

How to be Sober Without Being Sombre

Matthew 23:1-12 *Matthew 23:1* Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, ² saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ "Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. ⁴ "For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. ⁵ "But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. ⁶ "They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷ "greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' ⁸ "But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. ⁹ "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. ¹⁰ "And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. ¹¹ "But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² "And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Here are two churches for you to choose from. Church A is the church of Lord Smiley Face. This is a church where everyone is expected to grin and giggle during worship. The funnier the preacher is, the better, and the more comfortable Sunday worship feels, the better. It's casual, it's chatty, it's full of fun. There can be no space to think or pause, because that would feel serious, and the church of Lord Smiley Face does not want that. Worshipers of Lord Smiley Face feel it is their responsibility to feel chipper, upbeat, excited and playful.

Church B is the church of Lord Gloom. Here everyone is expected to seem grim and severe, and speak in lofty, far-off tones, like undertakers. Laughter is out of place, and smiles are rare. Worship feels heavy, ponderous and gloomy. Worshipers think that the heavier they feel, the godlier they are.

Which of those churches would you like to attend? It's an evil choice, isn't it? One church does not take God seriously at all, the other has gone to the other extreme of becoming gloomy. Sadly, in our day, with so much confusion in Christianity, churches tend to pendulum between these extremes. Probably by far the greatest majority of churches err on the side of being Smiley-Face churches, substituting a kind of skin-deep happiness for biblical joy, and cheap entertainment for true worship.

There is no doubt that the Bible expects Christians to be serious people. Our Bibles often translate the word from the original as *sober*. People who are sober are clear-thinking, not raucous, not out of control, not foolish or silly. They take life seriously.

1 Thessalonians 5:6 ⁶ *Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.*

Titus 2:2-3 ² *that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience; ³ the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things --*

1 Peter 1:13 ¹³ *Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ;*

1 Peter 5:8 ⁸ *Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.*

Christians have a lot to be serious about. The gospel is serious – it is life and death. Christian doctrine is serious, it is what shapes all of life and all of your decisions. Worship is serious, because we are responding to God as He is, and we don't want to be guilty of idolatry. Life is serious because it was made by a God who takes His own works seriously and takes us seriously.

As we flee from one error, we often flee too far into another. As we try to compensate from stressing one thing too much, we stress another too much. And unless we will allow the Holy Spirit to use His Word and use others to show us, we can begin to think that our sombre ways are the same thing as holiness.

Sober is taking matters seriously, sombre is taking matters heavily. Sober is thinking clearly and responding appropriately, sombre is to be dark in thought, and responding without hope.

The kind of sombre mood that slowly saps the joy out of a church, and takes the life out of our service is not something found in music or lighting, or if people were suits to church or not. A sombre mood is found in the heart. A sombre mood is a perverting of seriousness. It is what any of us can do with the good and necessary affection of seriousness. Just like joy can be perverted into being flippant, frivolous, and even trivial, so seriousness can be perverted into being sombre, gloomy, and heavy. Sombreness is a trap any of us can fall into, because we are all sinners.

That's what had happened to the Pharisees. The Pharisees actually started out as a good movement. In the centuries before Christ, there had been a lot of compromise. A lot of Jews had been encouraged to abandon the Bible and embrace the Greek culture around them. Other groups began denying the supernatural elements of the Bible, like angels, life after death, the resurrection. The Pharisees were like a back to the Bible movement. They were a separatist, puritan movement. They did good work but along the way, the sin in every heart had twisted the movement, leaving it very far from how it began. By the time of Jesus, they had gone very wrong. There were still godly Pharisees, but by and large, they were the ones responsible for crucifying Jesus. Who would have thought that the original Bible-believers, the conservatives would have murdered the Messiah?

And there's little doubt that the Pharisees were of the sombre variety. We know they fasted twice a week, and Jesus described the way they emphasized their dour appearance;

Matthew 6:16 ¹⁶ "Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

That's not because conservatism breeds this stuff. It's because it is already in the heart and unless we are listening to the Holy Spirit, it comes back.

In Matthew 23, Jesus first addresses people about the Pharisees, before speaking to the Pharisees. Verses 1-12 is a mini sermon about what had gone wrong with the Pharisees, before He then turns to address the Pharisees themselves. Looking at verses 1 to 12, we can see three negative areas of the Pharisees. If we study these verses, we will find out some of the reasons why good, conservative movements can go wrong, becoming hard, heavy, gloomy and depressing. We'll turn those into positives: things that serious believers do to avoid becoming sombre believers.

I. Serious Believers Practise What they Preach

Matthew 23:1-3 Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, ² saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ "Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.

The Pharisees were sitting in Moses' seat, that is, they were sitting in the place of authority to teach God's law. And Jesus said, in light of that, obey their teaching, but do not follow their example, for they preach, but they do not practice.

Here is the first error of the Pharisees, and the one that breeds all the others: teaching and obedience are disconnected. The Pharisees thought it was enough to know the theory and not live it out. Experts in knowledge but amateurs in obedience.

So what do you do when you are thin on the living reality of following God? You compensate by making your religion seem grave and grand and heavy. But it is no longer serious, it is just sombre.

Once a Christian begins to think that it is permissible to preach a high standard, but secretly, or even openly live far below it, he is sowing seeds of unreality. Each decision to preach and not practice, makes the Christian life seem more unreal and more theoretical and more abstract.

Worse, the heart is growing harder, feeling less responsive to God. Soon, you have all the ingredients for a Christianity that is not serious, but acts very sombrely. The reality of knowing God through obedience is gone, and in its place is just a form, a form of godliness but without the power.

If you want the real awe to go out of worship, then live a double-standard. Fake your faith.

Anytime a church tries to preach the Word, it will face the temptation to live below that standard. Now we know that none of us is able to perfectly keep all that we hear. But we strive to bring our lives into conformity with Christ. Where the problem comes is when we start to pretend to obey the Word. Because soon we will begin pretending to worship, pretending to be humble and pretending to be serious, and all that it produces is the sombre, heavy, feel of people plodding through something they do not know and do not love.

The word hypocrite was actually the ancient Greek word *hupocrites*, which just meant an actor who wears a mask. On the stage, the Greek actors would often wear the mask of the character they were portraying. It is when we stop putting into practice what we know, that we must put on a mask for church. And the more people wearing masks, the less sincere and real and truly transformative worship is.

Do you know the secret to authentic, vibrant, joy-filled worship? It is not in the music, or the lighting or the hymns chosen. It is in a living walk with God. When you seek to walk with God and obey the Word, the Bible keeps opening up to you. The Holy Spirit keeps illuminating the Bible to you, not just when you read it, but even during your day.
" to him that hath..."

And as you see more of who God is in your life, you know Him more. And you come to corporate worship, not trying to put up a front, or keep up with others, but express what you have already been seeing of God in the Word. We'll be serious, but not sombre.

II. Serious Believers Preach Grace With Holiness

Matthew 23:4 ⁴ *"For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.*

The Pharisees loaded people with obligations, and rules and laws. They were known for being the strictest of law-keepers, and to sit under their teaching would be to hear how great is one's duty to God. These burdens were crushing in themselves, but the Pharisees made it worse. They made no effort to help. They loaded the 45 kg backpacks of Sabbath regulations, fasting laws, tithing laws, food laws and so forth, and once the man's back was leaning towards the ground, the Pharisees simply sent the man on his way.

In other words, the Pharisees were great at telling people what to do, but miserable at telling people how they could do it. They loved to tell people of their obligations, but they didn't tell people of their resources in God to accomplish it. They piled up commands, but they were stingy with promises. They pummeled you with your duties, but not your enablements.

In other words, they did not preach the enabling grace of God. They preached the holy standard of God, but not the empowering Spirit that makes that standard even possible. They should have known this.

Zechariah 4:6 *So he answered and said to me: "This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' Says the LORD of hosts.*

The more they loaded people with burdens, the more the people became increasingly crushed, despondent and hopeless. They wanted to carry such a load, but they did not know how, and in their own strength, they were collapsing.

Anytime a church teaches how to be Christlike, how to be holy, how to live in a way that pleases God, we can be sure that those demands seem heavy to sinners. And if all that happens is that the church keeps adding Old and New Testament obligations, the burden gets heavier and heavier. With that burden, grows a sense of gloominess and heaviness. The Christian life seems to be a Mount Everest that only some manage to climb. Sanctification seems like an endless list of do's and don'ts.

Now one response is to lighten the load by preaching a compromised kind of holiness. But that's not the answer. The answer is to keep preaching and keep reminding one another of our resources in Christ. As someone put it, for every command, we should be reminded of two promises. We don't shy away from teaching holy living, but we make sure we are saturated in the promises of God; that the atmosphere is charged with the truth of all that we are and have in Christ; that we are often speaking of being filled with the Spirit.

When Jesus taught the Sermon on the mount, He didn't remove all obligations. He showed people the spirit behind the command, and then pointed people to Himself. And just two chapters later, Jesus would say,

Matthew 11:28-30 *"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."*

Whether you are preaching, or teaching a study, or counselling another Christian, we must think to ourselves - will this lighten the load, or will it add another weight.

"If some men were sentenced to hear their own sermons," Charles Spurgeon wrote, "it would be a righteous judgment upon them, and they would soon cry out with Cain, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear.'"

The signs that we are filling the air with the enabling grace of God, is joy. Joy is the dew of heaven when there is the humidity of grace in the air. When we know what our God has done, and will do, how he has finished the work; how we are already accepted, secure, complete in Christ; how He will never leave us nor forsake us; how His strength covers every situation; how His promises cover every fear, the result is joy. Not plastered smiles, not scrunchy-face worship, real joy.

For us to be serious, but not sombre, we must ever fill the air with words of grace, alongside words of warning. Words of Christ's strength alongside words of what is required of us. Words of what God has done, is doing and shall do, alongside words of what we must do.

III. Serious Believers Please God Not Impress Man

Matthew 23:5-10 ⁵ "But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. ⁶ "They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷ "greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' ⁸ "But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. ⁹ "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. ¹⁰ "And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. ¹¹ "But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² "And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

The Pharisees had turned their entire religion into a performance. Jesus says, "All their works they do to be seen by men." So some of the things they would do is take the already prominent phylacteries and make them bigger and more imposing. The border of the garments were to have tassels on the corners but the Pharisees made those tassels especially prominent.

Why did they want this? They wanted honour from men. They wanted admiration and praise from men. At a feast, where the guests of honour sat closest to the host, in descending order of importance, the Pharisees wanted to sit in the place of honour.

They wanted the titles, the special greetings, the stares from people.

But Jesus said they had missed the point of true spirituality where the humble are the greatest, where the people who humble themselves are exalted, and those who puff themselves up will be brought low.

Religion offers a lot of temptation for performance. The God we worship is invisible. He does not respond with an audible voice. He does not immediately tell us if the worship was acceptable or not. And if your faith is being emptied of an internal reality, what is left is an external performance. If your reward is no longer the pleasure of God, the approval of God, seeing and savouring God, then your reward will be impressing others, keeping up appearances, trying to have others think that it is real to you, that you get it.

In a smiley-face church this manifests as believers pinning grins to their faces, doing their best to show others that they are in joyful ecstasy. In gloomy churches this manifests as believers trying to look ponderous and measured, staid and unemotional. But either way, it's a show. And the show is not for God.

But there is no need for this. There was no need for the Pharisees to do this, since Messiah was in their presence. There is no need for our religion to be all external when the Holy Spirit Himself now comes to dwell inside us at salvation

Who is your audience when you come to corporate worship, when you come to Bible studies? I don't mean shut everyone else out, or act like they are not here. They are here, and they see you as you see them. But is the goal to impress them or to encourage them? Is the goal to convince them, or is it to edify them? If God is my primary audience, then the people around me are people I want to serve, they are not the audience I want applause from.

The only reason why we would settle for the cheap substitute of man's approval, is if we have turned away from the burning reality of knowing and loving God.

Turning a church from serious to sombre is a slow bleed. It begins when we start separating theory from life. It continues when we keep teaching standards without promise, holiness without grace. It results in a faith that is primarily about duties and moralistic standards, and not about a relationship with God.

A sombre mood or atmosphere is not the result of certain musical instruments. Nor is true joy a result of other instruments. We don't overcome a sombre mood by singing songs that make us laugh. We don't create real joy by being playful in worship. We don't create joy by minimising God's standards of holiness or preaching less about sin. We don't create joy by just saying that we have it.

We remain a serious church, but a joyful church when we are consistent. We emphasise God's enablement and promises. We emphasise pleasing and worshipping God Himself. If we do this, we will never fall into the ditch of Smiley Face. But we will also avoid the ditch of Gloomy face.