



MATTHEW 23

Being a pastor means I want people to listen to me. Pastors are the teachers and preachers of God's word. In many ways we come up with instruction and interpretation about this book. Is that our Job? I am amazed at the level of different interpretation with this word. I have met several people that believe different things about many passages. So who is right? In the catholic system the Pope has final say under God: is that what God wanted for us? Is our Christian life about knowing the truth and having all the answers? I know this is many questions, but after reading Matthew 23 over and over: I have many questions.

So would you please turn on your ipad and jump to Matthew 23. And while you're waiting for it to load up let's have a little talk about listening.

In the Bible listening is big. In the Old Testament the prophets say "listen to the word of the Lord." The book of revelation says "for those who have ears let them hear." It also occurred to me that Jesus asks us to listen many times. In the first verse of our chapter Jesus begins by speaking to a crowd, and my mind began

to wander. Were they listening? Were they interested? Why did Jesus need to say the things he does? See my mind began to wander.

When I study the word of God I try and put each book, chapter, and verse into context. What is really being said? Otherwise I might be taking the words on the page in what is called “out of context.” Am I reading or listening correctly these words in this book? John m. Grohol gives us ten reasons why we don’t listen. I for one think they are pretty good. So let’s quickly look at his ten characteristics about “not listening.”

1. **Truth:** Mr. Grohol begins by asking a simple question. Is what I say to you “mine or yours”? in another words is the truth spoken to you: your truth also? We might not be listening if we don’t believe it’s the truth.
2. **Blame or ownership:** Are you taking ownership of the information? Is this important to you? Sometimes we want to blame others for things that happen. If they tell you it’s your fault do you accept the blame, or do you blow them off because you won’t take ownership?
3. **The Need to be the victim:** It’s not my fault. We hate to be wrong. We desire to be right. So if something goes wrong? We tend to deflect blame from us. Are we victims of circumstances? We don’t like being singled out do we?

4. **Self-deception:** We can't see our behavior or we don't want to see it.
Are we right most of the time, and do our actions appear right because we fear being wrong. Why change my attitude when it's your fault. I like to say "you can have your opinion, but if you want to be right believe my opinion."
5. **Defensiveness:** it's the fear of criticism. We all fear criticism. Who really wants to be wrong? I call it fight or flight. If you tell me I'm wrong, I'll either ignore you or fight you.
6. **Coercion Sensitivity:** It's the need to defend you from the world. They are all out to get me. I think I might own this one. It's me against the world.
Why am I right and everyone else is wrong. What's wrong with me? We avoid this like the plague. Why listen if everyone is saying the same thing.
It's the X-Files: the truth is out there.
7. **Being demanding: its** entitlement. Do we feel that the world owes us something? We must be right because we believe we are. Many people push their agenda because they fear losing or not being on top. I have rights right?
8. **Selfishness:** I want what I want. We want ourselves to win. We have to have all the right answers. It's self-preservation. Seriously how many Sister Teresa's are really there out there? Not many, we are by nature fairly selfish.
9. **Mistrust:** The belief that others will manipulate us if they win. Oh I know this one well. I have asked people to trust their spouse. I always get the same

answer. But (and that's a big butt) they will win, they will control, I will lose myself. We are human, but another title might be "we are mistrust."

10. Help addiction: Always having a solution or answer. I must admit I hate these people. You know the ones. They always have an answer. They always give advice. They push, the pull, and they prod you to see it their way. They love to help but really they love to be right, accepted, and important.

So often we don't listen well. Are these ten characteristics of a bad listener a part of you? How many of them do you own? This sermon is the seventh in a series on energizing church. If we are to energize church isn't it important to listen to God? Has the leadership in the church become accustomed to listening to themselves and not the spirit of God? We set budgets, we plan strategies, and we hire like-minded people. All of these things keep the church atmosphere safe, comfortable, and simple. Are we doing church God's way or our way? Just questions, my mind is wandering again.

Church might be energized if we listen better. Maybe we come to church for the wrong reasons. We want to sing, we want a good message, or we love saying we belong. Yet, are we truly listening? Those ten things on not listening well might be what we bring into church. Do we believe the leadership? Are we being used? Are we valuable? Are we accepted? Check your heart, are you listening effectively or are you here on your terms?

In our series on energizing church have we been listening so far? Do you think this is my truth, the Bible truth, and your truth? When you come here have you taken ownership of what is being said? What is your agenda for the lost; are you good or bad soil, do you need Jesus still; what is your sin; is the field of ministry important to you; are you feeling responsible for keeping the faith going? These are some of the questions I have asked you in the last 6 weeks. If you never thought about them or challenged your- self on them, maybe you have not been listening to God.

Matthew 23 is a scary chapter. I have used these verses to prove Jesus can scrap with the best of them. I used these verses to do one of my favorites hang-ups “Church bashing.” Don’t judge me because we all do it. This chapter can be and has been taken out of context. I told someone that this chapter proves that Jesus will give some unloving words to people. It’s not all poppies and roses with Jesus. He can get mad. My friend responded by saying “I thought this was just for church leadership? Maybe, or maybe it’s for all Christians. How do you read these verses or better yet, how are you listening to the words of Jesus?”

This is more than an “I am right chapter.” This is more than a church bashing chapter. Right from the start Jesus shuts our mouths. The first three verses have stung like a bee. Have you ever been told something that was right? I mean the ones that are not just right but they prove without a doubt that you are wrong.

In a sociology class we talked about perception of people. I grew up believing that the homeless are bums, lazy, and I suppose discussing. My teacher in the class challenged me in-front of everyone. Pat you are following the social norm. The homeless are the mentally challenged, the lost people, and the hurting people of this world. I cried all the way home. I was wrong and had taken my beliefs on homeless people out of context. My eyes opened for the first time for the hurting and the lost.

This chapter did the same thing to me. I had to accept this chapter in context, not what I want it to say. Let's read the first three verses. **“Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.** The first thing we see is what? Do not do what they do, right? But what about the beginning of that verse 3: **therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it.** Jesus you want me to follow the bad teachers who are blind guides and hypocrites? You see many times in church we only hear what we want to. We sit and judge Betty on her clothes and bob on his tite. We don't just sit there and listen. We are gocking around looking for things to judge instead of listening.

I don't want to pick on you but we all do it. The verse says we are to listen to the word and nothing more. It does not matter what they do, what they wear,

who they are, but just what we hear in the teaching. A teacher in school might believe secretly they love Satan and hate God. They might, but does that matter when your there to learn math? Not really, they might be a great math teacher on the outside but terrible people on the inside. Do you know your math teacher personally, yet you listen to them teach math don't you?

That is what Jesus is saying to us the listener. Some pastors are hypocrites. Some bible teachers in a life group are not great parents, workers, or whatever. It's not them that teach us, it's the word. Are they speaking the word to us? Listen to Jesus in Mark 9 **“John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” 39 But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 For the one who is not against us is for us. 41 For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.**

This chapter right from the start is asking us to listen instead of all the other stuff we do. There is another thing this chapter asks of us. What are you calling yourself? Are you a pastor, teacher, mentor, father, mother, or anything else? Are you important? I know a teacher that told us we had to call her Doctor because she earned the title. Really? Is it that important?

Let's read verses 8-12 **“But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9 And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.**

This is really tough stuff to listen to. We (Christians) are not to be the “Lead” pastor, the Doctor, the CEO, the expert, the best in anything. Because were not the best? No, you don't get it. You might be the best but don't lord it over anyone. Listen to verse 12 again. **All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.** Jesus is not kidding if we are listening. We are to serve, care, lower ourselves, and have compassion, not lift ourselves up higher than others. My sociology teacher did not rebuke me but she lowered me to be with the homeless, not above them. All of a sudden I was equal with them more than lording myself over them. Isn't that the truth here? Taking Lord out of our name and putting it back on God.

This is not church bashing stuff. This is not Christian bashing stuff. As a word of God proclaimer (and we all are) listen because this is the word of the lord, not the word of me. We all need to listen more and talk less.

Jesus is in an interesting place in this chapter. Did you know that he is in the temple of God in Jerusalem? When he chose to rebuke the scribes and Pharisees he did it in the house of God. What would happen if Jesus showed up in church this morning and ripped us for our shoddy Christianity? I bet this would happen. First we would not recognize him. Second we would ask him to sit down and be quiet. Third we would ask him nicely to leave, and four we might even call the police and ban him from the premises. I know because I have witnessed it before. Pat, but that wasn't Jesus. Really are you sure.

In Matthew 25 Jesus says starting in verse 42 **“For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.”** 44 **“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’** 45 **“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’**

If you doubt those verses listen to Jesus in our chapter today in verse 33 **“You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?”** ok this is your Jesus or it's supposed to be. Jesus is one tough dude. Jesus might come and show himself as the poor or the complainer in church. The bigger

questions: when Jesus is asking: can you recognize him, are you listening? My Pastor friend told me once that a man showed up at the church one night looking for help. He recognized that this might be Jesus and it scared him. They gave him money and set him up for a week in a hotel. It was the last they saw of the man. Was it a test? I don't know but it made my friend think twice before he answered.

Sometimes Jesus will have strong words for his church. This chapter has a unique set of rebukes on the leadership of the synagogue 2000 years ago. They are called the seven woes. They might really be 8 because in mark and Luke there is an extra woe. Here in Matthew we have 7. I will stick with just these 7 to keep it in context of the writer. Are these for church leadership or are they for those that are listening? Let's go through them.

Remember that Jesus is in the temple. This is like being in the Vatican. The scribes and Pharisees work here. They are the pastors and church leaders. Jesus is talking to the crowds and disciples, but really he is blasting the church. I wonder how many times Jesus has rebuked a church and they blew it off as a nut. In my old church one day a lady stood up and gave a prophetic word. It was shocking because in that church it never happens, and I mean never. What she said in my opinion was bang on. The leadership listened and then continued with the service. After, they took her aside and discussed her thoughts. They concluded she was

wrong because she did not follow protocol. Basically they blew her off as a nut.

Was she or was she Jesus?

So Jesus does the same thing. He stands up and gives a prophetic word to the leaders. They are called the seven woes because they all start with “woe to you.” I went to a church planting course once and they rebuked me for calling the church “they.” It was (in their mind) that I had a grudge against church leadership. Jesus uses the word they and other words like that more than I can count here. Maybe he has a grudge against bad church leadership too. Pat, that is just for the bad Pharisees and scribes not our modern church. Is it really? Is our church these days beyond corruption? Is Jesus happy with your church? It might come back to the ten listening characteristics. Do we own our flaws and sin?

Let’s read the first woe verse 13 **"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.** Doesn’t that look and feel a lot like the man seeking shelter at the church doors or the woman giving the word from God? Does that look like the person who has gifts that don’t fit your church, yet God sent them to you? Are we listening or are we blind guides?

The second woe is verse 15. The missing one is verse 14 but it’s not here so I won’t talk about it here. If you want to read it go to Luke 20:47. Verse 15: **“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make**

a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. At Canada post I tried some years ago to become a supervisor. I am really grateful they rejected me. Anyways they gave me a test. If they said the mail was late, what should I do with it? I said make it a priority. The right answer was change the date to make it early. Hence I did not get the job. They were looking for like-minded people, dishonest or not, is not important, it was like minded they desired. In this woe, Jesus is saying the religious leaders are bad and they are “looking for” and “making new” bad leaders. What an insult this must have been in the temple. I bet they were just furious with him. How would we feel in church if some stood up and said the leadership sucked?

The third woe is begins in verse 16: **"Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath." 17 You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? 18 And you say, "Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath." 19 How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; 21 and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it;**

22 and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.”

I call this the swearing woe. I could probably do a whole sermon on just these verses. For the sake of time I won't. In a nut shell this is about what you worship. Remember I said earlier (if you were listening) that we want to lord ourselves over people more than to have a lord over us. That is what these verses mean. Do we honor our gift or the altar? Is the sanctuary sacred or the stuff inside it worshiped? In reality the last verse 22 is the real answer to this woe. **“whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.”**

It's not the sanctuary or the altar or the gift or the oath that's important. It's about the one seated in church as Lord over us. How can the church be energized if we are worshipping anything there but God? I have seen people put their hand in the tithing bag without giving a thing. Why do they do it: for habit, for show, or to fake it? I don't know but maybe they should keep their hands down unless they have something to put in it. Jesus is saying in this woe to be honest about why you're here today, it's not a show or a circus.

The fourth woe is connected to the third. Verse 23: **"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is**

these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!”

These men were tithing easy stuff they had plenty of. In Egypt I went past many many tables of spices. I have never seen so many bright colors as I did there. It was awesome. My point is that there were rather large amounts of this stuff, and they all were selling it. Spice is not a tithe if it is abundant. Oh it could be but it's what you neglect that kills the tithe. These men were skimming a small portion off the top of big piles, and giving it to God. Does the church need spice?

In acts 5 Ananias and Sphara were killed by God for renegeing on their tithe. It was not about the gift but their greed and hearts. Jesus is saying here in Matthew 23 the same thing. Why tithe at all if you're lousy Christians. Why put your hand in the bag but neglect the poor at home. Why bother worshiping in church if in your heart you have better things to do?

I love verse 24. It is really a version of a Middle Eastern proverb. **You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!”** These people love to drink wine, but bugs love wine too. So they would strain the wine by putting a cloth over the bottle when they pour it out. They take great care to take out the obvious. Yet the big things they ignored. The proverb says we neglect the big thing like a camel and not even notice how deep in trouble were getting. There is a book called “don't sweat the small stuff.” he wrote that we should concentrate on the big issues but

relax on the small ones. Jesus is saying we do the same thing in reverse. We are petty, picky, and condemning with the little things but miss the big picture. The irony in this verse is the camel. It was unlawful to eat a split hoofed animal in the Jewish diet. This saying was an insult more or less.

The fifth woe is connected with the sixth and is also connected to the fourth and fifth. Beginning with verse 25 **"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean. 27" Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. 28 So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.**

Jesus is asking them and us to look in the mirror. What do we see? Better yet, what do we want people to see? Are the actions we do in private look the same as we do in public? Is there a church face and a public face? The irony here is crazy: a colorful tomb full of rotting bones and death; a clean cup with discussing insides. Is a tomb a wonderful place to live in? Is a dirty cup good for drinking?

In Jordan I went to a tomb bar. They had converted someone's tomb into a party place. It was really cool, but death was not there. Cool idea, but they had

removed the reason for the tomb. What is the reason we exist? Why are we here? Is what we have done in our minds, hearts, and soul reflecting why God made us? How can we be the church of Christ if we are dirty inside and fake outside?

The last woe is what kills churches. Verse 29: "**Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous,** we do what we do because we always have. We love to honor the for-fathers of our denomination. Does that make it right? Were the for-fathers of your denomination or church setting a good path and example that is Christ honoring or ancestor honoring? Sometimes I have challenged leaders on what they believe and do. Many times they don't know why they do it but in respect to the church or its past they do. Sometimes church leaders do things in honor of the church tradition rather than in honor of Christ and what is right? Maybe not if we were honest we could see that.

The last part of this chapter is prophesy. Jesus goes on to tell them what will happen if they continue this way. Verses 34-37 "**Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, 35 so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered**

between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation.”

Jesus was bang on and it looks like the prophet was him. These prophets also look like Paul, Stephen, Peter and more. Paul hunted Christians and then he was stoned and left for dead himself by the very men he once served. Jesus knew the hearts of men in those times. He knows the hearts of men and women today.

Let's end with verses 37 and 38 "**Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 38 See, your house is left to you, desolate.”**

If we want to energize church where should we start? I always come back to songs. Christian songs don't lie. Why I believe that is they usually come from reading the Bible. They usually come from heart felt experiences. They are raw and truthful. Point of grace has a song called “begin with me.” Joy Williams sings “I wish I could have been there, seeing you Jesus face to face.” United sings a song called “desperate.”

We all come to church carrying baggage. We can bring it in and leave it in the church if we want to, or we can use it in the church. We can play the victim card and not listen well. Are we so concerned for our insecurities and wounds than nothing else matters. Luke Skywalker in Star wars tries to convince Han Solo to

rescue the princess. Han says no but Luke reminds him “but they’re going to execute her.” Han replied “better her than me.”

Is that the way we listen in church. I’m here for my hurts, my enjoyment, and my respect. Do you preach to others your truth or God’s truth? Is your spot in church yours or anyone’s? Why are you there: to listen or something else? Those ten characteristics of a bad listener are reality TV in church. Church might have more energy and be more alive if we came in with no stone to throw.