



How To Avoid Condemnation (Part 2)

Matthew 23:16-24

1. Be Truthful (verses 16-22)
2. Focus on the Right Things (verses 23-24)

In the Brandon household, topics come up from time to time which present great opportunities for Yvonne and me to talk with our children about the dangers that await them as they grow older. Sometimes we have spoken with them about the dangers of alcohol. Sometimes we have spoken with them about the dangers of drugs. Sometimes we have spoken with them about the dangers of friends. Sometimes we have spoken with them about the dangers of destructive habits, too much television, too many computer games. Sometimes we have spoken with them about the dangers of music. Sometimes we have spoken with them of the need to be faithful in their marriages.

In all of these discussions, we have tried to present to them the potential dangers that each of these activities have. There is nothing wrong with watching television, but too much will dull your mind and will expose you to the temptation of watching things that will lead you to sin. Television can also lead to a laziness, which will end in poverty. Regarding friends, we have told them that they need to choose their friends wisely, because "bad company corrupts good morals" (1 Cor. 15:33). Bad friends will have a bad influence on them and may lead them into danger and destruction. We have spoken with our children about how alcohol and drugs can ruin their lives. We tell them that there is nothing sinful about drinking alcohol. The sinfulness comes in drunkenness. Furthermore, we have warned them of the terrible consequences that have come upon those who have become addicted to alcohol. We know of those who have died early. We know of those who have lost their jobs. We know of those who have lost their marriages. We know of those who have ruined their minds through drug abuse. We tell them that the best way to avoid such things is never to start. Because once people start, they often cannot stop until they end up in the hospital or in jail.

When we teach our children about these things, we are teaching them about the end result of such actions. The thrust of my message this morning is along those same lines. I want you to see the end result of the lives of the scribes and the Pharisees. I want you to see how they became what they became. I want to tell you to avoid doing what they did, in order that you might avoid their consequences.

I invite you to open your Bible this morning once again to Matthew 23. If you remember from a few weeks ago, Jesus is delivering strong words of condemnation to these scribes and Pharisees. In no uncertain terms, Jesus is telling the world that these religious leaders have it all wrong. Oh, they may look spiritual. They may be saying spiritual things. They may be doing religious activities. But, Jesus says that their spirituality is bankrupt and is only leading them to hell. It's not their abuse of drugs or alcohol that has brought this condemnation upon them. It's not too much television or too many computer games or bad music. It's not sexual unfaithfulness. It's their religion that has brought them down. It's their morality. It's their hypocrisy that has caused Jesus to speak such strong words of condemnation to them. We need to take this to heart. It's their religion that has condemned them! At RVBC, we need to be careful not to bring people into religion. Bring them into love for God!

Consider some of the things that Jesus has said in this chapter. Seven times in these verses, Jesus calls them hypocrites (verses 13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29). On two occasions, Jesus said that these men were "blind guides" (verses 16, 24). On three other occasions, Jesus said that they were "blind" to the truth (verses 17, 19, 26). Jesus says that they will not enter into the kingdom of heaven (verse 13). Jesus says that they will receive a "greater condemnation" (verse 14). Jesus says that they are sons of hell (verse 15). Jesus says that they are "fools" (verse 17). Jesus says that they are "full of robbery and self-indulgence" (verse 25). Jesus says that they are "full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (verse 28). Jesus says that they are "serpents, ... [a] brood of vipers" (verse 33). Jesus says that they are murderers (verse 35). They can only expect the judgment of God.

Two weeks ago, my message was entitled, "How to Avoid Condemnation." My reasoning for this was simple. The scribes and Pharisees were condemned for the things that Jesus puts forth in Matthew 23. If we are like them, we will be condemned as well. To avoid our own condemnation, we ought to steer clear of these things. Just like we tell our children of the terrible things that await them if they engage themselves in wrongful activities, so also I want to tell you of the things that will await you if you are like these Pharisees. A few years ago, the popular slogan was, "Be Like Mike." It was a reference to Michael Jordan. My slogan for you today is, "Flee the Pharisee."

Jesus began his condemnation of them in verse 13. The lesson for us is clear. Rather than being misled away from the kingdom of heaven, we need to Get the Gospel Right (verse 13). Rather than using religion for our own good, we need to Serve Others and not Ourselves (verse 14). Rather than being influenced by those who are leading to hell, we need to Avoid False Leaders (verse 15).

This morning we will pick up in verse 16 with the fourth woe, in part 2 of my message, "How to Avoid Condemnation." Verses 16-22 teach us that we need to ...

1. Be Truthful (verses 16-22)

Let me read the fourth "woe" as found in verses 16-22.

"Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.' You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it." (Matt. 23:16-22)

In these seven verses, Jesus says the same thing again and again. His intention was to drive at the main point. His main point was that these scribes and Pharisees were deceitful. They had figured out ways in which to deceive other people. Let's look at what Jesus said. In verse 16, Jesus refers to the practice of the Jews which allowed them to not be truthful. They had arranged this scheme where you could make an oath before the Lord, which meant nothing. As long as you swore by the temple, it meant nothing. But, if you swore by the gold of the temple, you must keep your oath.

Let me give you an example of this. If you're a husband, suppose that you have a faucet in your home that is dripping. It needs fixing. But, with work and the busyness of life, you simply haven't been able to fix it. When your wife presses you on whether or not you are going to fix it, you finally promise that you will fix it on Saturday. Knowing a bit about how long you have neglected this already, your wife then asks you, "Are you sure that you will be able to do it on Saturday?" And you say, "I swear by temple that I will fix the faucet on Saturday."

Saturday comes. You spend your day putzing around the house. You do some paperwork. You read some of your favorite magazines. You watch a few hours of television. When it's about time to go to bed, your wife asks you whether or not you fixed the faucet. You say, "No, I didn't." She replies with disappointment, "But, you promised me that you would do it!" And you say, "So?" She said, "You swore to me by the temple, itself, that you would fix the faucet today!" You say in your smugness, "Ahhhh, but if you remember, I didn't swear by the gold of the temple." With no remorse, you are off the hook and head off to bed. Your promise wasn't binding, because you didn't use the g-word (i.e. "gold").

Essentially, these scribes and Pharisees permitted people to make all sorts of false promises, which they never had any intention of fulfilling in the first place. They even gave them the ability to make a show of their earnestness by saying, "I swear by the temple" that I will do this! This is deceitful. This is hypocrisy. In verse 18, the same practice was put forth, just using different words. You could swear by the altar, and it meant nothing. But, if you swear by the offering upon the altar, you must keep your promise. So, the scenario goes the same. You have some neighbors that are going off for an extended vacation. They'll be gone for a few weeks. In talking with them, you offer to look after their house while they are gone. You say, "If it snows, I come over and shovel your driveway to make it look like you are home." Your neighbor says, "You'll do that for us? Are you sure?" You say, "Sure, I swear by the altar that I'll shovel your driveway." Off they go on vacation and the snow falls. But, you don't shovel their driveway. You hope that it all will melt before your neighbors return. Your wife asks you about shoveling their driveway, "Hey, didn't you agree to shovel the neighbor's driveway?" You say, "No, I didn't promise that." She says, "Yes, I distinctly remember that you swore by the altar that you would shovel their driveway." And you say, "Ahhh, but I never promised by the offering upon the altar."

You put up a front that made you look kind and generous. But when you didn't want to keep your promise, you were free, because you didn't swear by the offering upon the altar. You didn't use the "magic words." In essence, the scribes and Pharisees had created a way to legalize lying. You could say, "I swear by the temple" or "I swear by the altar" and in either instance, you were not bound to keep your promise because you didn't swear by the "gold of the temple" or by the "offering upon the altar."

I trust that you can see how clearly ridiculous such things are. I hope that you can see how this was nothing more than a show. Certainly, we, who live in the 21st century, are far above such nonsense, aren't we? We don't swear by the temple or the altar. Surely we don't have these problems, do we? Oh, we definitely do. Our society knows a bit about this (as I'm sure every society on earth knows). We may not swear by the temple or the altar, but we have other substitutes. When I was a child (perhaps it's the same today), if you had your fingers crossed, you could say whatever you wanted without any obligation to keep your promises. And when you wanted to tell someone that you were really telling the truth, you would say, "Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye."

When we were little, we had these formulas which helped to determine when we were telling the truth and when we were lying. At the core, it's no different than the practice of the scribes and Pharisees. Lest we adults think that we have outgrown such childish behavior, let me remind you that we sign contracts with pen and ink. In court of law, those on the witness stand first promise to tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Why do we do these things? Because our word is no longer good enough. We want proof that people are really committed to it. Often people will try to worm their way out of promises especially if there's no proof that the promise was made. If it is not in writing, they don't feel bound to keep the promise.

These Pharisees tried to play games with their words to justify themselves. But Jesus demonstrated how foolish such attempts were. Verse 17, "You fools and blind men; which is more important, the gold, or the temple that sanctified the gold?" Verse 19 is a similar argument, "You blind men, which is more important, the offering or the altar that sanctifies the offering?" In each of these cases, Jesus is showing the bigger picture. The only reason that the gold is important is because it sits in the temple! The only reason that the offering is important is because it sits upon the altar. In an of itself, the gold is nothing. In an of itself, the offering is nothing. It's their place in the grand scheme that makes it significant. Do you see that? And then, in verses 20-22, Jesus does the same thing. In these verses he puts the temple and the altar in its place.

"Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears [both] by the altar and by everything on it. And he who swears by the temple, swears [both] by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And he who swears by heaven, swears [both] by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it." (Matt. 23:20-22)

Jesus says that if you swear by the altar, you swear by everything that the altar represents: the altar represents our approach to God. Jesus says that if you swear by the temple, you swear by everything that the temple represents: the temple represents the presence of God. Jesus says that if you swear by heaven, you swear by everything that heaven represents: heaven represents God, Himself. Here is the sum of what

Jesus is saying, "When you speak, you are not only in the presence of men, but you are speaking in the presence of God." God hears your every conversation. God hears your every promise. God knows the intent of your words. You will be accountable to God for every word that you speak. Jesus said, "Every careless word that men shall speak, they shall render account for it in the day of judgment" (Matt. 12:36).

The lesson for us is clear. We need to Be Truthful. Don't play games with your words. Don't tell the truth, while communicating a lie! Don't use manipulative words or deceitful phrases, which you can use to justify yourself. Don't say to yourself, "I didn't lie" because technically you told the truth. But, you communicated a lie. This is hypocrisy! Putting forth a true statement, which is actually a lie. God knows full well when you are telling the truth and when you are lying, despite your own reasonings to the contrary. This is why Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no.'" (Matthew 5:37). In that passage, Jesus told us to make no oath at all, either by heaven, or by earth, or by Jerusalem, or by your own head. In other words, speak the truth so that regardless of whether or not you make an oath, your words can be trusted. Those who follow Christ need to be straight-forward people of straight-forward words. We should hold to that old policy, "Honesty is the best policy." This week, I read a report that only 31% of Americans believe that honesty is the best policy.

This is difficult, because we live in a society of lying people. I don't think that I need to do much to convince you of this. Perhaps you have encountered this. I know that I certainly have. When I was in the secular workforce, I met many salesmen, who were trying to sell me computer equipment. I can think of several instances in which they made empty promises. They promised that their software would be able to do certain things, which it couldn't do when we purchased it. Now that I have been pastoring this church for a few years, I have spoken with many people who have promised that they would come and visit our church sometime. Have they come? No. They were never really interested in coming. But, a promise was a way to help them slip away. People have come to our church, promising that they would return again next week. Next week comes, and where are they? My experience agrees with the other statistics that I read this week about Americans. Half of American workers admit that they regularly call in sick when they are perfectly well.¹ According to one poll, 64% of Americans say, "I will lie when it suits me if it doesn't cause any real damage." Only 31 percent of Americans agree that "Honesty is the best policy."²

This is why a spoken word of agreement, a handshake, or a promise are not sufficient for us today. We want it in writing. We want proof. We live among those who don't tell the truth. We need a way to establish when the truth is spoken and it isn't. Why do you think that we have so many lawyers in our society? It's to deal with the lying lips of those who live among us. There are high-profile judicial cases going on all of the time which involve celebrities or governmental officials. They spend millions of dollars on lawyers who are masters at telling the truth, while communicating a lie.

Lest you think that it exists only on the grand scale, I have witnessed households where the children are compulsive liars. Where are they learning it? They are learning it from their parents and from their other siblings. I have witnessed it among adults, who want to put forth a good show. They will make boastful claims about themselves which are actually not quite the truth. The Scriptures are clear: The LORD hates all forms of lying. Liars will face the condemnation of God. Consider these Proverbs:

Proverbs 6:17, God hates a lying tongue.

Proverbs 12:22, "Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD."

Proverbs 19:5, "A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who tells lies will not escape."

Proverbs 19:22, "It is better to be a poor man than a liar."

Proverbs 21:28, "A false witness will perish, but the man who listens to the truth will speak forever."

Proverbs 24:28, "Do not deceive with your lips."

God hates all forms of lying. It is useless to attempt to justify your lying as these Pharisees did. If you are in the habit of lying, you are in danger of facing the condemnation of God. Is the Lord serious about this? The Lord killed Ananias and Sapphira for lying. You can read about that in Acts 5. The Lord condemned these scribes and Pharisees for lying. If you want to avoid condemnation, keep your promises. Don't play games with your words. Don't be deceptive. Don't exaggerate the truth. Don't paint the picture better than it really is.

At this point, you may be convicted in your soul. Perhaps you have spoken words of promise that you have not kept. Perhaps you have exaggerated the truth. Perhaps you have painted the picture better than it really is, so as to protect yourself. In our verses this morning, the solution to the problem isn't to cover it up and hide it. This is what these hypocritical scribes and Pharisees did. They manipulated their words to justify themselves. God will find you out.

Nor is the solution to suck it up and tell the truth all the time. Though, of course, this is the proper way to behave. Psalm 15:4, "[the righteous man] swears to his own hurt." But you can't do it. Psalm 58:3 says, "Even from birth the wicked go astray from the womb. They are wayward and speak lies." James says that "We all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well" (James 3:2). Untrue words will come out of your mouth. You need to deal with them the only way that is ever acceptable to God. The real solution is to be truthful and genuine, after you spoke, by confessing your failings. If you were deceitful the first time with your words, don't be deceitful again. Confess it when you have made promises that you haven't kept. Confess it when you have exaggerated the truth. Confess it when you have been misleading. Confess it when your words were deceptive. When you confess your sins, you will find mercy at the cross.

This is the essence of Christianity: confessing our wrongs and trusting in a Savior who cleanses us from all impurity. Pleading that the Lord would give to us strength to be a truth-teller. This is the church. We aren't a bunch of perfect people. You live around us for any given time and you will quickly discover this. We are a gathering that will willingly admit our failings. We confess our hypocrisy. We trust in the Lord to change us and to mold us and to make us what we want to be.

How to Avoid Condemnation? We can avoid it if we are truthful and if we, ...

2. Focus on the Right Things (verses 23-24)

It is easy to focus on the wrong things. We need to be certain we place our focus on the right things. Jesus said,

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others" (Matt. 23:23).

In the days of Jesus, many people had a little garden patch, from which they would grow some plants to use as food. Among these plants were the three spices listed here in verse 23: mint, dill, and cummin. These were common spices during the time of Jesus. Many people had these plants growing in their small household gardens. When they needed some spice, they would simply pick what they needed and put it in their food. Now, the Pharisees were so meticulous in keeping the law of tithing that they would carefully separate these small spices into two piles, carefully counting the number of spices in each pile. "One spice for God and nine spices for me. One spice for God and nine spices for me. One spice for God and nine spices for me."

In and of itself, this practice wasn't so bad. In fact, Jesus even commends them for their care in these matters, "these are the things you should have done" (verse 23). What was bad is that this practice consumed them and caused them to neglect other portions of the law, which were of greater importance than tithing your mint, dill, and cummin. Jesus said, "you have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness" (verse 23). In other words, they were so interested in tithing their tiny spices, that they ignored other things, which were more important.

We understand priorities. The mother knows that the crying baby is more important than the bathroom that needs cleaning. The business owner knows that its more important to get the product to the customer than to have the policy manuals written. The mechanic knows that a smooth-running engine is more important than an unvacuumed interior. The lover of God knows that obedience is better than sacrifice (Hosea 6:6).

It's not that a bathroom isn't important to clean. It's not that a policy manual isn't important to have. It's not that the interior of a car isn't important to vacuum. It's not that sacrifice isn't important. It's that the other things are more important. But, these scribes and Pharisees were so consumed with the minutia of the law that they missed the big things. Picture yourself eating a meal at a restaurant. You order soup and salad. The waiter brings you your food. Your soup comes in a nice little bowl, and steam is rising from it. Your salad comes on this big plate with a little bit of lettuce, and a 10 pound chunk of uncooked horse meat on top of it. You begin to eat your meal, hardly noticing it. You gladly dig into your salad and think nothing about the big hunk of raw horse meat. But, then you look closely at your soup and you find a small fly in your soup. You can't believe it. You call your waiter over and begin to complain about the fly in your soup, but say nothing about the raw flesh in your salad. You ask him, "What's the fly doing in my soup?"

It sounds crazy, right? That's exactly the imagery that Jesus used in verse 24, "You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" Make sure that we keep the gnat out of our wine! Never mind the camel that got into the wineskin! This is what the scribes and Pharisees were doing. They majored on the minors and minored on the majors. In this case, Jesus pointed out their obsession to their tithing practices. I believe that we could also point out their Sabbath observances. In Matthew 12, these Pharisees were upset with Jesus because He healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. They watched him do this and were so angered with Jesus that they wanted to kill Him (Matt. 12:14). I believe that we could say that same about hand washing. In Matthew 15, these Pharisees were more concerned about the traditional hand washing than they were about the commands of God (Matt. 15:1-9). The Pharisees were so concerned with the legal requirements of the law, that they missed the heart of the law. Jesus summarized the heart of the law with just three words: Justice, Mercy, and Faithfulness.

Perhaps Jesus has in mind that great verse in Micah 6. The question is proposed, ...

"With what shall I come to the LORD and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, with yearly calves?

Does the LORD take delight in thousands of rams, in ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my first-born for my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you, But to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:6-8)

Though the exact words are a bit different, the thrust of the argument is the same in each case. It's not the legal requirements of the law that the LORD is after. He is after a life of integrity. He is after a life of justice, of of mercy, and of faithfulness. Jesus is after the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law. David said in Psalm 51:17, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise."

Justice describes the process of being fair with all. Justice has no room for favoritism or elitism. It will give to each their due, without being a respecter of persons. The one who gives much to the synagogue ought to be treated the same as the poor man, who can give little. The beautiful person ought to be treated like the one of homely appearance. Mercy describes the attitude of heart that is kind to others, especially when they don't deserve it. Mercy overflows with a compassion and love and good will for others. Even when others sin against you, mercy will still respond in grace and love. Faithfulness describes the steady commitment of love toward another. In good times and bad times, faithfulness is the steady line that will be consistent. The faithful person is the dependable person, who will always lend a helping hand. The faithful person is the one who is always dependable and willing to serve.

But, the scribes and Pharisees had missed this. They had centered their attention upon the minutia of the law, rather than on the character of the one in whom the Lord delights. The same warning comes to us. Oh, in the church today, we may not be paying attention to the mint, dill, and cummin. But, there are many in the Christian church who are concerned with the wrong things. Rather than spending their effort on the right things, they spend it on the wrong things.

I can think of many things that have diverted the church from the main core of godliness, especially in churches that stress legalistic

practices. For example, the way a person dresses becomes very important. A person's movie attendance (or lack of it) becomes important. A person's church attendance is everything. And it becomes essential that they use a particular version of the Bible.

Let me discuss a few dangers that we must be on the lookout for today. There are many churches that are focused on church growth. All they want is numbers of people attending their churches. They will do anything that it takes to get people to come to their services. There are some churches that post their Sunday attendance figures on a board in the front of the church for all to see. Yvonne and I have a friend in another state, who periodically checks in with us. His question is always, "How many people are in your congregation now?" That is the only question that he asks about our church. I think that it is about the only thing that he is interested in regarding our church (as well as his). About a year ago, I wrote an article in our Food for the Flock newsletter that discussed church growth. In that article, I wrote that "The Church in America is infatuated with the idea of church growth." As I was preparing to write that article, I was amazed to discover that the Bible nowhere tells the church to "grow in numbers." In all of the New Testament, never is a church rebuked because there were few people attending the church. In the New Testament, churches are constantly being rebuked for idolatry and immorality and ungodliness. But never for not growing numerically. The admonition is always to "grow in grace" (2 Pet. 3:18). The admonition is always to be mature (Eph. 4:15). This is where our focus ought to be. Growing in grace and maturing is the important thing. Growing in justice and mercy and faithfulness is far more important than growing in numbers.

Another danger is that many churches are focused on doctrinal purity. Please don't get me wrong with this. I'm very concerned at Rock Valley Bible Church for doctrinal purity. Holding to a common doctrine unites us greatly. And yet, there are some who take doctrinal purity and sift it to the top of their priorities, so that doctrine becomes the main thing. A church can become very scholastic. A judgmental spirit is often cultivated in those types of churches. A degree of arrogance can easily creep in. The church can become exclusive and separatistic. "If someone doesn't agree with me in all doctrinal issues, then I can't have any fellowship with him." When these things take place, it can often lead to a lack of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. This happens because the main thing is no longer how you live, but what your theology is.

There are many churches that have lost focus of the gospel of Christ. If anything is to be at the center of our lives, it ought to be Christ and all that He has done on our behalf. But, it's amazing how easy it is for churches to get away from this. Churches can easily begin to focus upon programs. Churches can easily begin to focus upon buildings. Churches can easily begin to focus upon methods. Churches can easily begin to focus upon music. Churches can easily begin to focus upon rules and regulations. But, it's the saving power of Christ that ought always to be our main thing. Where is the source of the power to live with justice, mercy, and faithfulness? It's the cross. Apart from the cross, you won't live justly. Apart from the cross, you won't live with mercy. Apart from the cross, you won't live with faithfulness.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on January 30, 2005 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Disciplines of a Godly Man, Kent Hughes, p. 123

[2] as quoted by Randy Alcorn in Grace and Truth Paradox, p. 53