

“This incorrect Jesus” Mat 23:1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13) “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” (John 15:14) These are words of Jesus. He spoke them both to His apostles and to all His disciples. You are His friends, and He has laid down His life for you. There is no greater love... Isn't that good, to know that you are so loved?!

When someone loves you so much, that he lays down his life for you, you listen to them carefully, right? Even if what he says is not exactly what you want to hear. Even if what he says may sound unpleasant to our ears.

We listen, for we realize that the One, who speaks, truly loves us and cares for us. That He cares for us even more than He cares for His own life. Therefore, we believe and accept that whatever He says, He says caring for our wellbeing.

This is how we are to listen to words of Jesus, this is how we are to listen to words of the Holy Scriptures. Knowing that the One who speaks has shown the greatest love towards us, and whatever He says, He says out of true love.

Today we read one of these politically incorrect speeches of Jesus. We read only the beginning, and, in fact, it becomes much more incorrect later. Jesus is very harsh addressing the Pharisees and the scribes. He doesn't pull punches.

Remember, similar harsh words we heard also from prophet Micah in our OT reading. It is interesting, if we put Jesus address in our today's context, what do you think, who is He criticizing and to whom He is addressing these many 'woe to you!' sayings? To you? No! To the world? No!

We could say that He is addressing them to clergy, to pastors. He is not speaking to someone outside the Church, He is rebuking those to whom the responsibility to proclaim the Gospel is entrusted.

There is a very strong reason why Jesus was so harsh. Because if those who are entrusted with teaching don't teach and preach what God has commanded, then those who listen are led astray and the consequences are, – eternal damnation.

What was the problem? What did the Pharisees and the scribes teach wrong? On top of what the Lord demands, that is living according to His Commandments, they had put heaps and heaps of human made laws and requirements.

They had put these burdens on the shoulders of believers, and they had made it look like the gift of salvation is something that we could and should obtain by our own activities.

Do you think it is still a problem today? I don't think so. We have a very different problem. The very opposite problem. Perhaps even more serious and more dangerous. See, our Lord has repeatedly warned us: "You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it ..." (Deut. 4:2)

We, and this especially refers to us, pastors, shall not add to the Word of God, and that was this big problem in Jesus time. Nor shall we take away from the Word of God, which is this big problem in our days.

Back then there were more and more commands added to the Word of God, today, we take away more and more things that our Lord is very clear about. And as usually, it is done in the name of ... love and with the best intentions.

Today we often want to appear as more loving than Jesus. We are not going to say anything that may offend anyone or upset anyone. Who would dare to be so ... incorrect and offensive as to say unpleasant things to good people around us!

Jesus was very incorrect in what He said. He rebuked and called to repentance those who didn't teach the Word of God faithfully. He rebuked and called to repentance those many good people who didn't realize that they were sinners who needed a savior.

And obviously, Jesus paid the price for what He had said. You know how it ended for Jesus. Now we want to appear more loving than Jesus. The thing is that we don't love others more than Jesus did, instead, we want to be loved more than Jesus was.

We want to enjoy people's favor. We want to please them. We don't want to be rejected in our community, because of what we say. We want to say to people things that will make them happy. Then we will look good in their eyes, and they will speak well of us... as they walk on the wide and easy way to destruction (Mt 7:13).

Can you remember a situation where Jesus withheld the truth to please His listeners? Can you remember even one such situation? I can't. Do you know why? Because Jesus didn't try to please us. Instead, He loved us.

He knew why He had come. He knew why He had to die. To save us. To save from what, we need to ask. To save us from sin, and devil, and death and hell. That's right. We need to be saved from all these terrible realities.

We can't save ourselves. Jesus didn't pretend, for the sake of popularity, that these things don't exist. And we can't pretend they don't exist and simply live happily ever after. Terminal sickness doesn't go away if we pretend it is not here, right? We all know that. Nor will sin, or death, or hell.

Today people don't like these words. And we, pastors, prefer not to use them. Why would we say something that people don't like? It may put them away. Our warnings may create too threatening an environment.

At the same time, we don't care that the reality of sin is threatening to people's eternal life. And we take away from the Word of God, and we believe that what we do is for good. Look around and see what situation we, who are responsible for teaching, have created. We have helped to distort the message of our Lord.

What do people believe these days? I mean those people who would consider themselves to be Christians. There was a research done by Smith and Denton, and they summarized popular 'Christian' believes. They sounded like this:

[1] A god exists. [2] God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. [3] The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. [4] God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life [or we to be particularly involved with God] except when God is needed to resolve our problems. [5] Good people go to heaven when they die. And, basically, all people are good, right?

Does this sound familiar? I bet that most of those lovely people in Barossa who identify themselves as Christians, but ignore Jesus' family, the Church, hold these very believes, in one form or another.

Where did they get them from? From us, loving and friendly pastors. From us, when we cared more about what people think about us, and not what will happen with them in eternity.

There is something very important we need to understand. No one has any interest even in the best medicine, if they think they are healthy. Do you agree? But how radically situation changes when you realize that you are terminally ill.

When you are told: "Sorry, but you will die. Unless... there is one last chance. You could ask Jesus Christ if He would choose to heal you". And as soon as you in your despair turn to Jesus, He runs to greet you, He embraces you, and before you know it, you are healed. This is the Good News for a sick person.

But if someone has this false believe that all 'good' people go to heaven, and we all are good people, why would they need Jesus as their Savior? Why bother? If we don't know the truth about ourselves, if we don't know how God sees us,

that He sees our hearts and thoughts, if we don't know why Jesus had to die, why would we bother about this whole Church thing? There is no reason.

We have avoided to speak about unpleasant thing. But now, imagine, what would you think of a doctor, who knew your terminal diagnoses, but didn't tell you, for he didn't want you to feel bad? He just kept telling you that all is great, you are perfectly well... and then it was too late.

Or course, I can see the appeal to speak only about Jesus who loves and forgives and cares for all good people. Sure, He does. We may think that thus we do a favor to people around us, protecting them from bad news about our sinfulness and where it leads us.

We may think that thus we do the most important thing, that we share the Good News, the Gospel. But then we simply deceive ourselves. We don't do anyone a favor. Instead, we do people harm.

When we withhold the truth about our human situation, that all people go to hell, unless they are saved by Jesus through His Church, we simply leave them on their wide and easy road to destruction, self-confident and proud.

For they believe they are well and there is no need for a doctor. By trying to protect them from the unpleasant reality of our sin and God's judgment, in fact, we deny them the Gospel.

For the Gospel is the Good News that there is healing in Jesus. And as Jesus Himself said, only [those who know that they are] the sick need a doctor. You can't force your wonderful and life-giving medicine on someone who thinks they are well.

But how sweet is the Gospel, how dear is Jesus, how marvelous seems the community of saints, how liberating are words of forgiveness, how precious is the Lord's Supper, how uplifting is to praise our Lord with our voices, when the Holy Spirit has opened our eyes to see that without Jesus, there is no life, either in the age to come, or even in this one. Then the Good News about healing found in Jesus is more precious than anything else in this world.

This helps to understand why Jesus said what we read today. 'But you are not to be called teacher, of father or instructor, but one is your teacher and father and instructor, Jesus.' All these were titles for teachers, or we could say for pastors.

What it means is very simple. We are not to add to, or to take away from God's Word anything. One in our teacher – Jesus. We are not to trust or listen to anyone else more than the Word of God. This is, why we confess, that the Word of God is our highest authority and the norm for our faith and life.

We are to listen to our Lord as He speaks to us in His Word, and not to someone who for whatever reasons adds or takes away from it. And we are blessed to have God's Word written and available in our own language. We even have it at

our homes. We all have the Bible, right? We can always go to Jesus and hear what He Himself says. We just need to pray that the Holy Spirit helps us all to appreciate and to receive the riches that Jesus has made available for us, to be thirsty and hungry for God's truth.

Then Jesus concludes. "The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." We are not to change the message of the Bible.

And we don't need to. For we don't need to appear as more pious than Jesus Himself, by inventing new rules. Jesus knew how to appreciate good gifts of creation, and we too can enjoy this life and celebrate God's blessings, without trying to appear overly pious and holy.

Nor we need to try to appear more loving than Jesus by saying only things that people want to hear. Jesus spoke the hard truth in love, preparing people to hear the Gospel. We are not to distort God's Word to exalt ourselves by pleasing our listeners, we are always to remain humble students of Jesus, servants of the Word of God, not masters.

For whoever humbles himself under the Word of God will be exalted. This is what our Lord Jesus has promised to His disciples. The same Lord Jesus who laid down His life for His friends. And He says to you: "You are my friends if you do what I command you."

Amen.

