

Woe To You?

Silencing the Voice of Conformity

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HARNESS-BROKE MOOSE

Jacques Leroux, a resident of Escourt Station, Maine, always had workhorses. He used them, first, for actual work and then for show at Maine's many summer fairs. He had two matched pairs, one Clydesdale and the other Belgian. He would turn them out to pasture each morning and then work them in the afternoon dragging the sled around the fields.

Three springs ago, he noticed a female moose coming to the pasture and helping herself to the hay and grain the work horses didn't pick up off the ground. Jacques said he could get within 10 feet of the moose before it would turn and move off.

Two springs ago, the moose gave birth at the edge of the workhorse pasture and, upon getting to its feet, the baby moose had not only the mother in attendance but also the four horses. The young moose grew up around the horses and each afternoon, when Mr. Leroux took the teams for their daily exercise, the yearling moose would trail along the entire route next to the nearest horse.

At some point, the yearling got so accustomed to Mr. Leroux that, after he had brushed each horse after a workout, he started brushing down the moose. The moose tolerated this quite well so Mr. Leroux started draping harness parts over the yearling to see how he would tolerate these objects. The yearling was soon harness broken. Now came the question; what could you do with a harness broke moose?

INTRODUCTION

Today's sermon is the second in a 4-part series we've reservedly decided to call "Woe To You?", but which we accidentally keep referring to as the Woe is Me series. There may be more truth in that than I'm willing to face this morning. Just so we're clear, I'd prefer it was Woe to You and not to me. The focus of this series has been the fascinating interchange portrayed in Matthew, chapter 23, between Jesus and those representing the religious and moral authorities of Israel at the time. Last week, Jon Walker spoke about silencing the "Voice of Superiority." This week we'll take a look at how to silence the "Voice of Conformity."

DEFINITION

What is Conformity? (If you're the moose in our story, it's trying to be a horse). Conformity is living according to a set of standards. Adjusting your life and your behaviors so you match a set of standards. We do this everyday and for lots of reasons because we want to fit in.

- They're acceptable (socially, culturally, spiritually)
- They're popular (everyone else doing it)
- They're expected
- They're common

These are meaningful incentives because not conforming tends to leave you feeling:

- isolated
- vulnerable
- embarrassed
- uncomfortable

An easy example of this is dress code: when we try to match our appearance to the common norm of whatever "world" we're in. Raise your hand if you wore a collared shirt to church this morning—CONFORMISTS. I don't know if you're aware of this, but Missionary Kids are masters of conformity. We're like "*crazy conformity chameleons*." I came from the jungles of Africa to the great big world of America. I was an impressionable palate, waiting to be painted on. The first world I entered upon arrival was basketball. Baggy clothes, short hair, sport shoes (only). The second world I entered was that of a biker. I found out quick, cyclists don't wear baggy clothes. They wear tight shirts (wind-resistance) and spandex. If you've gotten to know me in recent years you may have noticed that I'm "fond" of flannel. Bill stopped me in the hall this week and accused me of wearing flannel because I'm trying to "fit in" to the culture in Weaverville. What he didn't know is that my flannel fixation is a holdover from a previous bout with conformity 3 years ago. In an attempt to fit in better with the guys of a third world, the jobsite of my short-lived career in construction, I became fond of flannel. You need to take my word on this; spandex isn't a good idea on a construction jobsite. So, conformity is not an inherently evil thing.

Wikipedia, a highly authoritative online encyclopedia, backs me up on this. It says, "*conformity can have either good or bad effects on people, from driving safely on the correct side of the road, to talking to bears.*" I'm sort of guessing the later is the effect that's frowned upon. What matters then, when talking about conformity, is the **context**. In Matthew, chapter 23, the context of "conformity" is looking to any standard other than Christ as the measure of success or acceptance.

"Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 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. 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." Matthew 23, 1-4 NKJV

The teaching of the scribes and Pharisees was legitimate. Jesus encouraged His followers to believe and obey their words, but not the way they lived their lives. Because their lives betrayed a departure from God's standards, that grieved Jesus. The "Woe to You" that Jesus later levels at the scribes and Pharisees are not a curse. They're not some angry tirade. It was more like a frustrated, sorrowful running commentary on the ways those entrusted with The Kingdom of God had brought grief to God. Alas for you, you're missing the point and you're taking people with you. God was grieving because of the damage these leaders were doing to themselves and to His people, when all He wanted for them is His best.

So, is God grieving for you today? Are these "Woe's" directed at you? I have to ask because, if we're honest, at some point we all listen to the voice of conformity. There are at least two different ways we do this. We listen to the voice of conformity when we make human performance a prerequisite to God's acceptance; when we insist that the behavior of others must be "fixed" before God can accept them.

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in." Matthew 23:13 NKJV

As Jon Walker showed us last weekend, Jesus exposed the self-promoting and self-righteous attitudes of the scribes and Pharisees as symptoms of Superiority. This was a Superiority Complex that manifested itself through bullying and the abuse of power (verse 4). They were positioned in the "authoritative office" of a man who led Israel to freedom, yet much of their power was now being used to re-enslave the people with standards and expectations God did not require.

Do you remember Bill's sermon "Clearing the Way to Refuge?" It's one of my favorite sermons, and some of its points are helpful in understanding what's really going on here.

- That sermon explained the purpose of the "Cities of Refuge" talked about in the Old Testament, which were the part of the justice system in ancient Israel set up to handle the occurrence of manslaughter or homicide.
- The person who killed had the right to seek safety/refuge in any of these cities. However, the closest relative of the one killed (the Avenger of Blood) also had the right to kill the original killer if he caught him before he could enter the city.
- It was paramount that this system worked, so there were to be obvious markers pointing the right direction to the cities. The roads to these cities were to be very wide. It was the task of the priests to make sure all obstacles were kept off the wide roads and out of the way of the one fleeing for safety.
- The implications of this imagery were as follows:
 - The slaying paralleled *our guilt*.
 - The Avenger of Blood paralleled *the Justice of God*.
 - The Cities of Refuge paralleled *Jesus Christ*.
 - And the act of fleeing towards the cities paralleled *faith*.

Now you have a better idea for the reasons Jesus looks at these leaders in grief. Picture this tragic irony:

- You have these religious leaders of Jesus' day, essentially the "road-keepers" of the city of refuge, legitimately and accurately pointing the way towards the safety of God's Kingdom.
- Then you have these people who, in verse 13, are entering in. They are already fleeing to refuge, to safety. They are already exhibiting all that God deems necessary to enter, FAITH!
- Then it's as if the road-keeper priests suddenly turn on the one fleeing and start assisting the Avengers of Blood.
 - They lug a boulder of rules into the middle of the lane and, if you're able to navigate that,
 - They dig a pot-hole of performance for you to slog through and, if you're still desperate enough to keep trying to inch forward,
 - They finish you off by shoving a stick of past failures into your spokes as you go by and the one fleeing is stopped within sight of safety.

I've had it with you! You're hopeless, you religion scholars, you Pharisees! Frauds! Your lives are roadblocks to God's kingdom. You refuse to enter, and won't let anyone else in either.

Do you know what the real problem was? It was unbelief. Deep down, these religious leaders just could not believe that FAITH, God's ultimate standard for acceptance, was enough. So Jesus sadly calls them "hypocrites." They know God's standards and teach them, but won't live their lives accordingly, or allow others to do so. We are also hypocrites and guilty of listening to the voice of conformity whenever we insist that people fleeing in the direction of safety must do anything beyond "repent and believe." If the context of "conformity" in Matthew, chapter 23 is looking to any standard other than Christ as the measure of success or acceptance, then we also listen to the voice of conformity when we pursue recognition instead of God's best for us. When you've perfected a culture of recognition that's based on performance, the only way you're able to gauge the success of your life is by comparing your greatness to that of others.

"But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the

marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ." Matthew 23, 5-10 NKJV

Jon read and explained this last week and he was totally right. The scribes and Pharisees were using superiority to mask not just their unbelief, but also their feelings of inferiority. The extra rules and standards they were creating in order to maintain control and stay that "one step ahead" were bi-products of their insecurity. Who can blame them? I mean, talk about a tough act to follow; it's no wonder they were overcompensating, they sat in Moses' seat!

Let's try to put this into a realm of perspective we can understand. How many of you are movie buffs?

- Can you imagine trying to play the role of Moses in any large-scale remake of *The 10 Commandments* after Charlton Heston's performance in 1956?
- Would you want to be that actor?
- Now imagine the pressure of the real deal.

The scribes and Pharisees craved the kind of recognition and authority held by Moses, and bent the rules in order to stack the deck in their favor, but inside they knew they weren't comparable to him.

- When Jesus exposed this and further leveled the playing field for everyone—they could have killed him.

And you know what? We listen to the voice of conformity, too; whenever we compare our lives with God's best for *someone else*. The bad news is that at some point, we've all allowed the voice of conformity to direct our lives more than the voice of God. The good news is that we don't have to listen to that voice any longer.

It's tempting to say the "voices" belong to our parents, friends, culture, teachers, pastors or the TV. But this is an avoidance of responsibility. The voices confining and crushing your spirit are, ultimately, yours. Yes, they may have originated from outside of you; it's like a bon-fire that shoots sparks into the air and sometimes they land on you. And yes, the devil does fan that spark the second it hits you. He'd like nothing more than to multiply bon-fires. But, ultimately, the choice to let that spark continue to burn is yours.

So let's talk about two ways we can silence the voice of conformity.

1. ACCEPT CHRIST & HIS STANDARDS

Joe Louis is widely regarded as one of the most legendary boxers of all time, largely due to the power of his punches, which resulted in so many knock-outs that he "held the world heavyweight title for 12 years, through 24 fights, longer than anyone before or since. But all of his fights seem to pale in comparison to his re-match against the German world heavy-weight holder Max Schmeling in 1938, a fight whose outcome was seen as a powerful symbol of the war being fought with Germany on a larger scale around the world.

Over 70,000 people crammed into Yankee Stadium, and over 70 million Americans huddled around their radios to hear the outcome of this fight. The reasons for such a large following were many and deep. Race played a role. Joe Louis was an African-American living in a time when "equality" really was just a word. Yet he was America's choice to defend another one of the deep issues at stake in the fight, national pride. Then there was a sense that we were good and Germany was evil. So, on the night of this fight, it was as if something was at stake for everyone. With so much at stake, you can imagine the euphoria when Joe Louis knocked out Schmeling in an explosive 124 seconds, less than one round. People who were there said the aftermath was the most unbelievable expression of excitement, joy, unity and triumph they had ever seen. Black men hugged white men, the poor and rich paraded together in the streets.

I was watching a show about this on PBS and one man who was interviewed commented that he remembers thinking, "What is this amazing feeling and how can I get more?" Perhaps as the form of a response, another man's comments were then played. He said, "Because Joe represented so many ideals to so many people, the feeling you had after that fight was almost that of a personal victory; when he won, you won."

The first and most crucial way to silence the voice of conformity is to believe Christ has already conquered and achieved every standard expected of you by God. Because Jesus followed every rule and requirement God expects from us, His life and His performance, while He lived, became the new standard by which God evaluates us. When He won, you won. So all you have to do is accept the victory of Christ as your own. From that point on, when God looks to evaluate you, He finds Jesus there instead. When God rolls out the giant measuring tape of perfection and holds it next to you he'll have to say, "Wow – another world heavy-weight champion!"

2. ACCEPTING YOUR UNIQUE SIGNIFICANCE & CONTRIBUTION

"Acceptance" has negative connotations in our society because we Americans seem to be all about defiance in the face of our circumstances. But acceptance is not a cop out; acceptance is not "settling."

When I was going to Simpson University, I remember "*settling*" as being an intense subject of debate.

- Does 'the one' tailor made for me really exist?

- Should I be content with anyone that makes me reasonably happy?

“No, that would be *settling!*” (GASP)

- That was the only time an 8-letter word became a 4- letter word
- In case you’re wondering, I’m an advocate for not settling and I’ve never been sorry.

And don’t *you* settle either, because the real tragedy takes place when you settle for the best God has for someone else.

- Don’t settle for the most common and respectable measures of success.
- Don’t look to the world’s definition of fulfillment.
- Don’t get hung up on the impossible feats of your heroes.

My Parents and grandparents are my heroes. In fact, if I really wanted to brag, I could look back at four consecutive generations of Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries in my family and get really depressed.

- They sacrificed their comfort.
- They left their families.
- They witnessed miracles.
- They built amazing ministries with their bare hands.
- And they risked their lives.
- Three of my four grandparents lost their lives in missionary service.
- My dad speaks all over the world and saves lives as a medical doctor in a third world country every day.

I could get really depressed trying to compare my life to theirs. Or worse, I could become obsessed with trying to create some legacy of my own. But God’s best for someone else is not God’s best for me and it’s not God’s best for you.

After exposing the desperation of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus presents an alternative route to a fulfilling life.

“But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Matthew 23:11-12 NKJV

Besides exposing their desperation for recognition, what was Jesus doing to these religious authorities in Matthew chapter 23? He was humbling them. He was reminding them of who had the real authority.

- You know, if we make recognition the focus of our energies, what we leave to God is the task of keeping us humble.
- If my focus in life becomes the creation of some sort of comparable legacy to that of my forefathers, I leave God with only one option: to humble me.
- But, if we focus on serving God with humility wherever we are right now, God is free to make us successful in ways that will be more satisfying than we could ever have orchestrated on our own and in a way that perfectly fits:
 - our personalities,
 - our gifts,
 - and our deepest desires.

The outcomes of humble obedience belong to God. I want to be sure we’re all clear on a couple of issues.

Clarification 1: I want to be clear that when I say “*humility*” I’m not talking about:

- shyness,
- meekness,
- letting people walk all over you,
- or even avoiding ambition. Ambition is good; God made you for excellence.

When I talk about “*humility*,” I’m talking about an over-arching attitude or “*theme*” of submission to the rule and authority of God in your life. *That’s* humility. And the outcomes of humble obedience belong to God.

Clarification 2: We’ve already agreed that it’s the humble obedience of Jesus’ life that makes it possible for God to accept us, so this humble service on your part has nothing to do with being acceptable to God. Instead, it has everything to do with you being able to enjoy the most fulfilling life possible. It has to do with you being able to THRIVE. God’s best for you waits on humility.

CONCLUSION:

It’s ironic that the only person in human history ever to conform 100% to the standards of God the Father was killed for refusing to conform to the standards of men. Yet, it’s precisely because of that non-conforming life of Christ and His death that we are able to both

- escape the punishment for poor performance
- and lead fulfilled lives of incredible purpose.