**Sermon 21-4-24**

**Text:** Matthew 23:1-12

**Title:** How to be a True Leader

Good morning, my name’s Dan. Tell me – have you ever had a really bad boss? I’m talking the kind that makes you *dread* going to work. Or kids – have you ever had a really bad teacher? One that makes your stomach turn when they call your name.

Everyone has a story, don’t they?

Back in 2011, one manager of a convenience store ran a contest for his employees. The challenge: pick the cashier you think will be fired next. Just write their name on a slip of paper and give it to the boss. If you’re right, you win ten bucks. And he added – you can’t pick Mike Miller. He was using his phone on the job, so I fired him yesterday!

I wonder what happens if you put your *own* name on the slip? I mean, maybe you’d want to. You say goodbye to a bad boss, *and* you get ten bucks! That’s using your brain, right?

Plenty of us have a story like this. “You won’t believe what *my* boss did.”

* She makes us take our break at the *end* of the shift.
* He fired half my team, then doubled my workload.
* They never talk to me unless I’m doing something wrong.

It’s so common, and yet our culture is *obsessed* with leadership. If you look up the best nonfiction sellers on amazon, it’s a kaleidoscope of leadership books. Atomic habits. How to win friends and influence people. The art of war – which is about leadership, believe it or not. Several books titled, uncreatively, “How to lead.”

These books exist because it’s hard to lead well.

And I don’t just mean for bosses at work. Leadership exists at all sorts of levels, right? Andrew and I are leading this church as elders. We have deacons, growth group leaders, ministry team leaders. You might even be ‘leading’ people here just by being you. You’re someone that people look to. You set an example.

And we lead in our homes. Fathers and husbands have a particular role, but we all lead, don’t we? If you have kids, you know what I mean – you’re *always* setting an example. More is caught than taught.

And kids, if you have a younger brother or sister, you’re sort of *leading* them. They look up to you. They follow you around, don’t they?

Church, home, work, sport, friendship groups – we can be leading others in all sorts of places. And it’s so easy to be a bad leader. Not just to ***have*** one, but to ***be*** one. Every pastor, every parent, every manager knows they don’t always get it right.

How can we be better leaders?

… If our culture had the answer, we’d have found it. But the books keep coming. The answer isn’t on amazon.

Actually, it’s **right here** in Matthew 23. The God who *reigns* over all, the *king* of all creation, shows us here what true leadership is. He’s the king over all. He knows what leadership is.

So the question is, **how does God want us to lead people?** This is the key. It’s to be a *godly* leader, a leader shaped by *what God says to us.*

And today, we’re gonna focus on **two portraits of leadership** that Jesus gives us. Two different kinds of leaders. First, the ***portrait of a godless leader***. Jesus shows us how the religious leaders in his time **failed** to lead God’s people. Then, we’ll see the ***portrait of a godly leader***. What does a leader in his church need to be like? A pastor, an elder, anyone who has authority and responsibility and influence?

And his focus here is on leading God’s people. It’s on the church. But as we go, we’ll also see what God wants for *any* true leader at *any* level.

**How does God want us to lead people?** And **how does he want his people to be led?**

Let’s pray and we’ll get into it.

…

Open up to Matthew 23. We’re on page \*\*\*\* in the church bibles. Jesus has been locked in confrontation with the first century religious leaders. As we’ve seen, they tried everything to trap him in his words. But in the end, Jesus leaves them speechless.

So now, v1, he turns to the crowds and his disciples. He’s about to show them that these religious leaders aren’t true leaders at all. Instead, there needs to be a new kind of leader that rises up among them.

First – the **portrait of a godless leader**.

Everyone looks at the Pharisees and the scribes and thinks, “Leader.” Many of them have years of theological education. Some of them have important positions in the synagogue. V2 says they “sit on Moses seat.” They seem to be great leaders like Moses was. Authoritative. Godly. God’s chosen people.

But listen to what Jesus says as v2 goes on:

**“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, 3so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.**

Ok, yes, listen to what they teach. They know the Old Testament. So listen when they explain it.

But don’t be fooled, Jesus says. They preach, but they don’t *do* what they preach. They’re hypocrites. They’re not true leaders. They’re *godless* leaders.

And Jesus shows us at least three ways in which that’s true.

Maybe we could treat this like one of those leadership books on amazon. “**Seven habits of highly effective people**.” Well here we’ve got, “**Three steps to being a godless leader.”** Here’s what the Pharisees do – and if you wanna be an ineffective, dangerous, deceptive, godless leader too, listen up. Here’s the three steps that’ll lead *you* to failure!

Step one: **flatten your followers**. V4:

**They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.**

The Pharisees and scribes had two main religious textbooks. The first was the Scriptures, the Old Testament. But the second was called the “oral law.” You might’ve heard of the Talmud or the Mishnah. They believed that this oral law had been passed down from Moses’ time all the way to the 1st Century without needing to be written down.

But in reality, the oral law became more important than the Scriptures. The Talmud even says, **“The words of the scribes are more lovely than the words of the law.”** And **“It is a greater crime to transgress the words of the school of Rabbi Hillel than the words of the Scripture.”**

Now, Christians totally reject that idea, right? Scripture alone is our highest authority.

But the Pharisees took the laws of the Old Testament and used the Oral Law to make them *heavier*.

The Scriptures say don’t work on the Sabbath. But the Oral Law says, don’t even carry a sleeping mat on the Sabbath. Anything more than four cubits, six feet, can’t be carried around. So *this* is fine, but not *this.*

The Talmud forbade 39 other forms of ‘work’ too. Sorting the books on your bedside table. Combing your wool jumper. Tearing something in two. Writing. Erasing. Putting out a fire.

You get the idea? Imagine having to live under all of these unbiblical laws. And not just on the Sabbath – in all of life!

This is the very definition of **legalism**.

It’s like if God said, don’t touch the water on this table. Just imagine for a moment that he said that in Scripture. Don’t touch this water.

But legalism is when someone says, “Really, God doesn’t want you to touch the **table**. Look how close it is to the water. In fact, God doesn’t want you to stand on the **stage**. Look how close it is to the table! In fact, God doesn’t want you in the **front row**, because look how close it is to the stage!” And on we go till no one can actually be in the building!

That’s legalism. It’s going beyond what God actually requires in his word. And the result is laying a “heavy burden” on people that God never intended.

Of course, we need to be careful here. **We shouldn’t call things legalism that aren’t.** Because living out God’s commands requires wisdom, right? We don’t just go *[\*swirling hands around\*],* ***“Hey, I’m not touching the water, so obviously that’s fine!”*** There’s a place for wise boundaries. There’s a place for things like a safe ministry policy or a membership process or other things that help us keep God’s commands. That’s not legalism.

But if you wanna be a godless leader, here’s what you do: add rule upon rule that God never required, as if God *did* require them. *Tell people this is how they earn God’s approval*. **Flatten your followers** with legalism. That’s step one.

Ready for step two? Here we go: **display your devotion**. V5:

**They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, …**

You know what a phylactery is? It’s a little box that looks like this. Inside is a scroll dispaying some of the key Old Testament laws. The Pharisees and other devoted Israelites believed God wanted them to tie this box on their head and to their hands.

And they were *sort of* right. Deuteronomy 6 mentions taking the law everywhere with you (v8):

**You shall bind them [the commandments] as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.**

So they took that literally. Not sure that’s the best interpretation of those words. But the point is, always remember God’s commandments. If the phylactery box helps them, I mean that’s fine, right?

So too with the fringes of their clothes. **Numbers 15** told the Israelites to make tassels for the corners of their robes. Why? To remember that they belong to God. It’s just a reminder that they follow *him.* And that’s ok.

Kinda like having an **alarm** pop up on your phone reminding you to read the Bible.

… But imagine if I set that reminder so – hey, it’s going off right now. And whoa, all of you are here watching me check it, what a surprise! I didn’t think *that* would happen when I set this alarm for 10:40am on a Sunday morning.

Anyway, sorry guys, ***I set a reminder on my phone to read my Bible***. It’s no big deal. It only goes off three times a day. Sometimes five. So you know, I’ll be back in a minute, just gonna go read and pray. Feel free to play a game on your phone or whatever *you* want to do…!

… Right? They’re not just being devoted. They’re putting their devotion ***on display.***

As Jesus notices, they’re making their phylacteries *broad.* The box is getting bigger. Maybe it started the size of a matchbox. But now the scribe has an amazon package on his head. And the tassels are getting longer. Imagine them being so long that they drag along behind. Now people can see how devoted you are even when you’re 10m down the road!

They’re not *actually* being devoted to God. They’re doing all this *to be seen.*

And if you wanna be a godless leader, that’s all you’ve gotta do. It’s easy. Only follow God in public. Make a point of showing everyone just how spiritual you really are.

Which brings us to step three: **aim for accolades**. V6, the Pharisees…:

**…love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues 7and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.**

When you invite them around for dinner, they expect special treatment. You wouldn’t dream of serving up leftovers. It’s slow cooked lamb shanks or nothing. Because what an honour to have the Rabbi over!

And in the synagogue, they make sure there’s a reserved parking space for them closest to the building. They’re the VIP.

And what about their salary? Well they’re a professional, right? They’ve done years of study. And who’s gonna fund that expensive wardrobe? The tassels just keep getting longer, after all. So they should be paid a big wage. We’re not asking for too much. I mean, we’re kind of like CEO’s aren’t we? So just whatever a CEO gets paid…!

A godless leader will **aim for accolades.** They get into leadership for the benefits it brings. Special treatment from their followers. Special honour in the community. Special benefits from the role. Special titles like “Rabbi” or “Pastor.”

I once met a young lady who was keen to enter full-time ministry. We got talking at a friend’s wedding.

She found out I was a pastor and so she asked me, ***“Do you think I have what it takes to be in ministry?”***

I said to her, gently, “Well, hey, I don’t know you well. We’ve just met. That’s not my call to make. What do your pastors think?”

And she says, ***“Oh, I don’t think they really notice me. At my church you’ve gotta really get noticed to climb the ladder.”***

Which is – I mean, that’s interesting. A church where ministry is about climbing the ladder, and that’s connected with how *impressive* you seem. So I ask her, “Why do you want to get into ministry anyway?” And you know what she says?

***“Because I want to be noticed.”***

And it’s clear that came from a place of deep insecurity. Partly her issue, partly her church’s issue. But either way, she wanted to be a leader so that she’d *matter.* She’s feel good about herself. Like she has a purpose. She’d be at the centre of a community and gain all the privileges that go with that.

I hope she’s not in that spot. But it’s a strong temptation for *any* leader. And if you or I wanna become a godless leader, all we need to do is **aim for accolades.**

This is all it takes, right? **Flatten your followers** with unbiblical commands. **Display your devotion** to be seen by everyone. **Aim for accolades,** for the honour and advantages of being in authority.

What it all comes back to is that **godless leaders are in it for themselves.** They’re in it for the control that comes from adding rule upon rule. Or the good feelings that come from everyone thinking highly of you. Or the tangible benefits that comes with leadership positions.

And Jesus says, ***no***. I will not have that kind of leader among my people. Do not be the kind of leader that the Pharisees are. It will only damage the people you lead. And that’s is *especially* true in the church.

Not to mention that, for the godless leader, it’ll result in something even worse – but we’ll get to that.

There’s the first portrait. The portrait of a godless leader.

But now, Jesus moves on to a **second portrait**. We move from the **godless leader** to the **godly leader.** How does Jesus want us to lead? How does he want his people to be led?

And we could give this a book title as well. If there are three steps to being a godless leader, there is **one overlooked quality of a godly leader.** And it’s really very simple. It’s just the opposite of what we’ve seen so far. **Godly leaders *aren’t* in it for themselves.**

Jesus starts by telling his followers to avoid the Pharisees’ errors. v8:

**But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. 9And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. 10Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.**

Godless leaders are often obsessed with titles. The title represents their honour. Rabbi. Father. Teacher. Doctor. Pastor. Director. CEO.

And to be clear, Jesus isn’t forbidding the use of titles in any part of life. Obviously if you have a Dad, call him Dad. When Darth Vader said “Luke, I am your Father,” he wasn’t sinning! And kids, you can call your teacher your “teacher,” right? That’s fine.

But what’s Jesus warning against here? The answer is in the reasons he gives. Don’t be called Rabbi, ***FOR* you have one teacher and you are all brothers**. Nor call anyone father, ***FOR* you have one father in heaven.** Nor be called instructor, ***FOR*** **you have one instructor, the Christ**.

The point is, as a leader, **don’t take the place that only God has.**

It’s so tempting for people to adore their leaders, right? Not always in Aussie culture, of course. We only adore *some* of our leaders.

But for Christians, it’s really tempting to identify strongly with a pastor or elder or bible study leader who’s been deeply influential in your life. That person can almost become like God to us.

Because if they know their Bible, and they have this deep way or praying, and they give wise advice, and they’re truthful and loving… then it’s tempting to go to them rather than read the Bible yourself, or pray for yourself. Dan will know the answer, right? And Andrew knows just how to pray for me.

That’s the temptation.

And the temptation for any *leader* is to buy into it. Like every time they go to visit someone, they’re putting on a cape. Here I come to save the day. And it’s good because I’m *needed*. Someone *looks up to me.* I’m *useful.*

But **godly leaders aren’t in it for themselves.** They relentlessly point away from themselves and towards Jesus.

The apostle Paul himself did that. Listen to what he says to the Corinthian church. Because they had a problem. Chapter 1, verse 12 –

**What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.”**

Do you hear the problem? Different people lining up behind different leaders. Like, Paul or Apollos or Cephas is the one they really look to. But here’s how Paul corrects them, v13:

**13Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?**

Right? Did Dan take your sin on the cross? Did Andrew conquer death for you? Did your growth group leader give you eternal life?

Of course not – only Jesus Christ does these things.

Only Jesus, as the perfect Son of God, can bear our sin and take God’s judgment on our behalf. Only Jesus, as the perfectly godly leader, can use all his authority in heaven and on earth to conquer death for us.

* And it comes not through **flattening his followers**, but taking the burden of sin *for* them. **“My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”**
* It comes not through putting his **devotion on display**, but living a truly perfect, sinless life.
* And it comes not through **aiming for accolades**, but taking our place on a rugged cross. Taking the lowest of the low. All of it to save *us.*

This is true leadership. And no one can take that place in anyone’s life.

 Which leads Paul to say the next chapter over (2:2) –

**For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.**

Godly leaders relentlessly point away from themselves and towards Jesus. I may be a pastor – literally, a shepherd. But I am an under-shepherd, and he is the Chief Shepherd. I am a steward, and he is the Master. I have authority, but only under the true King. I preach the word, but he IS the word.

No leader must ever supplant the place of God in someone’s life. And no leader must be in it for themselves.

And so Jesus says, v11, bringing everything to a point:

**The greatest among you shall be your servant. 12Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.**

The Pharisees were thirsty for authority. That way, they’d be exalted – lifted up – in people’s eyes. Even if it laid heavy burdens on them, even if it compromised their own integrity, so be it if it puts me in a high position.

Our world is much the same. Climb the ladder, no matter who you have to step on.

But Jesus flips the whole system upside down. The leader isn’t the one at the top. The leader is the one lifting *others* up. Just like he did at the cross.

This is the heart of true, godly leadership. It’s the heart of Jesus himself. And in this is both a **warning and an encouragement.**

The Pharisees, and all godless leaders like them, must heed Jesus’ warning: “**whoever exalts himself will be humbled.”** One day they will stand before the true leader, the true King, Jesus himself. Everyone who flattens their followers, thinks the rules will save them, lives to be seen, uses people to benefit themselves – they’ll have to give an account to Jesus. Every bad boss. Every selfish leader. Every abusive pastor. Every false teacher.

Friends, hear this warning today: **all of us will stand before Jesus**. And unless we’ve humbled ourselves before him, trusting in his work on the cross, we will be brought low on that day.

So whether you’re a leader or not, heed the warning. We must turn to trust in Jesus, and let go of making life about ourselves.

But there’s an **encouragement** here too.

None of us will ever be the perfect leader. Right? We’ll never be the perfect pastor, the perfect parent, the perfect boss. We’ll never be the perfect leader.

And that’s an encouragement. Because we already ***have*** the perfect leader. The one who humbled himself to serve us. The one who was raised to life and exalted to the right hand of God.

And any leader who points people to him, to the Lord Jesus, can have a true and lasting impact in the world. That’s why Andrew and I are here, by the way. We’re here to point all of us to Jesus. And we believe that as we do, God will do great things among us.

And that’s also true for you if *you* serve in a ministry leadership role, or one lies in your future. Jesus calls us to let go of making it about *us*. Whether we’re tempted to be in control, or be well thought of, or wear the cape, or get the accolades… Join me in putting it all aside, each and every time you lead.

And really, this is also true for *everyone* here. Many of us, maybe all of us, are leaders in one way or another. You might have an official ministry role, or you might not. But if you have influence over anyone’s life – whether by knowledge, position, example, charisma, or just close relationship – **you are leading**.

You’re leading here. You’re leading in your family. Perhaps you’re leading in your sports team or your mums group or your retirement village.

And Jesus wants you to be a godly leader. So the call is the same: **true leaders aren’t in it for themselves**. Put yourself aside to serve those in your care. And in whatever way you can, point away from yourself to the true servant leader – Jesus Christ.

We must become less, and he must become more.

Let’s pray.