

Define the Relationship

Relationship > Rules

Frankton – 2/1/15

Scripture: Matthew 23.1-7 don't do as the Pharisees do

Proposition: We are to follow Jesus, not the religious rules.

We've been talking the last few weeks about the difference between being a [SLIDE] fan and being a follower. As quickly and simply as I can, here's the difference, and this comes from Kyle Idleman's book, *Not a Fan*. A fan is an enthusiastic admirer, but he's never in the game. On the other hand, a follower makes sacrifices. He gets in the game. We talked about Nicodemus, fan, coming to Jesus at night, so as not to sacrifice his stature as a Pharisee; and Nicodemus, the follower, being one of the two men who buried Jesus. We talked about the immoral woman, the follower, who didn't hesitate to risk coming into a Pharisee's house to show her love for Jesus, while the Pharisee, the fan, didn't show even common hospitality to Jesus. We talked about Jesus telling the crowd that he wants to be their one and only, not their one of many. So let's get continue talking about fans and followers of Jesus.

Most of you probably don't remember the story of [SLIDE] Matt Emmons. Matt was an Olympian for the USA during the 2004 Olympics held in Athens, Greece. In fact he was a very good Olympian. He was one shot away from claiming a gold medal in the 50 meter three position rifle event. He was so far ahead of the field that he didn't even need to make a bull's-eye to win. All he needed to do what hit the target. Any shot hitting his target would have one. Well he shot and he hit a target. Unfortunately he fired at the wrong target. He was standing in lane 2 and aimed at and hit the target in lane 3. It was an extremely rare mistake in elite competition. Had he hit the same shot on his target it would have scored an 8.1, a good score, giving him the gold medal. Since he hit the wrong target, his score was zero. Instead of a gold medal, he ended up placing eighth – far out of the medals.

That's a picture of what happens to a lot of fans. If you asked them, "Are you a fan or a follower?" they would confidently respond "follower." It's not a question of their effort or desire. They are following hard. Here's the problem; it's not really Jesus they are following. Without realizing it, they are aiming at the wrong target. Instead of following Jesus they are following religious rules and rituals. They are standing in lane 2 and aiming at the target in lane 3.

This morning's scripture is part of Jesus's last sermon here on earth and it's directed right at these religious leaders. He doesn't hold anything back. If you grew up thinking of Jesus as a Mr. Rogers of Nazareth who was always smiling, winking at people, and wearing a sweater, the tone Jesus takes with these religious leaders may surprise you. The name of the sermon we're talking about today is not "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" This sermon is traditionally called "The Seven Woes." (Although not in the paraphrase I read to you today.) Seven times during this sermon Jesus says, "Woe to you..." And each "woe" is followed by a scathing rebuke. Jesus is going to strongly oppose these religious leaders because he doesn't want people to confuse following the rules with following him.

Define the Relationship

These spiritual leaders that Jesus was addressing made up the Sanhedrin, a religious council. Much like our Congress is made up of Democrats and Republicans, the council was made up of two different groups: the Sadducees and the Pharisees. And again, much like Democrats and Republicans, these groups didn't get along. The Sadducees were the elite - you were born into being a Sadducee. Some Christians are like Sadducees, they were born into their faith. At its worst, their faith has been more about honoring their heritage than surrendering their lives. We're not going to talk much about them today – their story is for another day. Today we're going to talk about the other group - The Pharisees. You weren't born a Pharisee, you had to work hard in religious studies to become a Pharisee. And a lot of Christians are like Pharisees – they measure their faith by how hard they work at it, concentrating on saying and doing the 'right' things.

In today's scripture, Jesus tries to get the attention of a group of fans known as the Pharisees. If you were trying to determine who the fans were and who the followers were in Jesus' day, most people would quickly identify these The Pharisees as the followers. They had a mastery of the Scriptures. They were considered expert theologians. They were especially known for their strict observance of the religious law. They would have received high scores for their religious rule-keeping, but that's not the target Jesus was most concerned about. Following the rules kept them focused on the outside, but who they were on the inside is what Jesus paid attention to. And the problem with these religious leaders is that, like many fans, who they were on the outside did not match up with who they were on the inside.

Jesus' main concern with these religious leaders is that they were hypocrites. Not my word; his - eight times. The word 'hypocrite' comes from ancient Greek theater in which an actor would play several roles and for each role, they would wear a mask. You never really see the actors face, just the mask they wear. Jesus says in verse 5: [SLIDE] *Their lives are perpetual fashion shows, embroidered prayer shawls one day and flowery prayers the next.* As a recovering hypocrite, I can tell you that some fans can be almost impossible to identify because they deliver Oscar-worthy performances as they play the role of follower, but aren't actually following.

When Jesus begins this sermon, he is speaking to the people about these religious leaders: [SLIDE] *The religion scholars and Pharisees are competent teachers in God's Law. [SLIDE] You won't go wrong in following their teachings on Moses.* [2-3a] I wonder if he paused her for dramatic effect. The Pharisees aren't used to Jesus patting them on the back. Typically Jesus is at odds with them so maybe they began to think, "OK, this is more like it. He's finally coming over to our side. He's pointing us out as the authorities." But then Jesus brings the hammer down: *But be careful about following them. They talk a good line, but they don't live it.* [3b] the problem Jesus had with these teachers is that what they were teaching just wasn't who they really were. They were wearing masks, like Greek actors.

Jesus doesn't expect his followers to be perfect, but he does call them to be authentic. That's what Jesus wants in his followers – someone who isn't pretending on the outside to have it all together. That's one of the ways the word hypocrisy is defined, "the act of pretending." Children love to pretend. Look at them on Halloween with their costumes: Elsa and Olaf were big hits last Halloween. Maybe kids play sandlot baseball while dreaming of hitting the home run that wins the World Series, or stand at their backyard free throw line pretending that if they hit the shot they win the NCAA Championship. But somewhere along the way, it stops being a childhood game and we start to take our pretending a little more seriously – or should I say religiously. As children

Define the Relationship

we may play pretend – but the problem Jesus had with these leaders is that they were professional pretenders.

They pretended to have a relationship with God, but what they really did was worship following the rules. And by doing so, they made it harder for people to come to God. They taught that God's salvation and favor was something that had to be earned, not just by keeping God's Law, but also by keeping a bunch of other laws they added to it. For instance there were numerous laws on what you could and couldn't do on the Sabbath. Laws that make no sense. Jesus spoke so strongly to these rule-loving religious leaders because he knew that when following him becomes about following the rules, people end up walking away from both. We've seen that in some churches. They are the "Thou shalt not" churches. But when we truly learn to follow Jesus, we find that obedience to God comes from the inside out. Submission to what God wants for our lives flows naturally out of that relationship. We submit to God because we love God. We don't submit to God in order to love God.

These religious leaders may have been keeping the letter of the law, but they were missing the spirit of it. They were technically obeying the commands of Scripture but they were missing the point of those commands. Like fans today, they would give their time and attention to following the religious rituals, but would neglect to show God's love to the people around them, which was the point of the rules in the first place. Instead they use God's law to beat up people who are already hurting. When laws become more important than love, and rules take precedent over relationships, it's a good sign that we have become fans who are aiming at the wrong target. We must constantly fight the tendency to make rules and policies more important than people, because when that happens we are no longer following Jesus.

When following the rules becomes our principle focus, then you can count on guilt being our primary motivator. Jesus spoke of guilt as a weight that these religious leaders forced people to carry by making a relationship with God all about following the rules. Jesus says to the crowd about the Pharisees, with the Pharisees well within earshot: **[SLIDE]** ...*they package [God's Law] in bundles of rules, loading you down like pack animals.* [4] Fans who follow the rules instead of following Jesus find that they are weighed down with guilt. Every time they come to church they find the preacher has another weight to add to the bar. They find the Sunday school class adding another chore to the list or requirements. The key word to guilt is "do", as in we try to do enough to make up for our mistakes and earn God's favor. But Christ calls for grace. The key word for grace is "done." Our punishment was taken by Christ. He made a way where there was no way. Fans are all about "do" while followers are all about "done."

If Jesus were preaching this same sermon today, it might go something like this: "Woe to you fans, if you would be as passionate about feeding the poor as you are about the music you sing in worship, then hunger would end this week. Woe to you fans, if you sacrificed as much to care for the homeless and the poor in your community as you do in caring for your church building, the need would be wiped out. Woe to you fans, if you would be as zealous about helping for the sick as you are about a 'Christmas tree' being called a 'Christmas tree' and not a 'holiday tree,' health insurance wouldn't be a problem. We end up aiming at the wrong target and losing out on the medal.

Define the Relationship

Here's the thing: fans of Jesus sooner or later find themselves exhausted. Fans grow tired of trying to maintain an outer appearance that doesn't match an inner passion. They find themselves weary of trying to keep all the rules in hopes of somehow earning God's favor. And I want you to know, as we end this sermon, that Jesus came to free you from rules religion. To those who have been hauling around a long list of rules. To those who are pretending to be more than they really are. To those who are weighed down with the fear and guilt of religion. To all the fans who are worn out on religion, Jesus invites you to follow him this way:

[SLIDE] Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. [SLIDE] I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me - watch how I do it. [SLIDE] Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. [SLIDE] Keep Company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

That sounds a whole lot better than trying to follow all the rules and failing.