachers of the law and Pharisees offer no compassion to those who struggle to keep the traditions—only contempt for those who cannot measure up to their standards. Even worse, these leaders have created clever (but in reality reprehensible) means by which they themselves can avoid keeping those same standards. In Matthew 15:1-9 (again, see lesson 3), Jesus gave an example of how this works. As a consequence, they

“nullify the word of God” (15:6). Although these leaders “sit in Moses’ seat” (23:2), they certainly do not demonstrate Moses’ spirit of humility, which was a distinctive part of his character (Numbers 12:3).

What Do You Think?

What did you learn from an experience of dealing with consequences of another’s hypocrisy?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When it affected your family

When it affected your church

Other

When one considers this kind of onerous burden created by these leaders, we can appreciate even more Jesus’ invitation, recorded in Matthew 11:28-30, that ends with his words, “For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” The one through whom grace and truth come (John 1:14) offers a freedom that is impossible to experience within the rigid, twisted system of the Jewish leaders.

IMPOSING BURDENS ON OTHERS

Wells Fargo, one of America’s largest banks, was hit with a \$185 million fine for setting up bogus accounts for customers who had no idea what was happening. The bank employees who set up these accounts claimed they were forced to do so to meet quotas placed on them by upper management under threat of being fired.

Apparently several of these employees had reported the pressure to an internal hotline, only to find themselves fired soon afterward for reasons supposedly unrelated to the whistle-blowing.

Wells Fargo claimed that it had fired more than 5,300 low-level and middle-management employees for these illegal and unethical practices, but federal regulators began to wonder if these workers were being blamed for implementing high-pressure tactics that had come from the highest levels in the corporation instead. Shortly after the exposure of the scandal, a \$2.6 billion class-action suit was filed by many of these employees for the unrealistic expectations placed on them.

Even in our day, leaders of religious, political, and business organizations place unsustainable (even illegal) burdens on individuals. If we ever find ourselves in a position of authority, may we never require that someone carry a burden that we wouldn't gladly accept ourselves.

—*D. S.*

II. Woes

(Matthew 23:23-26)

Matthew 23:13 begins a series of woes pronounced by Jesus upon the teachers of the law and Pharisees. A characteristic of these woes is Jesus' description of the religious leaders as hypocrites. In only one of the woes does Jesus not use that word, describing them instead as "blind" three times (23:16-22). The next part of our lesson text picks up with the woe that follows.

A. Regarding the Law (vv. 23, 24)

23a. "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!

The Greek word translated as *hypocrites* describes a stage actor, therefore someone who is pretending to be something he or she is not. The term is quite fitting for the *teachers of the law and Pharisees*, whom Jesus will later describe as "whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean" (Matthew 23:27, not in today's text).

23b. "You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.

Mint, dill and cumin are garden herbs used either for cooking or medicinal purposes. Tithing items such as these is not commanded in the Law of Moses, but for the religious leaders such an act gives the impression of how scrupulously they follow the law. One thinks of the Pharisee (in a parable) who proudly claimed, "[I] give a tenth of all I get" (Luke 18:12).

It is noteworthy that Jesus does not criticize the tithing per se of the religious leaders. In fact, he says *you should have practiced the*

latter. The problem is that paying such close attention to the details of tithing garden herbs has caused these leaders to miss the *more important* requirements of the Law of Moses. Specifically, those are *justice, mercy and faithfulness*. These must be given first priority, then tithing as the leaders desire to do can be done as private matters of devotion to God.

What Do You Think?

How can our church ensure it gives proper attention to the weightier matters of the gospel?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In the area of upreach (worship)

In the area of outreach (evangelism and benevolence)

In the area of inreach (spiritual growth)

Justice in this context involves intervening to ensure fair treatment for others. This closely relates to *mercy*, or compassion, toward those in need. *Faithfulness* as used here most likely describes active faith supported by works, the opposite of which is dead (James 2:26).

24. “You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. Jesus further illustrates the hypocrisy of the teachers of the law and Pharisees. The conscientious religious leader carefully filters his drinking water through a cloth to make sure he does not swallow a gnat. The gnat is not specifically mentioned in the list of clean and unclean creatures found in Leviticus 11. The *camel*, however, is found in Leviticus 11:4, where it is the first “unclean” creature cited. Jesus’ reference to swallowing a camel is his way of pointing out how the religious leaders major in minors as they give painstaking attention to relatively less important details while they ignore the law’s “more important matters.”

What Do You Think?

How can we protect our church leaders from the danger of spiritual blind spots?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When they invite us to do so

When we have not been invited to do so

B. Regarding the Leaders (vv. 25, 26)

25. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

We come to yet another woe of the series. This condemnation is similar to Jesus’ earlier description of the religious leaders’ zeal to impress others with external displays of piety (Matthew 23:5-7) while being *full of greed and self-indulgence* internally. The word *greed* highlights the attitude of selfishness that characterizes these religious leaders’ approach to spiritual matters. *Self-indulgence* describes a certain lack of self-control (compare Luke 11:39). Jesus, who “knew what was in each person” (John 2:25), sees the inside, and he is disgusted.

What Do You Think?

What steps can you take to avoid a spirituality that is oriented toward outward appearance?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When you think you’re not at risk in this regard

Considering the tension between needing to let your light shine (Matthew 5:14-16) and doing good deeds in private (6:1-4)

26. “Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.”

We do not know why Jesus at this point calls out only the Pharisees. Perhaps it is because they are the ones who are especially fastidious in their passion for the outward show of purity and piety (Mark 7:3, 4). What Jesus says here, however, describes not only the Pharisees but the human condition in general. Jesus pointed this out to his disciples following the confrontation with the teachers of the law and Pharisees in Matthew 15:18: “But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them.” Real change must happen from the inside out.

Earlier, Jesus had talked about such a transformation with Nicodemus, another Pharisee. On that occasion, Jesus described the necessary transformation in terms of being born again (John 3:3).

ON GULLIBILITY

Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union agreed to a nonaggression pact on August 23, 1939. The pact paved the way for Hitler's invasion of Poland a week later, thus beginning World War II. This treaty of nonaggression, initiated by Germany, was supposed to guarantee nonbelligerence between the two countries. It contained the further promise that neither would come to the aid of the other's enemies in an armed conflict.

This caused the Soviet Union to believe that Hitler would be no threat to them. But while the Soviet guard was down, Hitler violated the treaty and invaded in 1941. The Soviets eventually pushed German forces out of their territory, but only after suffering 26 million deaths. Some historians speculate that Hitler entered into the nonaggression pact as a ruse to lull the Soviets into complacency.

There can be no nonaggression pact with Satan. Jesus did not sign a nonaggression treaty with the Pharisees. Their viewpoint was wrong, and that wrong had to be exposed lest it cause even more damage. In sending us out "like sheep among wolves," Jesus challenges us to be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16). With discerning, Spirit-filled hearts, may we filter out alluring claims that are inconsistent with the revealed Word of God.

—*D. S.*

Conclusion

A. One Pharisee's Testimony

Let us revisit the case of Saul, the ardent Pharisee who was second to none in his hostility toward the Christian faith. After his conversion, he became, as the apostle Paul, one of the most passionate spokesmen for that same faith. What made the difference?

Certainly, the appearance of Jesus to Saul on the road to Damascus was the determining factor. But as we read Paul's later testimony,

particularly in the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians, we see that something took place in his thinking and perspective. He had come to reject completely the typical set of priorities that guided a Pharisee's outlook on matters of religion.

Paul described himself as someone who, as a Pharisee, had "reasons for [his] confidence" (Philippians 3:4). His résumé was quite impressive in an earthly sense (3:5, 6). All the items he lists in that description he refers to as "gains to me" (3:7). They constituted what he calls "a righteousness of my own" (3:9).

But Paul discovered something (and someone) far greater than his own self-made faith (which really wasn't faith at all). He calls it "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8). While Paul calls his righteousness obtained through the law "faultless" (3:6), law is by its very nature cold and impersonal. One cannot have a personal relationship with the law.

What Do You Think?

How do you guard against placing confidence in yourself rather than in God?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Steps that evaluate whether a problem exists

Steps that correct an identified problem

Steps that ensure the problem stays corrected

It was in a person (Jesus) that Paul found what the law could never provide. Among those blessings was a joy (a repeated theme in Philippians) that rigid devotion to the law (any law) is powerless to give. Gladly did Paul suffer losing "all things" (all the ingredients of his self-made religion) and "consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8). He was determined to move forward (3:13, 14), with his ultimate goal of seeing Jesus—not in a vision, but face-to-face in his heavenly presence (3:20).

It can be hard for us to appreciate Paul's experience fully. It may be difficult to grasp the radical nature of the decision that led him to follow Jesus and reject an upbringing and a heritage that was deeply ingrained within him. Even so, Paul's example and

testimony remind us that following Jesus is worth any price we pay to do so.

B. Staying Heart Healthy

The spiritual condition of the religious leaders, as exposed by Jesus in our text, was, sadly, nothing out of the ordinary. God's people in both Old and New Testaments were always subject to the temptation to focus more on external acts of worship or devotion to God while neglecting the condition of the heart. This can be an especially serious pitfall for leaders of God's people (the focus of today's lesson title). They can become so enamored with their authority and the title they hold that they forget to give proper attention to their own spiritual condition as a model for others to emulate.

Wise King Solomon advised, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (Proverbs 4:23). Yet Solomon failed to follow his own advice and allowed his heart to turn from the Lord through the influence of his pagan wives (1 Kings 11:1-4). We too must be cautious of how we care for our hearts. We cannot just point our fingers at the Pharisees and highlight their faults, lest we too fall prey to the pride that acted like a cancer on their hearts.

Our society is very conscious these days (as it should be) about taking care of the physical heart by eating right, exercising, and getting sufficient rest. The spiritual heart, however, is for the most part ignored or viewed as one's own business. Clearly, though, the corruption and decay going on in our world spiritually and morally (and with increasing speed, it seems) cannot be good for the spiritual heart.

At the grocery store, certain foods are now marked as "heart healthy." If an individual has concerns about his or her heart, that person watches out for such a label. Wouldn't it be nice if certain items (TV shows, books, movies, music) came with a (spiritual) heart unhealthy warning attached? What if we started watching, reading, or listening to one of these and a siren or alarm went off as if to say, "Careful, this is bad for your heart"?

The Bible is meant to serve as that kind of alarm. But it has to become a part of our spiritual heart to the point that we know it well enough (a good reason to memorize Scripture!) to call on it for guidance in times of temptation, tragedy, or other circumstances that have the potential to draw our hearts away from God.

Perhaps the words of Psalm 119:11 say it best—words that are part of the “pledge to the Bible” that is often recited by young people in Sunday school or Vacation Bible School classes: “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”

C. Prayer

Our Father, in the world around us is so much spiritual darkness that poses a grave threat to the health of our spiritual hearts! Help us to exercise discernment: to listen to, to watch, and to read what will keep our hearts in tune with yours. May the source of our discernment be your Word; may it always be the lamp to our feet and the light to our path. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

D. Thought to Remember

Let the great physician keep your
spiritual heart healthy.

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