

By way of introduction, let's look at Matthew 23:1-7. This very text ought to make us stop and think about our own life. What we do? Why we do it? Is our Christianity a game? One for show? Dietrich Bonhoeffer (a German under Nazi rule) said this about American Christianity in the 1930's *"American theology is essentially religion and ethics and does not recognize the radical judgement and forgiveness."*

Writer Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* written in the 1930's, made these observations about what he feared the American culture and church was becoming *"I fear those who give us so much information we are reduced to passivity, truth is to be drowned in a sea of irrelevance, and we are preoccupied with a trivial culture based on feelings and centrifugal bumblepuppy."* (Keep in mind this was a novel) In other words, we are slaves, not to an external oppressor but to our own trivial desires. We are captives until God appears and sets us free from these things we have enthroned. Romans 6:22 **"But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God."** And John 8:32 **"and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."**

POINT #1 - THE RECOVERY OF CHRISTIAN FAITH. True Christian service has been lost in our culture of relevance. What I am referring to, weak views of God, sin, holiness, and purity in the church. The gospel of Christ is offensive for the same reasons it always has been. The problem today, which has been brewing for many decades, attempts to make the gospel more attractive have diminished the call for holiness and righteousness in the church.

What this type of allusion of the gospel does to people is to keep them hopelessly trapped within their own inner psyche and resources, suppressing the truth about themselves (they are sinners), that they need Christ and His deliverance. Dr. Michael Horton *"No longer being objectively guilty before a holy God, they only feel a sense of guilt or shame, thus they deny by changing the subject to something lighter and more upbeat."* Furthermore he notes about Christianity primarily in America *"No longer saved from damnation, which is the source of their deepest anxiety, they are now saved from unpleasantness."* In essence there is a gospel being preached today that only relieves people of some sort of guilt but doesn't deliver them from the wrath of God. Weak pulpits where soft, confirmative to the culture gospel is being preached, and where people are to be made comfortable in their sin.

POINT #2 - FIG LEAF RELIGION. The attempt to cover our sin with some sort of external act or work is nothing new. Our text in Matthew describes the essence of fig leaf religion as we see Jesus pointing this glaring hypocrisy out. Genesis 3:7 **"Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings."** (NKJV) They did it. They covered themselves. They attempted to hide their sin.

Our fig leaves have become very sophisticated. They are no more successful in covering our nakedness in God's presence than homespun wardrobes of the garden. Isaiah 64:6 **"We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all**

fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away." Furthermore in Isaiah 59:6 **"Their webs will not serve as clothing; men will not cover themselves with what they make. Their works are works of iniquity, and deeds of violence are in their hands."** However, no one can intervene with their own works and goodness to save them, and God, who is rich in mercy can only reconcile them. We see this in Isaiah 59:16,20 **"And He saw there was no man...And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, declares the LORD."**

Fig leaf religion teaches us to have another go at saving ourselves. Have another round of trying to relive guilt, pain and suffering! Instead of falling into the hands of a merciful God, who died for us, who gave Himself for us, we keep dressing up the outside, polishing the shoes and external metal, yet dead and lifeless on the inside. The world, our friends and family think were sold out for God, but we're just whitewashed tombs trying to make the dead look good. Both sin and redemption are trivialized when we write the script.

It is a false prophet who dresses up sin as something attractable. Jeremiah 8:11 **"They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace."** Furthermore, fig leaf religion gives false hope **"Thus says the LORD of hosts: Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, It shall be well with you; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, No disaster shall come upon you"** (Jeremiah 23:16-17).

POINT #3 - THE CONCLUSION OF FIG LEAF RELIGION. In our text, we see is outlined in vs. 2. Instead of the gospel today in modern evangelical Christianity, we hear more of elevator, soft relaxing music that affirms the status quo instead of radical transformation by God. Instead of being brought to the end of our rope so that we let go of all other securities and fall into the hands of a merciful God, we are encouraged to have another go at it to save ourselves.

We may be in danger of being lukewarm as Jesus warned the Laodicean church. They were neither hot nor cold. A church that is deeply aware of its misery and nakedness before a holy God will cling tenaciously to an all-sufficient Savior. The other, the lukewarm, will rely upon morality, religion and works whenever it seems convenient. Many Christians live this way today. They dress up with morality when around other believers, but when it's no longer convenient they life opposite of what they profess.

Fig leaf religion seeks to establish its own righteousness, Romans 10:3 **"For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."** We do not naturally see ourselves as poor, blind and naked. The disciples even asked in Luke 18 **"who then can be saved?"** Jesus responded **"with man this is impossible but with God all things are possible."**

Today, when you see yourself as God sees you, then you can be saved. But as long as you see your external works as sufficient for salvation, you are doomed, fooled and are knee deep in fig leaf religion.