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Matthew 26:1-28
Leadership Series

Spiritual Abuse

This morning I am going to continue the series of messages that I have been doing on Christian leadership. I have mentioned to you who are here, that leadership is something that I have personally done a great deal of thinking and reading about over, really, the last 10 or 15 years, but in particular the last 7 or 8 years. I think I mentioned that I have probably read something over three dozen books just on the topic of leadership and have attended numerous seminars and conferences where leadership or management was the topic, along with listening to dozens and dozens of tapes. This is a subject that I have done some level of thinking about, both from a secular as well as Christian perspective.

This morning what I would like to do is tackle a subject that I know is a highly charged subject in the broader, cultural context of American religious life and that is spiritual or religious abuse. It is the rare week where there isn't at least some new report of abuse by a clergyman. The Roman Catholic church, in particular, has been racked with numerous reports of priests who have had histories of child molestation. Several years ago, the press was all over the tele-evangelists for the financial fraud they committed against so many people. I have personally talked with individuals who were pressured into having sex with their minister. I have talked with folks who have seen tremendous financial abuse in their churches, extravagant spending and extravagant incomes given to pastors.

Now I realize we find ourselves in murky waters when we are talking about something like spiritual abuse. There is no exact bright line test given to us in the Bible saying this is abuse and when you do just a little bit less of it, it's OK. But, the Bible does what many therapists and social service agencies are currently doing in other areas of abuse such as child abuse or sexual abuse. It gives us a list of criteria by which we can discern abuse. And when many of these criteria are present, we would say that a church or fellowship is a spiritually abusive environment. We are going to look at the biblical criteria for spiritual abuse in just a moment.

Now again I just want to frankly acknowledge to you that this is a highly charged topic in American society at large. But I know for many of you sitting here, I have heard your stories, and I want you to know that this teaching is not aimed at a particular group or a church or situation. I believe the Bible really brings this stuff to light, if you will, it exposes abuse.

But, because of the highly sensitized environment we live in to issues of abuse and because, frankly, some people feel victimized when no real victimization has taken place, I feel the need at the front end to talk with you honestly about what I believe is *not* spiritual abuse. It is the rare pastor today and the rare Christian leader who has been at their job for any length of time and who takes seriously their responsibility to proclaim the Word of God and to lead who has not at some point been buffeted by at least an intimation or a charge of spiritual abuse. Again, we live in a highly sensitized culture. A culture that resents any assertion of authority. So we need to have the ground cleared regarding those kinds of behaviors on the part of Christian leaders that do not amount to

spiritual abuse from a biblical perspective before we look at behaviors that do constitute abuse.

In the same way that spanking on the behind of a young child once or twice by a parent for defiance is not physical abuse, even though it is widely criticized by a growing percentage of the culture; so certain behaviors by Christian leaders attempting to live out the Word of God does not amount to spiritual abuse.

What things are not spiritual abuse?

It is not spiritual abuse to share with people what God's Word says or requires of them even if a person is made to feel uncomfortable. Or even if that counsel or that teaching from God's Word is in opposition to what the person wishes to do. It is not spiritual abuse to share with someone that God's Word doesn't approve of their behavior. For example, if you in a sincere and loving way speak with a Christian friend who claims to follow the teachings of Jesus. And I believe that we approach Christian people differently than those who do not make the claim to follow the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. But if someone says, "I am a Christian. I am submitted to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles" then it is appropriate and non-abusive to hold them to the standards of the Words of Jesus and the apostles. So, if you in a very loving way speak to a friend about their sleeping with their boyfriend or living together outside of marriage and they don't like that and they get upset with you. They feel condemned. They feel uncomfortable. That is not spiritual abuse.

So, it is not spiritual abuse to urge someone to do what they might not naturally wish to do if your counsel comes from the Bible. Just because somebody may not

naturally wish to tithe or to serve or to sacrifice, it is not spiritual abuse to strongly urge them to do what they would not naturally wish to do.

It is not spiritual abuse to communicate to someone that there is only one way to God and that is through Jesus Christ the Savior. Now, I understand that that sounds narrow. And maybe that sounds arrogant and exclusivistic. But we are simply submitting to Jesus' own statements. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the light. No one comes to the Father but through me." And so we can't be honest followers of Jesus unless we repeat what Jesus said when he walked the earth. We need to communicate why it is that Jesus is the only way to God and we need to give a reasonable explanation for our faith. We need to demonstrate our faith through deeds and not just words. We don't shout at people. But ultimately, it is not spiritual abuse to claim that Christ is the only Savior.

It is not spiritual abuse when the church is not a democracy. The Bible never suggests that the Christian church is to be a pure democracy. That doesn't mean the church is a dictatorship. Safe Christian leaders will always have an open door to input. We are called to uphold God's standards not our opinions. You are not in an abusive environment when the church doesn't vote on everything. And you are not being spiritually abused if you give your opinion and it doesn't win the day.

Neither is strong visionary leadership necessarily abusive. Because someone is a strong leader or a forceful leader, or a visionary leader, that does not mean that they ought to be suspected of being abusive leaders.

Finally, asking a leader or a pastor in a church to step down because of a spiritual problem, because of a sin problem, because of long-standing emotional problem, all this is not abuse.

Now, I go through a few of these examples because I would not wish to have in this church the kind of environment where we cannot speak to one another frankly, forcefully, and biblically without being charged with being abusive. But there is a strong other side. And as I speak today about spiritual abuse, I may sound more passionate than I normally do. Part of the reason for my passion is that this passage in Matthew 23 is a passionate rebuke by Jesus towards spiritual abusers. It's hard to preach it any other way. But the other reason is I have heard stories of the most outrageous behavior by leaders from so many of you coming from different church backgrounds regarding things that were said and done and ways that Christian leaders related to you or to your family or to your parents. Because of this, in a series on Christian leadership, I must speak to you honestly about the painful reality that many of you were spiritually abused. This morning I am going to talk to you about the marks of spiritual abuse in a church. Flip open with me to Matthew 23 and let's pray.

It says,

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 'The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.'

Let me give a bit of background on this text. When Jesus talks about Moses' seat in verse 2 there was in the synagogues in Jesus' day a stone seat where the authorized teacher would sit. And that was called Moses' seat. The authorized teacher was claiming to have the same kind of teaching authority to require obedience to their teaching that Moses, as the law giver, had. There was a presumed authority to bind people by a certain teaching that the Pharisees were claiming for themselves. And, frankly, it comes out more clearly in the New American Standard Version than it does in the NIV. The NIV says in verse 2: "The teachers of the law sit in Moses' seat..." it is better translated: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees have seated themselves." In other words the Pharisees, have presumed and taken upon themselves that right to bind people by their teachings.

Of course, people today do that. Folks arrogate to themselves authority and they claim for themselves the authority to bind people with their church and their man-made rules and regulations. I believe Jesus is using irony here when he says, "You'd better do what they tell you." I don't think that that was any kind of straight shooting counsel, but was really more sarcastic. The use of irony. Because in many other places he tells us to reject most of the teachings of the Pharisees. I think he is simply comparing what they say with what they do. He is actually rebuking the Pharisees for hypocrisy when he says, "Do what they say, but absolutely don't do what they do because they are total hypocrites."

But Jesus' point in this passage comes out forcefully in verse 4 when he says, "They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them." And here is the first mark of spiritually abusive

churches and leaders. People are always weighed down by abusive churches. The picture of what Jesus is drawing of what the Pharisees were doing to people is of one of those ancient donkeys that folks would tie enormous loads on. And in Jesus' day, sometimes they would put so much stuff on a poor donkey's back that you couldn't see the donkey at all. He would just be completely covered with stuff tied on. You know, a whole family's belongings. And as the donkey struggled under the load, sometimes the owner of the donkey would not only not help the donkey out, but would actually beat the donkey and urge it on when the donkey stumbled from the load. Jesus is saying, "That's how you know spiritual abuse. When you see many, many people stumbling under the load that the leaders are laying on the people. That's an abusive environment."

I think of churches that set up so many performance standards for being OK with God and OK with the church that folks start stumbling under the load. Now, of course the church would never say that you must do this list of things to be right with God. At least most Christian churches wouldn't say that. But there are all these unwritten rules and ways of communicating expectations. You must be at five meetings a week. You must spend this number of hours involved in ministry. You must bring four people to your small group. You must witness so many times a day. There is expectation upon expectation.

Even though folks may be told in teachings that you don't have to meet these standards to be right with God, the clear weight of expectation and the rewards structure of the system communicates an entirely different message. So when you see people, by and large, weighed down and stumbling; and then you see the leaders doing what the folks did to their donkeys in Jesus' day—not relieving the burden off the poor donkey's

back, but beating the donkey, cursing it for not being able to hold the load up—we say, “That’s spiritual abuse.” When people get the feeling that it’s never enough, that no matter how much they do, it’s never enough.

Sometimes the issue is loading people down with performance standards, some churches and leaders have loaded individuals down with excessive untrue burdens of guilt. Folks have had communicated to them that the reason why they remain ill or their wife has gotten cancer or their child has come down with allergies is because of some particular sin that is in their past. Or they are told that God is still holding them responsible for a sin that they committed years before or something they did when they were teenagers or when they were children. Loaded down with this mountain of guilt.

I have seen ridiculous burdens placed by churches upon pastors. You know, leaders are not the only ones who can abuse. Churches can abuse their leaders and pastors. Someone that I am close to told me about a pastor friend of his who before he was allowed to leave the city limits for any reason needed to get approval by one of the elders in the church. I have a dear friend who is a pastor and who before they were able to make any even minor changes in the parsonage they were given by the church, needed to get board approval for everything that they hung on the walls, the color of paint they would choose. And they were required to wear their ties even when they were off duty on Saturdays because of the supposed witness to the community.

And then when people stumble under these man-made loads, they are, of course, not physically beaten, but emotionally battered by being shamed and humiliated and manipulated and told that there must be some weakness in them because they can’t go to

these number of meetings. Because they can't rise to the standard. What's the matter with you?

And oh, Jesus' leadership style is so different. Jesus looks at weighed down people, people who are just crushed by the level of expectations and burdens of guilt and performance-do-do-do "Churchianity" and he says, "You come to me all you who labor and are burdened down and I will give you rest. Take my yoke on you and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus unloads all the guilt when we come to him. Jesus unloads all the do-Christianity to feel right with God. Jesus reminds us that God does for us what we can't do for ourselves. And he doesn't beat us when we collapse under the weight of expectations.

One mark of spiritual abuse is that when you look out at a church, you ask yourself, "Are a high percentage of people here stumbling under the weight of expectation, performance standards or guilt imposed by this church system?"

And then we see a second mark of spiritual abuse. Look down at verses 5-7,

Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their prayer shawls long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them "Rabbi."

Jesus is talking about that outward show of piety that betrays a more fundamental issue. In spiritually abusive systems the leader is being served and not the people. See, there is an outward show here, but that outward show was all designed to meet the needs

for power and recognition and importance of the leader. It was all focused upon the leader's needs.

Here is a good test to distinguish in your minds strong leadership on the one hand from abusive leadership on the other. Ask yourself the question: Who is being served? Whose needs are being met here?

One of the fundamental issues in abuse is that the one who is being served is the abuser. The sexual abuser uses a child or a teenager for their own sexual gratification. On the other hand, a strong but safe leader empowers and serves and strengthens those they are caring for. Jesus says that in verses 11 and 12: "The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

You could have a strong husband who leads the family and gives male leadership to his home, but what that means as you look at the home is that his wife is assisted and encouraged and strengthened, empowered, lifted up. Abusive leadership simply takes. Verse 14 underlines that: "Woe to you teachers of the law, you hypocrites. You devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers."

Wherever you see a system set up so that essentially the leader, the counselor, the pastor is getting their own needs met by the structure; they are not there to empower, encourage and serve, but their own needs for recognition and importance and money is the fundamental issue that is going on, that is abusive. And, frankly, it doesn't matter if the reason that the system is set up is because of the leader's insecurity or because of the leader's ambitiousness or because of the leader's ego. Who's serving who is a bright line test of abuse.

Then here is a third test of spiritual abuse—exaggerated authority. Verses 8-10:

But you are not to be called “Rabbi” for you have only one master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth “father,” for you have one Father and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called “teacher” for you have one Teacher, the Christ.

You must understand that in Jesus’ day and this development continued for several centuries after, a Rabbi’s authority with his disciples was enormous. The disciples of a Rabbi were required to obey that Rabbi without question. It was required that disciples would never walk beside a Rabbi. Never walk in front of him, always walk behind him. Never initiate conversation with a Rabbi. Never greet the Rabbi first. And Jesus saw this exaggerated authority given to human beings and he said, “Stop it! Let’s cut it right at its root. There is only one who you should give this position of unquestioning authority to. You have only one Rabbi, the Christ,” Jesus says.

You have only one authority that you are to respond to in an unquestioning way—God. So when a leader’s teachings or a leader’s authority, a leader’s opinions get somehow mixed up with the teaching and the authority and the opinions of God, in the eyes of the church, in the eyes of those he or she leads, that is spiritual abuse. Sometimes in certain charismatic churches it may not be the leaders teachings but his or her peers. Prophetic words – “God told me he wants you to do this or that. You’re supposed to obey these words without questioning.”

Now, we must understand the difference between spoken rules and unspoken rules. No one who is not a megalomaniac or an insane person, no one is going to stand up and say, “My words and my views are the same as God’s.” But the unspoken rule in a

fellowship or in a church may be that no one is permitted to disagree with the leader. See, one of the questions that I would immediately ask someone who wondered whether the church they were attending, the fellowship they were in, the organization they were a part of was spiritually abusive—one of the questions I would immediately ask them is, “Well, you tell me this. What is the consequence in that fellowship, church or organization, what is the consequence for disagreeing with the leader?”

Tell me what has happened to people who have disagreed with the leader and I will tell you if that place is abusive. Because if the consequence of disagreeing with the leader is isolation of the person, cutting off, labeling, the person is automatically considered divisive just for disagreeing then that is a good sign that the leader is claiming exaggerated authority. Only God can never be disagreed with.

What is the consequence in this place of asking questions? Of wondering about teachings? Of wanting to dialogue about direction. What happens when that kind of discussion gets initiated. It is not divisive to ask a question. It is not divisive necessarily to disagree or to have an opinion. Exaggerated authority basically communicates to the church: “Don’t talk. Because if you talk, as I have said to you before, then you get labeled in some places as the problem. The problem is not the exaggerated authority of a leader who believes he or she is 100% right and won’t ask forgiveness when they’re wrong. The problem is the person who raises the question.”

Now, let me take a little parentheses here and deal with this question, “Well what is the nature of a Christian leader’s authority? If I am suggesting that Christian leaders are surely fallible, able to be questioned, able to be disagreed with, that we can discuss things

here, I am not always right; I do need to be challenged, in love and confronted graciously, any many people have stumbled over texts like Hebrews 13:17 which says,

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy and not a burden. For that would be of no advantage to you.

Does this suggest that we obey everyone who has the title of “leader” with unquestioning obedience and that the moment you disagree that you are in violation of Hebrews 13:17 and that you are a divisive, negative person who must be labeled, isolated, kept away from the body like a cancer? Just submit and shut up or leave. Those are your options.

Well, I want to give you a few qualifiers on this text. Because no where in scripture is a Christian man or woman ever asked to give unquestioning obedience to a pastor, to an elder, to a fellowship leader. And I believe the text implies the first qualification. One, it says, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.” Well, who are the leaders that we submit to? Anyone with just a title? Anyone who is called elder, bishop, reverend, pastor?

Well, the next sentence tells us, “They keep watch over you.” Literally, those who watch ceaselessly, who have sleepless nights caring for the church. The Reformers, as they dealt with the question of authority came up with this. This is John Calvin as he commented on this text.

Our author’s concern is only with those who faithfully exercise their office. For those who have nothing [listen to this now, listen to this]...for those who have

nothing except the title and who, indeed, abuse the title of pastor to destroy the church deserve little reverence and even less trust.

A pastor says, “Obey me.” You say, “Are they fulfilling the office of pastor by faithfully watching over the flock?” Or are these people who are devouring the flock? People devouring the flock you give no mind to whatever and no respect.

And then we need to look secondly at the meaning of the word “obey.” You know, the word “obey” here is almost always translated in the New Testament as “be persuaded by.” Or “become convinced by.” The Greek word is from the root word “patheo”—to be persuaded by.

I do not believe that the author is suggesting unquestioning obedience to a leader when he says, “Obey your leaders.” I believe the nuance here is “Allow yourself to become persuaded, to become convinced by your leader’s teaching and life.” You open yourself up to being convinced, to being persuaded by your leader’s life and teaching. If your leader does not have convincing teaching and a convincing way of leading, then you cannot fulfill Hebrews 13:17 and, frankly, that is a time when you ought to search out another fellowship. Not unquestioning obedience, but the willingness to be persuaded to be convinced, to have your heart and mind moved into a position of following. That is what it is calling for.

And third of all, any command, any command in the Bible that calls us to obey a human being, human government, human parent, human Christian leader, human husband—any command calling us to obey a human leader must always be set over against the statement of the apostle Peter, “But we must first of all, obey God and not men.” Never, ever, ever, obey any human being no matter what their title if they call you

into a place that creates disobedience in your heart to the explicit Word of God in scripture or to God's imprint on your soul, that is your conscience. Your first accounting is to God before whom you will stand and your leader won't be there. You don't have to render account to your leader, but you must render an account to God.

And so I see limits on a leader's authority. It is not to be exaggerated. He or she can be questioned. The authority is only given in any case to somebody who faithfully discharged the office and who is persuasive in life and teaching and who doesn't contradict the Word of God.

Now, in my mind the passage reaches its climax in verse 13; this is the ultimate charge of spiritual abuse, verse 13:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Spiritual abusers cut people off from God. Here is the ultimate accusation: You won't enter the kingdom. You won't open yourselves up to an experience of God and his reign and rule and, then, literally the Greek says, "You slam the door in the face of those who want to enter."

"You Pharisees," he says. "You form a wall, you build a wall that gets between people and God. It is one thing if you don't want to experience the reign of God in your life, but then through your teaching, you cut off other people from experiencing the reign of God in their lives. That is your sin of abuse."

Here is the issue. Does the leader or church help you in deepening your relationship with God so that you continue to grow in your experience of God, your

knowledge of God, your hearing from God, and in your love for God? Or does the leader or church get in the way?

This was the battle of the Reformation. Reformers like Luther, Calvin and Zwingli rose up against the church that had become an abusing system and got in the way of people's relationship with God. And with one voice they cried out, "Get out of the way! We are all priests before God. We can all go to God directly."

And look at who the abusive leader cuts off. Not God haters, not God rejecters—look at who the abusive leader cuts off from God. Jesus said, "You yourselves do not enter nor will you let those enter who are trying to get in." You cut off God seekers. People who just want to hear from God more and grow in God more and worship God more and love God more. You cut off God seekers.

Oh, there are so many ways to cut off God's people from God. Through teaching you just sow massive doses of unbelief that God is even interested in having any kind of personal relationship with us. You sow lots of cynicism and you sow mistrust and unbelief. You build up a wall in people's minds. You get in the way of God's people by projecting out to God's people distorted views of God. Abusive churches always, always distort people's view of God. People who have been severely abused in a church, their view of God will always be off.

"Well, I know that God is going to get me for leaving this church or for not living up to somebody's expectations. I know that God is really angry with me."

Really? Is that the way you think of God? That he is just laying in wait to just get you? Will he really get you for leaving a particular church? I don't think the Father is like that.

“Well, I know that God doesn’t really care about these areas of my life. He has just left all of that up to me.”

Really? Is that your view of God? That God is apathetic about anything that you do? That he doesn’t care?

Or you were taught that the Holy Trinity was really Father, Son and Holy Bible. That somehow in this distorted teaching on God it was not Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a person who is living and active and can be experienced and felt. It was Father, Son and Holy Bible.

You see, all of this was condemned by Jesus in the strongest possible language. Where he says to abusive leaders, “Get out of the way. Stop shutting the door in the faces of God-seekers who are trying to get through to me.”

Here is the fifth mark of spiritual abuse.

“Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.”

Spiritually abusive systems will always communicate to people that we alone are right. Our church teaches the purest truth. Our fellowship has the corner on the market on methodology and ways of relating to people. We are the best, the truest, the most faithful to the Bible.

You know, the Pharisees were not concerned in simply making people converts to Judaism. That wasn’t sufficient. The Pharisees were concerned about making people converts to Pharisee-ism. And Jesus said, “You not only make converts to Pharisee-ism, you make people twice as much a son of hell as you are.”

Let's approach this from a couple of angles. Spiritually abusive systems and fellowships and churches, because they believe that they, alone, are right make people into their own image to such a degree that what you are going to find is churches full of clones. They just cut off people's individually and turn everyone into a clone. There is one right way to be, act, live, speak and that's is the leader's way!

Some months ago I found the words to Steve Taylor's old song, "I Want to be a Clone." Let me read you a couple of verses.

*I've gone through so much other stuff
that walking down the aisle was tough.
Now I know it's not enough
I want to be a clone.*

*I asked the Lord into my heart
They say that this is the way to start
Now you've got to play the part
I want to be a clone.*

*Be a clone and kiss conviction good-night
Cloneliness is not next to godliness, right?*

*I'm grateful that they showed the way
'Cause I could never know the way
To serve him on my own
I want to be a clone.*

*They told me that I'd fall away
Unless I followed what they say
Who needs the Bible anyway?
I want to be a clone.*

*Their language it was new to me
But Christianese got through to me
Now I can speak it fluently.
I want to be a clone.*

*So now I see the whole design
My church is just an assembly line
My parts are there, I'm feeling fine
I want to be a clone.*

*I've learned enough to stay afloat
But not so much to rock the boat.
I'm glad they shoved it down my throat.*

I want to be a clone.

We're the only one's who are right. And so we cookie-cutter out everybody and we turn people into spiritual clones. And when a person hears in one of those abusive situations that we alone are right, you know what the real message is? You have no alternative but to stay here.

There is no alternative but to stay and be abused. And I have talked with people who have been in the most abusive situations for five years, for nine years, for fifteen years and I will ask, "Why did you stay?"

And they'll answer, "We knew that there was something terribly wrong here five years ago, ten years ago, fifteen years ago—but you know, I didn't think that I had an alternative because we were told over and over again that there were no other good churches. And that every other church refused to teach the Bible truthfully and refused to do what the Bible tells us to do and didn't honor the Word. Every other church didn't do the gifts the way we do them. The other churches were all compromisers and watered down and confused. We were repeatedly told there was no alternative."

Isn't that what we see in abusive relationships all the time? Wife, why do you stay and allow yourself to be beaten on? Or verbally bashed day after day after day? "You're stupid. You're fat. You're ugly." Why?

"Because I thought I had no choice."

"Because my husband told me over and over again that I would never meet anyone else. No one would ever take me in because I was a loser."

"Because I had several kids and I just didn't know where else to go."

Now, I want you to hear this. If there is another church in the city where you feel like you can grow better in your own relationship with God, you feel like you can get closer to God, you feel like you can serve him better, love him more, worship him more dearly, help his cause in this world then please, that is the place for you to be.

There are dozens of alternatives to the Vineyard. There are loads of places that folks can find God in this city. And if you find God better with a different style, you find God better when there is liturgy; you find God better where women wear doilies on their heads; you find God better where people march, where people have banners, where the music is more up-beat or less up-beat; where the pastor sits on a stool or marches around—whatever doorway, style, whether they dress up or dress down; whatever you need to do to find Jesus and love Jesus more, you do that. Because this is about Jesus and Jesus is not the private possession of any particular church or denomination. Jesus is not some little private trophy that we put in our trophy case and say, “Oh, well, we really have Jesus.”

There are always alternatives for people to get out of abusive situations. You do not need to be abused and you do not need to allow your children to get abused.

In verse 16-22, Jesus is talking about another sign of spiritually abusive places and I don't have the time to cover it. He is going through all of the distinctions that the Pharisees makes between binding oaths and oaths that are not binding. Really, I think he is talking about churches that have cut-n-paste Bibles. The Holy Bible becomes a Bible full of holes. And there are all these different loopholes around the clear teaching of the scripture. So that when the scripture says something, “Well, that is a distinction. And here is a way to categorize that. And here is why we shove that teaching over here and

we don't need to follow that. And we don't need to follow that chapter. And we don't need to follow all of those verses because that is for a different time and a different place. And that is for a different people." Cut-n-paste Bibles. And Jesus didn't really mean that when he said that.

Well, let's move on to verses 23 and 24. We will finish this up in just a moment.

Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides. You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

In Judaism, if you look at the Old Testament, the Lord classified animals as either clean and appropriate for eating, kosher foods, and those animals that were unclean and not considered kosher and right for eating. Now, both a gnat and a camel were unclean. And so the Pharisees literally used to put everything that they drank or ate, because in those days there were lots of bugs, they would put everything through a strainer or clench their teeth to make sure that a gnat didn't enter. And Jesus is using irony, again, with them and saying, "That's great that you strain out these little unclean gnats, but in the course of how you deal with things, you swallow camels."

Spiritually abusive leaders and churches have distorted priorities. And they confuse people's understanding of what true spirituality is. So that true spirituality gets measured by gnats rather than camels.

"To be really spiritual, you must be homeschooling your children."

"To be really spiritual, you must carry this certain Bible."

“To be really spiritual in this church, you must not watch television.”

“To be really spiritual in this church, women should never wear sleeveless tops or shorts.”

You see, there is a deceptiveness to straining gnats and emphasizing gnats because it seems that the church is so scripturally faithful. Man, these guys are really into the minutia. They really take seriously every little thing that is in the Bible. Wow. This must be a great biblical church.

But they get so caught up in all of the minutia, that the really big issues get lost. And people begin to measure their spirituality by gnats. How many meetings have you been to this week? Not whether you have gossiped; whether you are full of unbelief; whether you regularly criticize or are full of anger or lust or jealousy. You may not know the first thing about spiritual gifts or repentance but boy you strained these two gnats on our check list. The leadership judges you to be an okay person. Keep straining those gnats and one day we may let you be a leader – even if you have a mouthful of camel.

Well, here is the last thing that I am going to talk about today. Verses 25-28:

Woe to you teachers of the law, and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisees! First clean the inside of the cup and dish and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

In abusive systems, abusive families, abusive churches, appearance is everything. Let's make sure that no one knows that Dad is an alcoholic. Because appearance to the neighbors is everything. So we take Dad out of the car and we help him inside and we wash off the vomit. We don't let anyone know that little Billy has been stealing stuff from a store. Don't let anyone know that incest has been going on in the family. Got to maintain appearance. Got to maintain appearance. Put the make-up on to cover the black eye.

The same thing occurs with spiritually abusive churches—got to maintain appearance. Let's put on a show of unity. We don't want anyone to know that there is real major disagreements here. It's all show. It is phony unity. It's all pretense. Inside there are dead men's bones.

Romans 14:17 says:

“The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness, peace and joy and the Holy Spirit.”

There is an order. Churches want peace; churches want unity. The second thing in this list, “righteousness, peace and joy”—they want peace. We want unity. But we won't have righteousness. We won't work for righteousness, for the truth.

We wonder why we have no peace? There is not a lot of joy. The foundation for peace and joy is righteousness. Righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. You do the right thing. You speak the truth. You listen to the truth. You obey the truth. You repent when the truth confronts you. And then you have a basis for peace and real unity.

A number of years ago a friend told me a story about a church they were in where the pastor was caught in a sin, a sin of morality. There was some controversy over

whether or not he had really committed the sin that was alleged. They called in a member of the board who was very trusted in the eyes of the church and he knew the pastor had committed this sin. This member of the board was asked, “Did the pastor commit this sin?”

He stood up in front of the church and said, “No. I have looked into it. The pastor is clean. He didn’t commit that sin.”

Afterward someone said, “Why did you say that? You talked with him privately. Why did you say that? You knew the pastor had sinned. Why did you tell people that he hadn’t?”

The member of the board said, “Because I didn’t want to destroy this church’s unity.”

Friend, the unity of the church was destroyed the moment you decided to opt for appearance rather than to opt for the truth. At that moment you destroyed the church.

Every time a church opts for what looks good rather than what is good, they put another nail into the coffin of the church. Everywhere we opt for appearance rather than reality because someone in control makes the decision that the people can’t handle the truth or would be upset by the truth – we are abusers.