

## Always Being Reformed

Matthew 23:1-12

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Saint Paul, Minnesota

### Reformation Sunday

Prayer: *Guide us O God by your Word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will, discover peace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Too much religion isn't necessarily a healthy thing. I said too much religion, not too much faith, and I think there's a profound difference. I remember the religion of my childhood and in some respects, I miss how easy it all seemed.

*A sunbeam, a sunbeam, Jesus wants me for a sunbeam.*

Back then, things on the surface were easy—black and white. There was right and wrong and they were as obvious as the difference between black and white. Good deeds got rewarded and bad deeds got punished. At least that's what the flannel graph boards in my childhood Sunday school rooms would have had me believe. Annie Dillard recalls the Sunday school images from her childhood. She writes,

I saw Jesus in watercolor, framed, on the walls. We Sunday school children sat in a circle and said dimly with Samuel, 'Here am I.' Jesus was a thin veil of tinted water; he was awash. Bearded men lay indolent about him in pastel robes, and shepherd boys, and hooded women with clear, round faces...it was all so watercolor; I could see paper through it (*Incarnation*, Alfred Korn, ed. P.28).

Believing the way we did as children was the result of an unrestrained fantasy which was not limited by logical thought or reason. We possessed what psychologist James Fowler, in his important book, *Stages of Faith*, calls the "Intuitive-Projective" faith. There was right and wrong, good and bad and it was easy to tell the difference between the two.

In the New Testament however, just like in the adult world—the world we inhabit when we put away childish things and grow up, things are not always so clear. Take for example the Pharisees. It is a mistake to think that they weren't religious people. They were devoutly religious. And while they may have been the brunt of many of Jesus' teachings, it isn't because they weren't religious. It's frankly that they have too much religion. It is focused in the wrong direction. It makes this text a good one for Reformation Sunday, I suppose. Any time people—any time you are less concerned with the outcome of the process than you are with the process itself, it's time to question your true motivation.

And as I read today's text from Matthew, I was struck by the twist. You see, usually we encourage people to ignore what others say and instead, pay attention to what they do. Behavior rather than words is always the best indication as to the truth of a person. But here Jesus twists that around arguing that the words are to be listened to while the actions are to be ignored.

And in thinking about it further, I wonder if the sayings attributed to Jesus in Matthew's Gospel are in fact accurate. We know that Matthew's Gospel was written some eighty years after Jesus died. When Jesus lived, there was no church. At the time of Matthew's writing, however, there is a church—small pockets of believers and followers of Jesus who are constantly at odds with the organized religion of the day. And it's no wonder they are struggling.

After a disastrous war with Rome, a war which lasted about seven years, the Pharisaic teachers have attempted to reconstruct their Jewish ethnic identity in the face of Roman occupation, by extending and consolidating their

influence in the synagogues of Palestine. And so these early Christians, these Jewish-Christian missionaries who proclaimed a crucified and resurrected messiah, found in these Pharisaic teachers—these leaders of the official religion, their most determined adversaries and rivals. And it makes me wonder if sayings of Jesus from an earlier period in time somehow got reapplied here by Matthew in this new situation?

Because the passage is problematic right from the opening statement. “The Scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, therefore do what they teach you and follow it.” That statement stands in stark contrast to other sayings of Jesus where he openly criticizes the Pharisees, so much so that I am not alone in questioning whether or not Jesus would ever have said what is being attributed to him here. In fact it seems in stark contrast to the very next sentence. “But don’t do as they do for they do not practice what they teach.”

If a genuine statement by Jesus underlies these verses, the original version may be that what Jesus meant in general terms, was that the Pharisees’ perspective on religion was to be preferred over that of the Sadducees and the Essenes? And yet I’m left shaking my head because whatever problems this statement presents to modern biblical scholars, it obviously posed no such problem to the author of Matthew’s Gospel.

What seems to be called into question in Matthew is the question about the level of accountability to which the Pharisees must be held. They were, after all, the ones given the responsibility for leading Israel at the dawn of the Messianic age—and it’s a responsibility in which they had failed miserably. And they failed because they were only interested in the safety and security and predictability and enforcement of the law.

The Pharisees were only concerned with the observance of the law—following the letter of the law and they had no time to consider the spirit in which the law was given. For the Pharisees, it was not enough, for example, to observe the Sabbath in a general way. Rather it was necessary to define in prescriptive detail which week-day activities constituted work and which ones were therefore prohibited on the Sabbath. And it must have been ordinary Jews who were the most irritated by such a rigid observance, and who most likely saw these rulings as coming more from the interpreters of the law rather than from the scripture itself.

And it’s into that kind of world and religious climate that Jesus came along. Along came Jesus the reformer, reimagining the religion in the same way he reimagined the world, asking people to stop and consider the meaning of basic humanity—to think and to dream and to make up their own minds. In a religious landscape heavy on rules and regulations, along came Jesus offering to any and all who would follow him, a lighter burden and an easier yoke.

And it made the religious types nervous. Because Jesus observed the Sabbath in a general way, but to those who were really sick, it didn’t really matter what day of the week it was when it came to their need for healing. Meeting the needs of hurting people far outweighed the strict, legalistic interpretation of Sabbath observance.

The Pharisees were religious alright, but their religiosity was their problem. Episcopal priest Robert Capon in his book *The Parables of Grace*, writes,

Christianity is not a religion, it is the announcement of the end of religion. Religion consists of all the things the human race has ever thought it had to do to get right with God. The church is not here to bring the world the bad news that God would think kindly about us only after we have gone through certain creedal and liturgical ethical wickets...it is here to bring the world the good news that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly.

When it comes to one’s religious expression, what is it that makes people sometimes settle for easy answers to complex situations? What makes them willing to see as beautiful a black and white world? Or for them to define the world in terms of clear lines and boundaries and prohibitions?

You've heard me talk before about the religious legalism of my childhood where we were not allowed to go swimming on Sundays or take the boats out on the lake when we were at my grandparents' cottage. And how it didn't me long to begin questioning the enforcers of these self-imposed rules—these expressions of piety, why it was that we couldn't take the boat out on the lake but we could get in the car and drive around the lake in order to go to church? The holes in hypocrisy are sometimes glaring.

And you can imagine my delight when I was in seminary and discovered one day the words of Martin Luther about the observance of the Lord's Day. Luther actually had this to say about it,

If anywhere the day is made holy for the mere day's sake, if anywhere, anyone sets up its observance on the [Hebrew] foundation, then I order you to work on it, to ride on it, to dance on it, to feast on it, to do anything that will remove this encroachment on Christian liberty (quoted in *The Church Speaks*, James I Cook, ed., p. 149).

And you can further imagine that those words were not greeted unenthusiastically one hot, summer Sunday at the cottage as I read aloud them to the enforcers of the law, and to the rest of us who were suffering inside a hot cottage on a beautiful summer Sunday.

A fundamentalist, legalistic approach to faith is too simplistic in the long run to provide real answers or any lasting comfort. It is not thoughtful nor does it take into consideration the human element that Jesus was all about. That approach to faith always and conveniently so, reserves God's mercy for the enforcers while declaring God's wrath and judgment on everyone but them. And it just doesn't begin to allow for the world's complexity or the depth of intellectual exploration that our faith requires of us.

Because we live in a world where meteoric changes and advances stagger the mind demanding far more from us than simple, pad answers, cliché responses and an understanding of the Christian faith still in pastel and stuck to a flannel graph board in some bygone room. We are called to embrace the constant tension we live in—the tension between our Reformed faith and our ever-changing world.

We are Reformed and we are always being reformed according to the word of God. That means that change is inevitable and it is not something we need to fear. The Bible is always speaking in bold, fresh new ways. And the church that fears change has forgotten its own history.

Just think of the changes many of you have already experienced. From the institution of slavery being accepted by good, church going Bible reading people—people who could read to you from their Bibles the verses used to justify slavery. No one here remembers those days but some of you may remember when interracial marriage was prohibited by the church. And it used to be awfully difficult for divorced people to get remarried in the church because of what Jesus himself had to say about it.

I know many of you remember when women were not allowed to be ordained because of what the Bible supposedly says about women in leadership. And now we have opened the door for the ordination for gay and lesbian Presbyterians who have the gifts and are called to serve. We are Reformed and always being reformed.

On this Reformation Sunday it is important to remember the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick who said, "New occasions always call for new duties."

The Christian faith is a journey of discovery. It is not so much a possession to be claimed as it is a process to embrace. And when Christianity is rightly practiced, it will often produce more questions than it will provide answers. Answers are there to be sure, but they are not easily grasped but are rather discovered after careful and thoughtful searching, like treasure buried in a field.

God didn't give us agile minds so we could be content with what we already know and believe to be true. We are Reformed and by the grace of God, always being reformed into the people God wants us to become in this ever-changing world.

So people of God, embrace our always reforming heritage by keeping the faith, and an open mind.

Amen.