

Identity Study: Matt. 23:1-36 – Image is Everything – Lesson Summary

In 1990, Canon created an ad campaign declaring, “Image is Everything.” 30 years later, that statement might be the perfect description of our culture. If you’ve paid any attention to social media’s explosive popularity, you’ve likely heard the term “influencer.” This term is used to describe a social media personality who’s career is composed of influencing the culture around them. In doing so, they have become targets for advertisers and brand executives. Sponsorships, scripted videos, or devotion to specific products have become the main source of income and influence. The primary way in which influencers influence the culture is through their image. They present a specific image highlighting physical characteristics, style, trends, demographics, and much more. This image becomes the identity presented to the masses. While the term influencer has recently become a career title, prominent individuals throughout history have always influenced the culture by the image they created. It was no different during Jesus’ time on earth.

As we consider the dangers of finding our identity in our image, we must look to some of the most prominent individuals in Jesus’ day. In the Jewish tradition the scribes and Pharisees would have been the influencers. They presented an image of superiority, prominence, and prestige. In *Matt. 23:1-36* Jesus uses His last public teaching in the synagogue to address the foolishness of their behavior. With great boldness, Jesus points out the failure of these “spiritual leaders.” Often referred to as the “7 Woes,” Jesus addresses their behavior 7 times with the words, “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees” or “Woe to you, blind guides.”

An identity found in one’s image leads to two distinct problems. The first is hypocrisy. Jesus makes this clear when He follows each woe with a declaration, “Hypocrites”. The expectations and image the Pharisees have established is unattainable. As a result, they say one thing but do the opposite. This is not unlike our culture today. The second problem is that of pride. When our image defines our identity, we constantly compare ourselves to others and make distinctions in order to feel superior. Clearly, the words and actions of the scribes and Pharisees have led to struggles of hypocrisy and pride.

As we consider the 7 specific woes that Jesus pronounces on the scribes and Pharisees, **5 problematic characteristics** of an identity found in our image become clear. The first characteristic is the creation of **impossible standards**. The requirements that the Pharisees have placed on others are impossible to attain. The second is **exclusivity**. Individuals that measure up to the image created are invited into the “club” while those who don’t are left out. Third, an identity defined by one’s image leads to **focusing on the physical rather than the spiritual**. The Pharisees would swear by the items in the temple or on the alter rather than the by the presence of God signified by those things. Fourth, we **focus on our external image rather than our heart**. We are quick to appear outwardly worthy with little consideration for the condition of our sinful heart. Finally, an identity wrapped up in our image often leads to **self-righteousness**. We deem ourselves better than others. The Pharisees displayed each of these characteristics because their identity was solely found in the image they presented to others. However, when we consider Christ, we see the complete opposite. There is no hypocrisy or pride in Christ. Jesus was the standard of perfection yet He provides a way for us to be perfected through His Spirit. Our Savior invites people in rather than exclude them. Jesus often spoke about surrendering the things of this world in order to look toward Heaven. The sanctifying work of God, through Christ, addresses our truest need, fixing the ugliness of our sinful heart. Finally, Jesus is not self-righteous; He is the personification of righteousness! Through His mercy and grace we can become righteous. When our identity is found in our image and not in Christ’s, we will reflect all that is opposed to Him. The only image that matters in our life is that which is reflective of Christ as we find our identity in Him.

Discussion:

- 1) Consider the statement, “Image is everything.” How do people in our society live like that is true? How do you live like that is true?
- 2) The Pharisees and scribes required the impossible for others to be accepted. How do you see that happening in our culture or even in the church?
- 3) If our image becomes our identity, we struggle with hypocrisy, pride, exclusivity, and a concern for physical rather than spiritual things. How do you struggle to prioritize your faith over your image?