

Three Warnings of Jesus to Clergy

Mark 12:38-40 (New American Standard Bible)

³⁸ And in His teaching He was saying: “Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like personal greetings in the marketplaces, ³⁹ and seats of honor in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets, ⁴⁰ who devour widows’ houses, and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers. These will receive all the more condemnation.”

Introduction

Disclaimer: this morning’s message is mainly for me, a pastor and member of clergy. In view of God’s mercy, I pray that all clergy take Jesus’ warnings to them as seriously as I do.

Thirty some years ago, as I entered parish ministry, a wise counsel advised me to beware of three ministry killers, a.k.a. three “S”s. *Silver, Sex, and Sloth*. Since then, I am very mindful of such dangers in ministry. In today’s text, Jesus also warns clergy to beware of three things: the desire of recognition, the love of money, and hypocrisy.

Content

When you read the Bible, sometimes you feel that the words are jumping out of the page and directly speaking to you. That’s how I felt one day as I was reading today’s text. I felt Jesus was directly speaking to me, warning me of three dangers lurking in the path to faithful ministry. Beware, He commanded me, of the three sins that I as pastor can easily commit without knowing. They are the sin of ‘big’ me. The sin of love of money. And the sin of hypocrisy.

7 Woes to Scribes and Pharisees

Jesus’ warnings to religious leaders actually appear three times in the New Testament. Matthew 23:1-36, Mark 12:38-40, and Luke 20:45-47. Matthew 23:1-36, in particular, details Jesus’ scathing warnings to then the religious leaders: scribes and Pharisees.

7 times He said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” Note here, Jesus seldom used such strong words of condemnation to anyone else but these two groups. Only once, I can remember, He mentioned ‘woe’ to Judas Iscariot, who betrayed his master (Matthew 26:24). He never said “Woe to you” toward ordinary folks. But the religious leaders, He held them accountable in a “you - know - better - than - that” tone. You would be shocked to know that Jesus actually called scribes and Pharisees ‘children of Hell’ saying, “You snakes, brood of vipers. How can you escape being sentenced to Hell?” (Matthew 23:33). Whew! No one wants to fall into such a strong condemnation from Jesus.

Why was Jesus so harsh? Why these particular groups? Scribes and Pharisees are equal to modern day clergy. What made Him so strong against them? Please keep in mind. Jesus was / is not against any individuals per se, but against the sins they have committed. You've heard the expression before: *God hates sin but loves sinners*. The same goes with scribes and Pharisees.

Meaning of 'Woe'

By the way, it would be helpful to understand the meaning of the word "woe." It is "often used to express grief, regret, misfortune or grievous distress that an escape out of it seems **impossible**"(www.patheos.com). No matter how we may understand it, we don't want to hear that word from Jesus.

Who Were Scribes and Pharisees?

Scribes: "were the scholars of the oral and written" Law of Moses (the Old Testament) "and the instructors and interpreters of it" (Mark 1:22). "They preserved the Scriptures by copying it carefully and meticulously" (www.bibleask.org.)

Pharisees: were "a prominent religious sect of Judaism in the first century C.E. They were not of priestly descent, but they were strict observers of the Law in its smallest detail" (Matthew 23:23). "As scholars of the Law and the traditions, they had great authority over the people" (www.jw.org.)

Every village had at least one scribe. Both scribes and Pharisees "were well-known experts" on the Law of Moses: "hence the partial overlap of membership of the two groups" (www.britannica.com.)

Beware of "Big" Me (v. 38-40)

The first sin Jesus condemned was the sin of loving human recognition. It is obvious that scribes and Pharisees back then loved to be recognized by the people in the community. They were indeed respected and honored by the members of the synagogues. For instance, they were invited to the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues (Matthew 23:6). They showed off their broad 'phylacteries' and their long 'fringes' (Matthew 23:5). They did all things to be seen by others (Matthew 23:5). They would sit high on Moses' seat (Matthew 23:2). Jesus warned them, "that which is highly esteemed among people is detestable in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15).

Question: if such love of human recognition and practice thereof among religious leaders were bad back then, has it changed since? Are the clergy doing any better in the 21st century in America? Well, it all depends on whom you are asking. My honest answer is this: we are no better than scribes and Pharisees. Many clergy still love to be recognized and

honored by the church members. But the question is: are they truly representing Christ in their words and deeds as much as they are esteemed by the Church?

Beware of the temptation of “Big” me.

Beware of the Love of Money (v. 40)

The second sin of clergy is the love of money. One day Jesus was giving a lesson to people saying that no one can serve two masters: neither can we serve God and wealth / mammon at the same time (Luke 16:13). ¹⁴ Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were ridiculing Him. ¹⁵ And He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the sight of people, but God knows your hearts” (Luke 16:14-15).

The Word of God clearly points out that anyone who desires to be bishop in the Church must not be ‘the lover of money’ (1 Timothy 3:3) nor ‘greedy’ (Titus 1:7). That means, even in the first century, there were church leaders who were greedy or in the love of money. Jesus condemned then religious leaders for devouring up the houses of widows. This was a big problem back then. It is still today.

Many years ago, I remember hearing a pastor giving a piece of advice to young pastors. He said, “If you love money, ministry is not for you.” I still remember that advice. The love of money and ministry don’t go well with each other.

Sometimes, the love of money sets in the heart of clergy due to their low income. It has changed now, but in the past, many clergy and their families used to live on one income and church housing, we call, parsonage. Nowadays, many clergy families have two incomes and some clergy even own their own houses (it used to be forbidden by the Church Law). My family learned from the early days to live on with one income, and we are used to it by now. But one thing I never want to be is to be in the love of money. Didn’t the Scriptures say that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10)? Not just for clergy but for all? Pray that your pastor never falls into this sin.

Beware of Hypocrisy (v. 40)

The last sin of clergy Jesus condemns is hypocrisy. Speaking of hypocrisy, Jesus attacked the practice of scribes and Pharisees who would religiously clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, yet their inside was full of greed and self-indulgence (Matthew 23:25). Jesus condemned, and still does, such a lifestyle where “inside full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” while outside looks perfectly sincere and godly (Matthew 23:28).

No one is immune to hypocrisy and all of us are prone to hypocrisy to a certain degree, but clergy must be very careful with it, because we the clergy tend to do a lot of things for appearance’s sake in order to please the crowd. We tend to offer long prayers

with impressive words as well. According to Jesus, with those prayers, we get plenty of human recognition, yet no reward from God in Heaven (Matthew 6:1, 5-6).

Root of Hypocrisy

Please reason with me for the root of hypocrisy. *For the appearance's sake. To be recognized by people. To be commended by people. To be praised by people. To justify self before people* (Luke 16:15). Hypocrisy stems from the desire to be recognized / loved / justified by people. One remedy for hypocrisy is to desire the divine recognition only. E.g. After seeing Ms. Bertha Bailey (a 92-old member with hearing problems), on my way home, I was struggling inside and questioning of my “wasted” life in rural Michigan. The Lord instantly spoke to me saying, “You have seen Me today” with a good verse in Matthew 25:40: *And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of Mine, you did it for Me.’* From then on, that verse became my motto in ministry.

Conclusion

People are kind and respectful of me as clergy. For that, I am very grateful. However, I’d better not forget that I am no better than laity. I’d better not be self-conceited. The reason they show respect and love for me is not because I am better than they are but because of Christ whom I represent. Jesus is the focus, not me.

That will help me stay humble. That will help me stay focused on the Lord. That will help me stay alert against sins Christ condemns. Pray also for clergy that they may not commit the sin of ‘big’ me. Pray that they never love money. Pray that they remain forever sincere and humble before God and people.

Amen.