

“Don’t Miss What Really Matters!”  
by Rom A. Pegram (10/29/17)

I don’t know if you guys remember this story or not, but it’s a true story and it happened at the 2004 Olympics. A man by the name of Matt Emmons was competing in the 50-meter three-position rifle event. He didn’t even need a bulls-eye to win. All he had to do with his final shot was to ... be on target. Normally, the shot he made would have received a score of 8.1, more than enough for a gold medal. But in what has been described as “an extremely rare mistake in elite competition,” Emmons fired at the wrong target! Standing in Lane 2, he fired at the target in Lane 3! His score for a good shot at the wrong target? *Zero*. Instead of a medal, Emmons ended up in eighth place...

That’s a picture of what happens to a lot of fans. If you asked them, “Fan or Follower?” they’d confidently answer “Follower.” It’s not a question of effort or desire; they’re following hard. But, here’s the problem: IT’S NOT JESUS THEY’RE FOLLOWING! Without realizing it, *they’re aiming at the wrong target!* Instead of following Jesus, they’re following traditions of religious rules and rituals! *And they’ve confused their targets*—exactly what’s going on in our Bible story for today... Listen (Matthew 23:1-28, NLT):

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, **2** "The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the Scriptures. **3** So practice and obey whatever they say to you, but don't follow their example. For they don't practice what they teach. **4** They crush you with impossible religious demands and never lift a finger to help ease the burden. **5** "Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear extra long tassels on their robes. **6** And how they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the most prominent seats in the synagogue! **7** They enjoy the attention they get on the streets, and they enjoy being called 'Rabbi.'

**8** Don't ever let anyone call you 'Rabbi,' for you have only one teacher, and all of you are on the same level as brothers and sisters. **9** And don't address anyone here on earth as 'Father,' for only God in heaven is your spiritual Father. **10** And don't let anyone call you 'Master,' for there is only one master, the Messiah. **11** The greatest among you must be a servant. **12** But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

**13** "How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you won't let others enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and you won't go in yourselves. **14 15** Yes, how terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn him into twice the son of hell as you yourselves are.

**16** "Blind guides! How terrible it will be for you! For you say that it means nothing to swear 'by God's Temple' -- you can break that oath. But then you say that it is binding to swear 'by the gold in the Temple.' **17** Blind fools! Which is greater, the gold, or the Temple that makes the gold sacred? **18** And you say that to take an oath 'by the altar' can be broken, but to swear 'by the gifts on the altar' is binding! **19** How blind! For which is greater, the gift on the altar, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? **20** When you

swear 'by the altar,' you are swearing by it and by everything on it. **21** And when you swear 'by the Temple,' you are swearing by it and by God, who lives in it. **22** And when you swear 'by heaven,' you are swearing by the throne of God and by God, who sits on the throne.

**23** "How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees.

Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest part of your income, but you ignore the important things of the law -- justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but you should not leave undone the more important things. **24** Blind guides! You strain your water so you won't accidentally swallow a gnat; then you swallow a camel!

**25** "How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees.

Hypocrites! You are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy -- full of greed and self-indulgence! **26** Blind Pharisees! First wash the inside of the cup, and then the outside will become clean, too. **27** "How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs -- beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity. **28** You try to look like upright people outwardly, but inside your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.

These guys Jesus was talking to had a FAN CLUB. These spiritual leaders Jesus was talking to in Matthew 23 made up a religious ruling body of 72 men—a club called ... the Sanhedrin. Within this body were two different groups—one called the Sadducees and the other called the Pharisees. These two groups did not get along. When it came to interpreting scripture, the *Sadducees* were very liberal, and the *Pharisees* were quite conservative...

- The *Sadducees* served the roles of Chief Priest and Elders, as we hear about in scripture. If you were a Sadducee, you were born into that position. There were other requirements, but you it had to be part of your heritage...
- To be a *Pharisee*, however, didn't depend on the family you were born into; it was your hard work that got you there. Becoming a Pharisee required an incredible amount of textual study and theological training (as we've already mentioned regarding Nicodemus and others)...

What I've noticed is that many FANS fit into one of these two camps, too!

- Some FANS are like *Sadducees*. Their faith was something they were born into. It was never really something they chose. It's kind of like when you were born, your parents handed you a mask, and you grew up acting Christian-like, talking like a Christian, listening to Christian music ... and so forth. Your faith has been more about honoring your heritage ... than surrendering your heart...
- And some FANS are like *Pharisees*. They'd measure their faith by their hard work at learning and following the Law. Their 'intellectual knowledge and behavioral compliance' was the target they were aiming at. But even though they said and did the right things, it wasn't a reflection of who they really were. We may say and do the right things, but that's not enough for Jesus. He wants all of us! So, you see ... if you're a FAN, there are some problems...

The main problem Jesus had with these religious leaders was this: THEY WERE HYPOCRITES! You know that Greek Actors were called 'hypocrites'—a single actor

who played several different characters or roles. What people saw didn't reflect who the actor really was! That's why Jesus said of the religious leaders in verse 5a: "Everything they do is for show...." He was dealing with FANS whose teaching wasn't a reflection of who they really were! *Ouch! Amen!* So, where do we stand today (and you knew I was going to be asking that question)?

Jesus gives a number of indicators, in this sermon, that can help us realize—just as his audience in that day—if the *outside* has become more important than the *inside*... Here they are (at the risk of sounding like Jeff Foxworthy): *YOU MIGHT BE A FAN IF...*

**YOU CHOOSE RULES OVER RELATIONSHIP.** Verse 13 records Jesus saying, "How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you won't let others enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and you won't go in yourselves." These religious leaders were making it as hard as they could to come to God, but is that right? Here're some examples of what they taught:

- God's favor & salvation was something that had to be earned, not just by keeping God's law, but also by keeping a bunch of other laws they decided to add to it (Political Pork?). Or this...
- "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy." God established this law, so people could have rest/spiritual renewal, as they honored God by recognizing his authority. The religious leaders, however, added so many more laws to the Sabbath that it became anything but rest; it was exhausting! On the Sabbath, you could throw an object in the air with one hand, as long as you caught it with the other. You couldn't take a bath on Sabbath. If someone spilled something on the Sabbath, you couldn't clean it up. You get the idea...

When I got married there were some rules I said I would live by—written and spelled out for me:

- Be faithful to Jane as long as we both live...
- Provide for Jane and meet her needs...
- Protect Jane with my life...
- Be committed to Jane for better or for worse...

But, after I got married I soon discovered there were *other rules* I didn't know about, but these rules have since been clearly established...

- I am to keep my areas (i.e. study, closet, garage, basement, etc.) clean...
- I'm not to try to be funny around her before 10 AM...
- I'm to always have an opinion when asked about 2 dresses ... that to an untrained eye may appear identical...
- Take the garbage out weekly ... *without having to be reminded!*

If I saw our relationship as a bunch of rules I had to keep, I'd quickly become bitter and miserable. I'd likely rebel and break the rules when Jane wasn't paying attention. BUT ... I'm passionately in love with my wife and that translates into a desire to please her.

So, what I've found is that doing all these things ... are actually quite satisfying. When the relationship on the inside is right, all things on the outside will just flow... For a FOLLOWER, NOTHING COMES BEFORE RELATIONSHIP! Also ... *YOU MIGHT BE A FAN IF...*

**YOU CHOOSE LAW OVER LOVE.** Verses 16-17 say, again, "Blind guides! How terrible it will be for you! For you say that it means nothing to swear 'by God's Temple' -- you can break that oath. But then you say that it is binding to swear 'by the gold in the Temple.' <sup>17</sup>Blind fools! Which is greater, the gold, or the Temple that makes the gold sacred?" These religious leaders not only put rules ahead of their relationship with God (Jesus), but they got so caught up in keeping the letter of the Law that they no longer showed love to God's people... Let's be honest: How many times do we get so caught up in 'how things should be'—even at church—that we forget to treat those around us in a manner that Jesus would approve of? In other words, DOES LOVE COME FIRST in all we do?

I read a true story one time about a man named John who, dressed in blue jeans, walked into a bank to finalize a business transaction. The teller told him that the officer he needed to see wasn't in, and he would have to come back the next day. John said that would be fine ... and asked the teller to validate his parking ticket. The teller then informed him that, according to bank policy, she couldn't validate his parking ticket because he had not technically completed a financial transaction. John asked for an exception, since he had come to the bank *intending* to do business, but wasn't able to because the appropriate officer wasn't in. The teller didn't budge. She said, "I'm sorry; that's our policy. Rules are rules." So John decided to make a business transaction. He decided to close his account. John's last name was Akers. He was the CEO of IBM, and the account he closed that day had a balance of 1.5 million dollars. This qualified as a financial transaction, and the teller was then able to validate his parking ticket...

This is an example of how legalism works and what happens when churches are filled with FANS that make rules more important than relationships. DOES LOVE COME FIRST in all that we do? Here's something else: *YOU MIGHT BE A FAN IF...*

**YOU CHOOSE GUILT OVER GRACE.** Back to Verse 4 for a moment: "They crush you with impossible religious demands and never lift a finger to help ease the burden." When following the rules becomes the primary focus of a church, you can then count on GUILT being the primary motivator! Jesus here speaks about GUILT as a weight that the religious leaders forced people to carry ... by making their relationship with God all about the rules! FANS who follow the rules instead of following Jesus find they're weighed down with GUILT... Please ... don't come to church here thinking the preacher's going to lay on you more rules and you will now have to DO more to be right with God! Our relationship with Jesus isn't so much about the DO, as it is about the DONE; that's what FOLLOWERS dwell on...

**BE CAREFUL, FOLKS, THAT WE DON'T MISS OUT ON WHAT REALLY MATTERS...** The religious leaders of Jesus' day wanted to make a big deal over the

more detailed matters of the Law, but in doing so they overlooked what was really important! If Jesus were preaching today, he may say something to us like this:

Woe to you fans, if you would be as passionate about feeding the poor as you are your church's style of worship, then world hunger would end this week. Woe to you fans, if you sacrificed as much to care for the homeless and hungry as you do for your church building, the need would be wiped out. Woe to you fans, if you would be as zealous about caring for the sick as you are about a 'Christmas tree' being called a 'holiday tree,' health insurance wouldn't be a problem.

We end up straining a gnat ... but not really paying attention to the camel! If we're not careful, instead of becoming FOLLOWERS of Christ, we might become FOLLOWERS of religion... Instead of raising our children in Christ, we're simply raising them in the church ... and that just won't do! Relationship has to trump everything else ... if you want to be a FOLLOWER of Jesus...