

BIBLE READING: Matthew 23:1-12

SERMON

When religion is not rooted in the love of God, it is not only devoid of God - it is dangerous. Not only does it not serve people, it oppresses them.

Genuine spirituality, driven by God's love encourages and nourishes people's lives - it can lift them to the heights of heaven. Deceitful religion on the other hand, driven by self dominates and enslaves people's lives - it can drop them to the pits of hell!

A couple who had just begun to attend a previous church I ministered in, asked if I would visit their daughter. The 28 year old daughter had just returned home after several years in a cult. She was under the care of a psychiatrist. She was depressed and highly anxious about everything. She was extremely fearful of religious leaders of any kind. *"Be sure not to bring a bible or even quote the bible,"* the mother pleaded with me - almost apologetically - *"...it sends her into a panic."*

My visit was very low key. "De-programming" was not an issue here. The young woman's sanity was. She was the picture of fragility. She sipped a cup of coffee while holding on with two shaking hands. Her eyes were windows into emptiness. Without emotion, she described a bit of her life with people who came to her initially with such love and acceptance that she felt she had discovered a true home at last. She moved in with the group and happily worked and turned over everything she made. She was building up treasure in heaven that no one could ever take away from her.

Then the demands began to build and the teaching sessions went late into the night. Contact with "outsiders" was displeasing to God. Parents, pastors, teachers and friends would all try to lead them back into a life of sin and evil. She would be cut off from God forever.

After several years, she grew suicidal and hopeless, called her parents and they found her and brought her home. The physical part of her bondage was over. The spiritual part was deeply embedded in her soul. Toward the end of my visit, she finally gave a glance that could be loosely described as "at me" and spoke directly to me. *"I know that I have turned into something evil now - and that God hates me!"*

Not all negative religious experience has gone to this extreme, but wherever religion results in something toxic instead of nourishing for our spirits, there is abuse.

Spiritual abuse is not new. It is something that angered Jesus himself and in today's bible reading he spells out for his followers the characteristics of abusive spiritual leaders and gives them clues for avoiding these abusive spiritual leaders.

Characteristics of abusive spiritual leaders

In a few sentences, Jesus gives four characteristics of abusive religious leaders that cuts through their outer appearance and reveals inner corruption. These characteristics provide insight when we find ourselves wondering about religious leaders and churches we may encounter.

These leaders were **hypocritical** (v2) The scribes and Pharisees had the content right, but their behaviour was not consistent with the content. They were experts in the bible, but their behaviour did not match their teaching. Rather than seeing themselves as servants of what they taught, they imagine that they are masters who are above their subject matter. This characteristic is so well known, any of us can finish the sentence, "His problem is that he does not practice what he"

These leaders were **oppressive** (v4) One of the critical failures of the leaders Jesus addressed was their approach to religion - they saw religion as being about rules and regulations. It was clear in Jesus' ministry, however, that true religion was about a relationship with God. Jesus brought joy. They brought judgement. Jesus taught about a God who gave them love. They taught about a God who was hard to please. Jesus said his yoke was "easy" and his burden "light." They on the other hand would "tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others..."

These leaders were **pretentious** (v5) Another key attribute in the life of abusive spiritual leaders is the fact that they are pretentious. They are all about "show-biz." The heart of this failure is that they are "other directed" instead of "God directed." Their inner reward system is tuned into what others think and how others perceive them, rather than by what God sees. They sometimes cannot help themselves, they are "on stage" in their religious living and are in need of an audience.

1 Samuel 16:7, *"...the LORD does not see as we see; we look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."* When Jesus was alone, he was the same person he was when he was with others. When he was with God, he was the same person he was all the time. The question we need to ask ourselves is , *"Am I the same person when I am alone as I am when I am with others?"* In other words, people who change when the "spot light" comes on - are pretentious.

These leaders were **arrogant** (v6) This is the key to the other characteristics. The people Jesus came into conflict with were people who were filled with self and self-importance. When a soul is filled with self, there is no room for God.

This was at the heart of the tragedy of the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Instead of God-centred spirits, they wound up self-centred. Instead of fellowship with God and and each other, there was alienation and blame. Their feelings became more important than their love for each other and more important than God. The arrogant heart which loves the "places of honour" and "the best seats" is a heart that has no place for God.

Clues for avoiding abusive spiritual leaders

Three characteristics will insure the authenticity of the spiritual experience of Jesus' followers! Embrace and grow these qualities in your life and you will safeguard your spiritual life and build a safety shield against abusive spirituality in your own life These three spiritual gems belong to those who are:

Open The actual word Jesus used in describing his followers was *"brothers."* You have one teacher and you are all brothers and sisters. Christ is the only teacher. There is an equality amongst the followers of Christ as all are learners and students. One is not greater than the other and a sure clue of abusive spirituality is when this sense of interdependence in the community of faith is absent.

This does not eliminate the need for leaders in the community, but the model of leadership Jesus lived out and taught was that of the servant leader.

Leadership in the community of faith is about service. Peter makes it clear, *"...tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it - not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock."* [1 Peter 5:2-3]

There is an openness, mutuality and approachability with those who are genuine spiritual leaders.

Dedicated *"Call no one your Father on earth, for you have one Father, the one in heaven."* This is another way of saying the first commandment to *"have no other Gods before me."* Worship belongs to God alone. When we have made God our first love, all else falls into its proper place. We do not ask or seek the allegiance of another's heart in any ultimate sense.

Genuine spiritual leaders who receive the love, allegiance and loyalty of others are anxious to have that love, allegiance and loyalty passed along to the Lord. They do not keep it for themselves.

Humble This is the quality that brings it all together. *"The greatest among you will be your servant."* This is the most important clue for evaluating spiritual leadership. There is humility instead of arrogance. Jesus himself set the example by emptying himself and taking the form of a servant. [Phil. 2:7] Genuine spirituality sacrifices self to lift up others. Jesus makes his point with the truth that God will do the "exalting" and "humbling."

And this is where the whole struggle between Jesus and the religious leaders who wanted him eliminated rests. Abusive spiritual leadership finally wants the place of God. They might not even be fully aware of it, but when self becomes central and God becomes peripheral, the spiritual disaster is ready to unfold.

The model is in Isaiah 14:12-14 taken by many to be the prophets words of doom to the Evil One.

"How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit on the mount of assembly on the heights of Zaphon; I will ascend to the tops of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High."

These words spell out the bottom line in abusive religion and abusive spiritual leaders. The anatomy of a spiritual disaster can be stated in a few simple words.

To become filled with self is to become emptied of God!

May God grant us grace to grow the qualities of openness, dedication and humility as we build a healthy family of faith.