

High Street Uniting Church Frankston

The Servant Leader

Matthew 23:1 – 12



*In a small village in the Middle Ages, a woman's husband died. The local priest, after conducting the funeral, informed the woman that her husband was in purgatory and many prayers and special services would be needed to help him travel through to be with God. "He has miles to go, and if you make a donation, we can say mass for him to speed his travel." And so, she paid. Again, the priest said, "He is closer now, just a mile or two and a donation will allow us to say more masses for him." And this went on, three and more times, with the distance getting less each time, but the woman was getting frustrated.*

*The priest said, "Good news, he only has ten feet to go, to get out of purgatory, one more mass will help him to heaven." And she replied, "If he's that close, let him jump."*

It's easy to make jokes about some of the excesses of the church over the centuries – How ironic to call celibate priests 'Father' – but those jokes mask the enormous burden of some of the church's theology, and piety, and practices placed on people of faith. Demands, guilt, requirements, beliefs, many with no sound support in scripture, and many that don't seem to apply to those making the rules. Scripture is alive and that is no more obvious than today's text. Jesus is talking to the crowds about the excesses and hypocrisy of some of the Pharisees and he could just as easily be talking to us, now, about the excesses and hypocrisy in the church. And I don't just mean other denominations and other centuries.

In writing to the Romans, Paul castigates his fellow Jews, "You that boast in the law, do you not dishonour God by breaking the law? As it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you'." And here we are in this time and culture with research saying that most people think that religion does more harm to society than good.

We need to remember, being the people of God in Jesus Christ means following the one who said, "my yoke is easy, and my burden is light".

Come to church every week, read the bible every day, pray four times a day, believe these creeds, follow these teachings on moral issues, and so on. How many burdens do we place on people as obligations of the faith? Practices that could be loving responses to God's grace are turned into burdensome obligations to win God's favour.

The Gospel, the Good News of God's grace in Jesus Christ, cannot live in the language of should. To be a Christian you should do this, and you should do that. I know it's ironic to say, but there shouldn't be any shoulds. Particularly when the behaviour of the people saying 'should' shows that they aren't living those 'shoulds' themselves, or they are living out those 'shoulds' resting on the privileges of time, money, and family situation with no concept of the burden on ordinary living.

This teaching from Jesus, which if you read the rest of the chapter turns into a bit of a rant, and is touched on in various ways in all the Gospels, is not a criticism of the Jews, it's a

lesson in leadership. But I don't think it's just about faith leaders. We are all leaders, guiding people to God in Jesus Christ; we are all the light of the world.

"Call no one teacher, for you have one teacher and you are all students. Call no one father, for you have one Father in heaven".

We are all children of the one God. There is no place for one group to be fathers, or teachers who dictate the way of salvation or piety by trying to take over God's role and place. There is no room for people to demand respect and obedience; to demand that people do things their way, particularly when their way shows nothing of grace, love, and service.

"All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted". There is plenty of room for leaders who take the path of service and offer insights, learnings, and guidance to lead people to God. Humility that recognises that we are all the same before God, but that we are all different in our needs, our understanding, and our faith. Humility that says, "I believe this, but I'm not going to let that belief, or that practice, be a cause of doubt, or a burdensome expectation in another person". Humility that says, "Let me be your servant, not your master; how may I assist your walk with God".

Our faith, and the call to make disciples, is not about placing a burden of religion and religious practice on people; we are called to share the life giving, gift of grace. Grace that calls out a loving response, not an onerous list of demands and preconditions. So, when you are sharing your faith, or telling people about the Gospel, avoid the word 'should', avoid placing burdens of belief or action, and talk about grace, talk about acceptance, talk about love, and humbly say, "This is my experience, I hope you have a similar one". Or, better still, show by your actions, your loving care and compassion, that you serve the God of grace and love. That you follow Jesus Christ, who said, "Come to me all you who are burdened and heavy laden, and I will give you rest". The very light burden of loving response and relationship, and not a heavy burden of rules and demands and obligations. That is the grace of God who loves the world and seeks to reconcile the world in and through Jesus, the servant Lord.