

Sermon
2 November 2014
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Matthew 23:1-12

Ordination & Admission of Elders

During the October break my family and I went to the Netherlands for a wee holiday. On our way to the airport, the taxi driver asked us if we still needed to check in for our flight, to which André replied: No, we are checked in already, it's just our luggage that needs to get sorted...

And then André and I had a long conversation about what he just said. Because is that not true of everybody who believes in God? *We are checked in to heaven already, it's just our luggage we still need to deal with...*

Jesus secured a place for us all with God, our final destination is sorted, but *en-route* there, we all have baggage that we carry around with us.

And as anybody who has ever travelled anywhere by plane will know very well, if you want to take more luggage than is allowed, you'll get fined for it. And the amount of money you have to pay for excess luggage is usually much more than what your luggage is worth, so very often you see people re-packing their bags at the airport and throwing things out. After all, the restrictions are there for a reason – if everybody

just took along whatever they wanted, the plane might end up being too heavy and not safe to fly with...

We all have baggage. Physical baggage, emotional baggage – we're always carrying something along with us. Some of these things we really need, so we have to carry it along with us, we don't really have a choice there.

But I think very often

- we carry things with us “just in case”,
- or things we don't really need, but think we'll be lost without,
- and even some things we don't need at all...

And that's not very clever, because unnecessary baggage doesn't have any use at all – it just drags us down.

In Matthew 23 Jesus describes the *Pharisees* as people who “tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.” So that is even worse – they are forcing other people to carry things, but they wouldn't do the same if they were asked.

What does this mean? The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were the ones who were to tell the people how to be obedient to God. But their outlook on religion was wrong. They made serving God about thousands upon thousands of rules and regulations; and therefore religion became *an intolerable burden* for the people to carry.

And now Jesus is asking his followers if that is what faith should be like? Should religion be a deadweight that drags you down, or should it give

you wings to lift you up? Should people have to *carry* their religion, or should they *be carried by* their religion?

The Pharisees wanted the whole world to think that they were amazing at serving God. We read that:

- *They made their phylacteries wide:* “Phylacteries” were small boxes with Scripture passages inside, affixed by a leather strap to one’s head and left hand during morning and evening prayers; and the Pharisees made these really big because they wanted people to see how pious they were.
- *They made the tassels on their garments long:* The tassels were there to remind them of the commandments of God; but now they used these tassels to show off to others, instead of using it a reminder of how they should live.
- *They loved the place of honour at banquets and in the synagogues:* In Palestine the back seats in the synagogues were occupied by the children and the most unimportant people; the further forward the seat, the greater the honour. The most honoured seats of all were the seats of the elders, which *faced* the congregation. If a man was seated there, everyone would see that he was present and he could conduct himself throughout the service with a pose of piety which the congregation could not fail to notice.
- *And then they also wanted to be addressed as Rabbi and to be treated with the greatest respect:* “Rabbi” means “father”. They claimed, in point of fact, greater respect than that which was given to parents, for, they said, where somebody’s parents gives him/her ordinary, physical life, somebody’s *teacher* gives him/her *eternal* life.

Talk about baggage! Jesus insists that Christians should remember that they have one teacher only – and that teacher is Christ; and only one Father in the faith – and that Father is God.

To summarise Jesus' problem: *The Pharisees did not practice what they preached.* They were supposed to be the religious leaders of the community, and they wanted the honour for doing just that, but in reality, it was all about the show for them.

Jesus wants his followers, the leaders and the members of his congregations, to be humble servants. To not only tell others what to do, but to do it themselves too. We're not here for the show, but to make a difference.

And that brings me back to the baggage again. Because nobody who serves, who works really hard, can do that with a huge pile of baggage on his/her back. If you really want to get in there, get your hands dirty and make a difference, you'll have to travel light.

There'll be no room for pomp and ceremony, no room for grudges, anger, revenge, hatred, envy.

So the 1st thing a true follower of Jesus will have to do is to unpack all of these things – because these things are very heavy, and can drag you down to the ground completely. And carrying things like this along on your journey will in the end cost you more than you can afford.

Nobody can go through life completely without luggage – but let's rather choose to carry things like humbleness, care, kindness, forgiveness and

love with us. Because these things are not heavy. And the more we use it, the lighter our baggage becomes, because these things we can give away without losing it...

So, may you, with the grace of God, be an elder who humbly serves this congregation in the way Jesus wants you to, and may we all support you in the way Jesus tells us to.

And may we all, by doing that, travel light and enjoy the ride, because we know that our destination will be out of this world!

Amen