

How to Spot Faulty Religion

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[0:00] How can you tell if your church is faulty? How can you tell if your church is faulty?! So if something is wrong in your car, if something is faulty in your car, you can tell because normally on your dashboard a little light will come up.

You might not know what the light means. It's quite scary when that happens. You know what I'm talking about. I think everybody's been in that position. You see this light come up and you don't know what it means, but you know something is wrong in your car and you have to look.

But what is the faulty light in a church? What is the thing that indicates that something is wrong in a church?

Well, as we're back in Matthew, where we are in the story is that Jesus is now in Jerusalem and he is about to confront the leading spiritual authorities of his day, of Israel, the spiritual leaders of Israel.

But first, before he does that, we're going to see that next week, he takes aim at them and he confronts them. But before he does that, he actually has a word with those who follow their teaching, those who listen to them.

[1:10] And he wants to warn their listeners just how faulty their religion has become. And we're going to look at that passage and I must admit, studying it this week has been a bit difficult.

And reading a passage like this is difficult because it forces us as Christians to look at ourselves and to ask, are there perhaps fault lights in our church or in modern Christianity that we've been ignoring?

And I think what we'll find in this passage is that there are a lot and they're easy to ignore. But Jesus wants us, just as he wanted the people back then, to know what are the faulty things in their religious culture.

And so let's see what he says from verse 1. We'll pick it up. And Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat, so you must be careful to do everything they tell you, but do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

[2:30] Okay, so here we see the first sign of faulty religion is a religion or a religious system that creates burdens on people rather than taking them away.

That's the first sign something is wrong with your religion if that is happening. And we see it happening here. The religious teachers of Jesus' day made it very difficult for the ordinary person to be in any kind of meaningful relationship with God because they made the standards so high. These Pharisees and these scribes said, These are all the rules you've got to keep in order to be righteous enough to be in a relationship with God. And the thing is, Jesus says they didn't even practice what they preached.

They didn't even meet the standards they set for others themselves. But they set these high standards. And then further, Jesus says they did nothing to help people to keep them.

They told them the kind of life they must live, but they did nothing to help them. In fact, they made it harder for people to come close to God. Jesus says that verse 4, they tie up heavy cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

[3:46] And so that was the religious culture of the day when Jesus was in Jerusalem, that it was really hard to be in right relationship with God because the religious teachers had put these heavy loads, these high standards on people.

Now the thing is, hundreds of years before Jesus even said this, God, through the prophet Ezekiel, had warned the teachers of Israel that they were doing this. He had already given them warnings centuries before.

And we heard from Ezekiel 34. I'll just read it again. The word of the Lord came to me, says the prophet Ezekiel, Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, those are the teachers, prophesy and say to them, this is what the sovereign Lord says.

Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves. Should not shepherds take care of the flock? And it goes on, verse 4, You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick. So this is talking who are the weak or the sick sheep. They're the ordinary people of Israel, the sinners. And they had not helped them in any way. You have not strengthened the weak, helped the sick or bound at the injured.

[4:58] You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So God had warned the religious teachers of the centuries before that, but they had ignored.

Nothing had changed by the time Jesus was on the scene. And the type of religion that God is condemning here is a type of religion that looks down and condemns sinners rather than helping them.

It condemns sinners rather than helping sinners. Now, let's fast forward to 2026. Do we see that today in religion, in many churches?

Of course I think we do. I think a lot of the time we see a Christianity that has all these rules you've got to keep, this high standard you've got to keep, and then it just looks down on all those who fail to keep that standard, but it doesn't do much to actually help them.

I don't think much has changed. And that is why, for many people, coming to church is a burden.

[6:06] It's an emotional burden to come to church for many people. Now, those of us who are used to coming to church, and we've heard the gospel, and we realize it's different.

But for many people, maybe visiting for the first time, coming to church is a big thing, and lots of people feel burdened doing it because, you know, you're guilty enough. You feel guilty enough during the week just not being able to keep your own standards that you set for yourself, and then you come to a church, and you hear that you haven't kept God's standards.

And it's an emotional burden. Hopefully that doesn't happen here. Hopefully the gospel is proclaimed here every Sunday. But I think that's the image people have of church, and that's often what keeps people away.

Because it's like you're carrying this heavy pack, this heavy backpack, and it's got all this weight in it, and it's weighing down on your shoulders.

And you're carrying this throughout the week. Everybody is carrying a backpack. And then for many people, they think coming to church is like coming and then having someone put a whole lot more rocks in your backpack, that now you've got to live this way, and you've got to keep these rules.

[7:13] That's what people think church is. No wonder people stay away. No wonder people hesitate to come to church, because that is the experience of church for many people.

It's coming and just having more rocks put in your backpack, more expectations. You never know. Maybe that's still your, maybe that's how you understand church to be. You think it's a place where you come, and you get told the rules of how to live, and you better go out and do it.

Well, if that's the case, then I'm sorry we've failed you. If that's what you hear, hear it's in Mark's, if that's your experience, then we have not explained to you the gospel of Jesus Christ properly.

And I hope that's not the case, but I do know that that is many, that is often the case in many churches. And Jesus says here that this, that is the first sign of something gone wrong.

That is the first warning light of a faulty church. When it is a burden, when it places burdens on you, rather than relieving burdens for sinners, it burdens them more.

[8:22] If that is happening at a church, then the church has failed to do its job. That's the first sign. But there's a second sign. The second sign of a faulty church is a lot of importance is placed on religious status and religious achievement.

So we see this from verse 5. Jesus says, again, talking about the religious leaders of his day, everything they do is done for people to see. They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long.

They love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues. They love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called rabbi by others. Now, we don't see that today in the church, do we? Of course we do. In the Christian culture we live in, nothing has changed. Now, all religions actually have their own version of this. All religions have their own versions of status where they show off how righteous they are. [9 : 32] Back then, it was the size of your phylacteries that showed people how righteous you are. Now, I had to look that up this week.

What on earth is a phylactery? Well, it turns out that it's a little, you've probably seen them, Jewish people wear them, a little box, a little box made out of leather that they put on their forehead or on their arm where tiny scrolls of the Torah are stored inside this little box.

And they wear them to show how committed they are to God's Word. In fact, it's a literal obedience of Deuteronomy 11 verse 18 that says this, Fix these words of mine, God tells His people.

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them to your foreheads. They took that a little bit too literally and they actually started doing that. Now, initially it was just a reminder to them, a visual reminder, which is fine.

Something to visually remind them of this. We must take God's Word seriously. We must have it in our minds. We must keep thinking about it, which is what God intended with that command. But what it became was a sign of religious status.

[10 : 47] It became a way to show off just how devoted you are. And so they would walk around and in Jesus' day, they would actually make these boxes quite big so that you could see them from a long distance away.

Oh, there's a very devoted person. Look how devoted I am. So this was what phylacteries became, little signs of how devoted you were to God. But let's ask today, again, fast forward to 2026, what are today's phylacteries in religion?

Think about it. What are the ways people show off how religious, how devoted they are? Well, the Jews, they still have these little boxes, literally, and other ways that they show that they're very devoted Jews.

Muslims have their own versions, their own versions of phylacteries, their robes that they wear, their prayer mats, their fasts that they make sure everybody knows when they're fasting. But what are ours?

Let's not look at other people and other religions. What are Christian phylacteries today? Or maybe it's when you update social media at 6 a.m. in the morning, telling people that you're doing your quiet time.

[11 : 57] Or maybe it's your theology. Maybe that's your phylactery. You show off and you discuss with people your Calvinist theology all the time. Or maybe it's showing how sacrificial you are, making sure people know how late you stayed to clean the church.

What are our phylacteries? You see, every religion has its phylacteries and we have our own ways to show off our devotion and to show off our religious status.

And now it doesn't help when leaders in churches do the same. When they do the same, especially with their titles. Have you noticed that? Church leaders love their titles.

In fact, Jesus points it out. Verse 7, he says, they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called rabbi by others. Or in our context, doctor, prophet, apostle, so and so.

Or my pet peeve, by the way, is when ministry leaders name their ministries after themselves. Have you noticed that? I really, it really gets to me.

[13 : 07] Well, how about we take some marks and name it after one of the pastors. Let's call it Dylan Marais Ministries. How will that be? In fact, I asked AI to put a mock-up of what that would look like.

How about that? We could have a big sign on Casino Road. Man, we would fill this place up. Now, we joke.

We joke. But the problem in much of Christianity today is that this is normal. It's actually not weird to do that.

Modern Christian culture, if you look around at most modern Christian culture, it's become about the leaders, hasn't it? It's become all about who is your pastor? Who is your leader?

Now, hopefully we're not like that at St. Mark's. Because you know what? God actually hates that. God hates it when leaders, the people He's entrusted to take His word to others, start to bring the glory on themselves rather than Him.

[14 : 17] And not only do they promote themselves, but in turn they burden people. And that's the thing that Jesus is taking aim at here and warning His people against. Don't be involved in a type of religion that does that, that burdens you all the time and that the leaders are using to promote themselves.

In fact, God got so bothered with it as it happened in His nation Israel for all those centuries that He went on to promise that He would do something about it, that He would put an end to this.

And we read about that in Ezekiel 34. He goes on. We read it earlier, but I want to remind you of what God said He is going to do about all this false, presumptuous, status-seeking, burdensome religion that had become the norm.

He said this, Ezekiel 34 from verse 7, And therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord. As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord.

This is what the Sovereign Lord says. I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves.

[15 : 47] I will rescue my flock from their mouths and it will no longer be food for them. For this is what the Sovereign Lord says. I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.

I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. So God is saying here that because of the failure of leaders of religion, He said He's had enough.

He called time out and He says, I'm going to now come. I'm going to come and I'm going to judge those leaders and I'm going to take over their job. And that is exactly what Jesus came to fulfill.

That's why Jesus came. Amongst other things, He came to take over the job of those who were misleading God's people. Jesus, you see, is God Himself fulfilling this promise He made hundreds of years before.

Come to us. Come to you and me to lead us to life in a way that human teachers cannot. To teach us, to teach you and me how to live the way He made us to live and how to live a life that leads to abundance and eternity.

[17 : 10] But to teach us, to teach us to live the right way, not in a way that adds heavier burdens to our lives like human religion and human teachers always do, but in a way that takes those burdens away.

And that is why Jesus, back in Matthew 11, said these words. Matthew 11, 28 to 29, He says this, Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. That's what Jesus came to say to us. Learn from me.

You see, because all all these other teachers in every religion, imams, priests, or the secular

version, the life coach gurus that you see on YouTube, all of them, you know what they do?

They'll all tell you something you need to do. That's what the basis of their teaching is. If you boil it down, it's always, this is what you need to do.

[18 : 35] This is what you need to achieve. This is how you need to improve your life. You know what they're doing? They're keeping, putting more rocks in your backpack. All of these teachers that you'll ever hear, they might be really charismatic or they might be really, like, exciting to listen to, but at the end of the day, their message is, here's another rock, here's another burden, here's another thing you must do if you're going to have a better life, if you're going to live the right way.

The good news of Jesus is not about what you must do, but about what He has done to take your burden away, to take that backpack off you and put it on Himself.

And that's what He did when He died on the cross for your sins and when He rose again for your justification, if you trust in Him. That is why Jesus is different to every other religion and every other teacher you'll ever hear.

They will all put burdens on you, He will take them away. And if you have not yet realized that about Jesus, if you think coming to church, if you feel it is still a burden to come to church, if coming to church to you is about performing and making sure that you meet the standard, well then I want to

tell you, you have not understood Jesus yet.

And you need to come to our Discover Jesus course to find out what it's really all about and you need to do that urgently. Talk to Dylan and sign up for that.

[20:01] It will change your life. If you do not know about Jesus yet and what He has done to take your ultimate burdens away and give you ultimate life, you need to come to that course. Because Jesus has come to replace the teachers of the world and lead people Himself to the life that He longs for you to experience.

But if that's true, if Jesus has come to lead people to life Himself, what does that then mean? And I had to really ask this question this week. What does that mean for me and Dylan and local church leaders and pastors?

Well I think as we read on, to summarize, it means we need to get out the way. We need to get out the way. Look at what Jesus goes on to say from verse 8 of Matthew 23.

But you, talking to now His disciples, who He's forming to be His new community, shaped on the gospel, He says, But you are not to be called Rabbi, for you have one teacher and you are all brothers.

And do not call anyone on earth Father, for you have one Father and He is in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant, for those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

[21:28] Okay, so what is Jesus saying here? Is He saying that we shouldn't have teachers and pastors anymore and leaders in our church? Well, should I just go get a regular job?

Well, no. Actually, if we read the rest of the New Testament, it teaches that God actually gives pastors and teachers to the church. But their role, this is key, their role is not to be the source of new knowledge and wisdom.

Their role is merely messengers of what Jesus teaches us. Because Jesus is our teacher. That's the point He's making here. Jesus has come to replace the teachers of the world to be our teacher. But the way He teaches is through His messengers, His apostles, His prophets, pastors and teachers, Ephesians 4 tells us. But that is the role. That is the limit of the role and it should be of pastors and teachers to do.

They are merely the messengers of Jesus' teaching, not the source of knowledge. And we must never elevate them to be that. That I need this teacher or I need that teacher.

[22:36] And make them more important than they actually are. And yet we tend to do that because we live in a culture which is all about celebrity, isn't it? We love our celebrities and what we do for Christians is we make teachers and pastors into celebrities as well.

We give certain, especially with the internet, our favorite teachers and our favorite pastors, we give them celebrity status or we say they have a special anointing that they have stuff that no one else has.

Or the more kind of subtle reformed evangelical version that I've got my favorite pastor and everything that I hear from other pastors I must check with him.

You know, John MacArthur says this and so that must always be right. That's actually placing them on a pedestal when actually and people like John MacArthur would admit he's only a messenger. Jesus says you have one teacher and you are all brothers. We are only messengers and pastors and teachers shouldn't be treated as more than that.

[23:45] Okay, so Jesus talks about titles there. Does that mean we must never use titles like doctor or reverend which we do in church? No, again, the rest of the Bible also teaches us about this.

The apostles and the early church still recognized office and they recognized qualification to teach to be faithful messengers precisely because it is so easy to misuse the position and not faithfully teach the message of Jesus and so it is right to recognize those who are qualified to do that.

But Jesus is saying here don't use these titles to make people more important than they are. That's what he's trying to get at and yet we do, don't we?

I think especially in our own setting here in Africa it's amazing how much honor is given to those who have titles and amazing how much those who have qualifications doctor or reverend or right reverend bishop they will make sure people know they will put it on the beginning of their name for everything even if it's not related to their qualifications it's because titles are super important in our

culture and they'll seek honor because of their titles but when that happens Jesus says that's a sign that something is wrong something's gone deeply wrong in the church and as Christians we need to be able to spot that that's why Jesus is telling the disciples here you need to be able to spot when your religion has gone faulty and so how do we do that in summary in closing how do we spot when our

Christianity is faulty well firstly it adds burdens rather than taking them away and secondly it puts leaders on pedestals that's what Jesus says are the two major warning signs of faulty Christianity faulty religion here but Jesus goes on and says he's come to make a new type of community that is centered around him as the ultimate teacher he has come to make a new type of community that are churches where no one is more important than someone else and as he says the greatest among you will be your servant that's the kind of community that's the new community ethic that Jesus wants to instill in his people but if you compare that what Jesus wants his churches to be today versus what they were what the Pharisees and scribes over here were elevating leaders and burdening people which which are churches today closer to and I think too often they're like like it was in

[26:46] Jesus day adding burdens and putting leaders on pedestals but Jesus came to change that churches where no one is more important than anybody else where everybody has a different role to play and everybody are brothers and sisters and they're equal value where the pastor who preaches is no more important than the person who serves tea and he wants his churches to be a place where burdens you come and burdens Burdens are lifted!

Burdens are taken away! Not added to you! And so as I close I want to ask is our church St. Mark's a place like that? It's a valid question we need to ask when we read a passage like this.

Is this a place where we serve each other as equals? And is this a place and I'm asking genuinely I don't know and we need to ask ourselves is this a place where when someone comes through those doors and visits us perhaps for the first time they feel that their burdens are lifted or do they feel that burdens are added to them?

This must be a place where burdens are lifted off sinners! But also it's not just what is a church it's not the building it's you and me it's the people and because church is actually the people we need to ask ourselves each of us another question am I a place like that are you a place like that to other people?

Not burdening people with standards that you need them to keep if they're going to be acceptable to you that's very common isn't it?

[28:27] where we have standards for other people around us and we'll only sort of open ourselves up to them when they keep those standards and yet so often we ourselves fail to keep the standards we hold others to just like the Pharisees did here!

are you a place where burdens are lifted where you are serving those who are around you taking burdens!

away from them rather than adding them and doing that primarily by reminding them of the one who came to take our greatest burdens!

for us are you a messenger of that one and is that seen in your life and your words and how you treat others let's pray and ask that we would be a church like that Lord Jesus we thank you for this warning that you gave to your disciples all those centuries ago and as we read of what was wrong with religion in their day we see so!

is the same today and we pray Lord that you would help us to take these warnings to heart and not be a church like that not be a church that adds burdens not be a church that elevates some over others but Lord would you help us to be the kind of community you came to make where you are the center and that whenever someone comes into this church they feel that their burden of sin is lifted and that they understand and they experience the love of Christ and Lord we do thank you for all you've done for us so that we can know you despite our sin you've lifted our burdens so that we can have life help us to follow you and to represent you well to others we pray this in Jesus name Amen Amen