

Wolves in Wool:

Pharisees, Faithfulness and Fraud
Matthew 23

Sermon One: Who are these Wolves in Wool?

Opening ILL: I was in middle school when all of the famous failing televangelists began to fall. Even worse, I was not yet a Christian, and I remember being completely disenfranchised by their hypocrisy. I remember hearing people mock and ridicule not only these disobedient and scandalous men, but also their God.

Lest we be too hard on them, though, let's remember that all of us are at least a little bit hypocritical. Let me prove that to you. Do you act exactly the same in church as you do at home? Should you?

Quote: Were a stranger to judge of me by what I sometimes say in the pulpit, he might think that, like the angels, I had but two things in view, to do the will of God, and to behold his face. But, alas! ... I hope Satan will never be able to persuade me that I am a mere hypocrite and stage-player; but sure I am, that there is so much hypocrisy in me, so many littlenesses and self-seekings insinuating into my plan of conduct, that I have humbling cause to account myself unworthy and unprofitable, and to say, "Enter not in to judgment with thy servant, O Lord."
John Newton [Works 1:491]

Also, lest we be too hard on those who fall, let's remember that our inconsistencies bring the same reproach on the Lord as theirs does. Let this humble us and break our hearts.

However, lest we deal too gently with ourselves and with hypocrites, let's not allow ourselves to deal lightly with what Jesus will so clearly and severely denounce in this passage!

I. Introduction

A. To the name of the series—Why Wolves in Wool?

1. This title is adapted from **Matthew 7:15** Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

B. To the theme of the series

1. The basic theme of this series is religious hypocrisy.
 - i. Hypocrisy--the practice of claiming to have moral standards or beliefs to which one's own behavior does not conform; pretense.
2. See Romans 2:21-24

C. How does this fall under our theme for the year?

1. Sincerity is absolutely essential in love and good deeds.
2. Hypocrisy is that state of disconnect between love and good deeds.

II. Who were these Wolves in Wool?

A. Who were the Scribes and Pharisees?

1. **Scribes (οἱ γραμματεῖς; סֹפְרֵי)**—Some interesting facts¹:

- i. Originally, scribes were simply people who could read and write. The ruling class began to depend on scribes in order to write and interpret laws and contracts.
- ii. They were also respected for their knowledge of the Torah. They were valued because the Torah was.
- iii. After the Babylonian exile, the profession of scribe began to be seen as above other professions.
- iv. In Judaism, the scribes were “possessors of divine, esoteric knowledge” and as such “The immediate heirs and successors of the prophets.
- v. They began to be called, “rabbi,” which means “my great one.”
- vi. The Scribes were mostly Pharisees, but some were Sadducees.

¹ The information for this (along with much more) is found in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia vol 3, pgs 822-829

- vii. The scribes were among the main conspirators in Jesus' death.
- 2. **Pharisees (Φαρισαῖοι)**—Seven common types/characteristics of Pharisees:
 - i. Shoulder Pharisees—they pinned their good deeds on their shoulders.
 - ii. “Wait a little” Pharisees—These were those who always had an excuse to put off obedience.
 - iii. “Bruised and bleeding” Pharisees—These would keep their eyes shut when women were in the room and trip over/bump into everything to show how holy they were.
 - iv. “Humpback tumbling” Pharisees—These would walk around backwards and hunched over to show their humility.
 - v. “Ever-seeking” Pharisees—These kept meticulous notes of their good deeds to make sure they were properly rewarded in Heaven for them.
 - vi. “Fearing” Pharisees—These were obsessed with Hell.
 - vii. “God-fearing” Pharisees—These were genuine, sincere, law-loving Pharisees. (Nicodemus)

III. Do as they say but not as they do! (Matthew 23:1-3)

ILL: “Do as I say, not as I do!” This is an unfortunately common way of parenting or leading in any capacity. There is a sense in which there is some truth to this, but there is also a sense in which this is horrible.

ILL: Classic anti-drug commercial: “I learned it by watching you!”

- A. They have seated themselves on the seat of Moses.
 - 1. Notice how Jesus puts this: They themselves have taken this position!
 - i. They were not necessarily ordained by God. Instead, they were ordained by greed and by bullying!
 - 2. Notice how Jesus describes this: The seat of Moses
 - i. The place of ruler
 - ii. The place of law-giver
 - iii. The place of directly communicating with God.
- B. Obey what they tell you to do.
 - 1. They are the spiritual authorities in the lives of the everyday people, at least for now.
 - 2. They are the guardians and primary teachers of the law, at least for now.

Point: When is a liar not a liar? When he is telling the truth. The truth is still the truth, even when it is spoken by a compromised source (Praise the Lord, I am glad that you don't have to be perfect to preach!).

- C. You can obey them. Just don't emulate them!
 - 1. Wait...what? I thought these were the good guys? (That's how the original audience would respond.)
 - 2. Why not?
 - i. Because they say a lot, but they don't do a lot.
 - ii. Because they are not even obedient to their own rules.
 - iii. We will see in the course of this study just how bad it got.

IV. What was the Problem? Pride and Pretense! (Matthew 23:4-7)

- A. They are a burden—beware the rule makers!
 - 1. They are strict and oppressive to others, but gentle on themselves.
 - 2. They are strict and oppressive to others, but lazy in themselves.

Point: We have to be real careful how we define faithfulness to our people!

- B. They are all show—beware the showy fakers!
 - 1. They widen their Phylacteries.
 - 2. They lengthen their tassels.

- C. They love attention—beware the spotlight takers!

V. What is the Solution? Servant Leadership! (Matthew 23:8-12)

- A. Let's be careful with the fancy titles (vv. 8-10)!

1. **ILL:** “Most Holy Reverend Doctor!”
 2. Does this mean that you can’t call me “pastor?”
 - i. Honestly, there is a danger even in this.
 - ii. However, there is a danger in the other extreme as well—disrespect.
 - iii. Here’s where I land on this:
 - 1) Never feel compelled to call me “Pastor Dom” or anything like that unless:
 - a) You would feel disrespectful in doing so.
 - b) You really are disrespectful in doing so.
- B. Let’s celebrate lowliness, not supposed greatness (vv. 11-12).
1. If you want to be great, be a slave (Matthew 20:28)

VI. Some practical exhortations

- A. Let me encourage you to read Matthew 23 over and over again and think through Jesus’ critique of these wolves in wool!
- B. Let me encourage you to ask yourself the following questions:
1. In what ways does my walk not match my talk?
 2. In what ways do I create an unnecessary standard for leadership or the “really saved?”