

# What Would Jesus Say to Conservatives?

Matthew 23:23-28

Preach January 18, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

**Introduction.** During our fall semester of CDF, Dr. Chuck Lippy taught a great class with catchy title: "Is Evangelical a Dirty Word?" During the class he traced the history of the word back to its Greek New Testament roots – euengellion – good news. He then shared about its development over time through the present time. He concluded that it was not a "dirty word." That was a good thing because a few weeks after the course, he shared the stage in the Vine with a bishop from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

Often people connect evangelical with conservative (even though they are not the same.) Sometimes you will hear someone refer to another as an "evangelical conservative." In the minds of many, the two words are close kin.

This morning we are going to consider this: "If Jesus were present today in human form, what would he say to Christian conservatives?" "If he were invited to a gathering of key Christian conservatives at the Convention Center, what would his keynote address be?"

## What is a Christian conservative?

What is a Christian conservative? Would you know one if you saw one? Would you recognize yourself as one?

In the Christian community, several labels are often associated with conservative: evangelical, traditionalist, fundamentalist, orthodox, Bible-believing, Confessing and Pentecostal. Depending on the circles in which you associate, some of these are considered negative, while others are considered positive.

Conservatism is located on a continuum. On the extremes are ultra-liberalism and ultra-conservatism. For many who like to label others, if one is to the right of where they are they are conservative, to the left they are liberal. Some would consider me to be liberal while others would consider me to be conservative.

People often are identified as conservative or liberal based on their positions on particular issues: "virgin birth," "homosexuality," "abortion."

On my first day in seminary, I was in the cafeteria at Emory University eating with some friends. While seated at a table, we were joined by another man. One of my friends began a rant about the professors in the seminary being so 'broad-minded' they are flat-headed. Little did he know that the person who joined us was a professor. Later that semester, most of us who had been at the table, including the one who made the "broad-minded" comment, were seated in that professor's classroom. During a lecture, he looked over in the direction of my friend and said, "Some people are so narrow-minded that they could see through a keyhole with both eyes?"

At the heart of the word "conservative" is "conserve." Conservatives seek to conserve that which they consider to be important. There are matters of faith and practice that conservatives believe it is important to guard and preserve. A couple of years ago on an NPR broadcast regarding

conservatism, Barbara Bradley-Hagerty commented that *conservatives have a depth of nostalgia and fear their Christian heritage being left behind.*

Conservatives often seek to preserve "biblical theology." They take seriously the exhortation in Jude 3 "to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." Conservatives generally are advocates for personal morality and abhor what they consider to be the deterioration of morality. Additionally, conservatives frequently attempt to preserve certain aspects of religious practice such as a manner of worship.

Within most conservative camps, there is a significant emphasis on the individual, particularly personal salvation and individual responsibility. "God loves you and wants a personal relationship with you. You must respond to God in faith. You are responsible to God for what you do or don't do."

Critics of conservatism often raise issues of those holding the position. They point out that conservatives tend to deemphasize social justice and concern for the poor, have excessive concern about sexuality (Wikipedia, *Christian Conservatism*), often seem judgmental about the morality of others and are too political (David Kinnaman, *Unchristian, 153ff*).

What would Jesus say to those I have described as conservative? To gain some understanding, let's take a look back into the days in which he dwelt on earth.

## Jesus and the Pharisees.

During that time, there were 5 main groups of Jewish people who lived in Palestine: the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Zealots, the Essenes and the people of the land. Often these groups were at odds with one another. Looking at a couple of these over the next two weeks might give us some insights into what Jesus would say. While none of these groups would be considered conservative or liberal in today's terms, Jesus'

interactions with the Pharisees give us a good place to look at what he might say to conservatives.

Jesus had a significant number of encounters and interactions with the Pharisees. While their roots reached back to pre-exilic times for the Jews, the form they had in Jesus' day sprang forth the Hasidim, "Pious Ones," who were around during the Maccabean Revolt. They were deeply devoted to the Law of Moses and protested the Hellenization taking place in their land. By Jesus' day, they were religious leaders who were serious about the scripture. They went to great pains to see that they followed the Law completely. On one level, they were "liberal" because they accepted the writings as well as the Law and they wrote long commentaries on what the laws meant and how to practice them. In other ways they were conservative in how they invested themselves in following the Law.

In the gospels and Acts, they were both heroes and villains. Jesus often associated with Pharisees. Generally, he was supportive of their theological understandings. Yet there were times when Jesus took issue with many of their ideas and practices. Here in Matthew 23, we find a chapter where Jesus addresses their needs and his concerns.

In our scripture lesson, Jesus shares an image that is vivid. He says to the Pharisees, "*You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.*" Most of us, if we were to find a gnat in our drink, would pour it out and get a new glass and drink. But Jesus' audience would preserve the drink by straining it to remove the gnat. He was saying they were more concerned about the minor issues than the major ones. They took great pains to address minor issues. In our language, they majored on the minors.

There are two areas mentioned in our text where Jesus demonstrates this. Jesus pointed out that the Pharisees tended to be more concerned about the outer appearance than what was on the inside. He said they cleaned the outside of the cup but not the inside.

One of the critiques by some about conservatives is the act of judging. Some time ago, a friend and I heard a presentation about a group of people whose culture is significantly different from

his and mine. After the presentation, he commented about their "lostness." While I understood what he was saying, a measure of judgment was present that probably is not constructive in helping the "lost be found." Jesus would warn us about judging others based on their differences or their failure to live up to our expectations of religious appearance.

Many of the Pharisees were concerned about their appearance and reputations out in public. They liked to wear articles that clearly identified them as religious people. They did things such as praying and giving publicly so as to be noticed. They expected others to do and to look as they did.

Today, it is not unusual to see people displaying symbols that identify them as Christian, whether it is wearing a collar as clergy person, wearing a cross, having a bumper sticker or wearing "witness wear." Wearing these things is not wrong in itself. But Jesus did question the motives of Pharisees. He felt many of them wanted to be noticed.

Perhaps it is at this point that Jesus might speak to present day conservatives. He probably would call "us" to look inward at our motivations for our outward display of our faith. Are we attempting to draw attention to ourselves or do we want to draw attention to God?

Jesus found the Pharisees sought to follow the Law down to its smallest detail. He comments here that they tithed, that is 10% of the very herbs that were grown in their garden. (I looked at the offering this morning and I did not see any packets of cumin or oregano.) It seems that Jesus was pleased that they tried to be true to their giving by not only tithing their income but also the smaller things. I wish we had that same type of determination in giving.

But the problem Jesus noticed was that they tended to see this as their "religious duty" (if you are a faithful God follower, you will tithe everything). While it has its place, Jesus pointed out it was superseded by matters of much greater importance – justice, mercy and faith.

I believe these are words Jesus would share with conservatives today – "Keep up your religious service (giving, praying, studying, and worshiping) but elevate your practice of justice, mercy and

faith. These are matters close to the heart to of God.

If you will notice, two of these are very social in nature: justice and mercy. While each of us may want justice and mercy, here the concern of Jesus is that we show it and be an advocate of it for others.

Justice comes as people are treated fairly and get what they deserve. Justice is the act of those who have sharing with those who do not have. Two weeks ago, I was invited to a meeting at the conference office to hear about the Central Conference Pension Initiative. In the UMC worldwide, there are over 12 million members in some 130 annual conferences. In the 67 conferences outside the US, there are 3.5 million members. In 56 of those conferences, there is either no or an inadequate means of caring for retired pastors – those who grow too old or lack the health to continue to serve. Today, some retired pastors in these areas struggle to put food on their tables. During this presentation, our bishop commented, "This is a justice issue." At the end of the presentation, Anne Travis (Clair's mother) commented, "This is a justice issue." There are many "justice" issues in our world and our community. Our faith calls us to wrestle with them and to take actions that we can.

Mercy is about offering to others a gracious response. It is giving a break to those who may not deserve a break. It is offering forgiveness to those who are guilty. It is not looking down on others who fail to meet our expectations. As we look at others, we must remember who we are, what we have done and from whence we have come. (One of the sobering passages for me is found in 1 Corinthians 6. Paul gives a long list of vices and comments that those who practice such things do not inherit the Kingdom of God. Fortunately he does not stop there but goes and reminds his readers (of which I am one) that such were you before God transformed your life.

Faith has a social element but it relates to the relationship with God. For Pharisees and conservatives, it is easy to trust in religious practices and efforts. If we do this and this, then God's kingdom will be present. But Jesus is calling to

place emphasis in the heart of the relationship with God and trust God.

While this is not necessarily a “conservative” issue, allow me to share an example from church life. As some of you are aware, January is when FCUMC plans and sets its budget. We take the campaign pledges, anticipated income from other sources and requests from committees and seek to establish an operating budget. Examining and analyzing those numbers is critical and central to good stewardship. Yet there is a point at which trust comes into play. There are unknowns. There are needs and opportunities the church wants to address. We do our best and lean in trust upon God.

### **Summary.**

In summary, I believe that on one hand Jesus would commend conservatives for “conserving” the faith and being advocates for personal salvation and responsibility. On the other, I believe Jesus would call conservatives to take a look within themselves rather than being judgmental and to emphasize and practice justice, mercy and faith.

### **Invitation.**

In light of this, I want to offer two invitations. Do you have personal faith in Christ? If not, I encourage you to open your heart to the Lord. If you would do this, I invite you to come forward and pray with one of the pastors at the chancel.

What matters of justice are stirring your heart? Offer yourself to God to act and to make a difference in these areas.