



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life. **Amen**

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Have you ever told someone to do one thing, while doing something else yourself? What happened, and why did you do this?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise (based on a prayer by David Adam)

Jesus said, “Come to me, all you that are weary
and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls.
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”
Rest in Jesus’s presence, and be aware of God’s love.

Let God’s presence be a light in the darkness.
The Lord is here. God’s Spirit is with us.
Thanks be to God. **Amen**

Reading Matthew 23:1 – 12

Sermon

“These boots are perfect. The sole’s solid, they are very grippy, they are good for every surface, they’ve got fantastic ankle support. Just the job!” You nod, as the assistant in the outdoor shop heads to the back of the store to pick out walking boots in your size. This morning saw you decide that the best way to spend your week off work would be to go walking in the middle of nowhere. Thus, after breakfast and before you could change your mind, you go to the local outdoor shop to buy everything you need. The salesperson was very persuasive, and seemed extremely knowledgeable. As you look at tents, socks, water bottles, torches, sleeping bags, waterproofs, camping stoves, gas canisters, first aid kits, OS maps, food storage boxes, and even long-lasting and apparently tasty snacks, their assistant assembles a pile of shiny new equipment at the checkout.

Finally, the salesperson points out a rucksack that seems taller than you are, and tells you that it should *just about* be big enough for this lot, but it might be a bit cosy! That’s when you start to wonder about whether this was such a good idea after all. You’re only half listening as the assistant shows you how to pack your new stuff into this bag, in order to make the best use of its huge capacity. You cannot shake off the thought that you might struggle to get back to your car in one piece with this load, yet alone carry it for miles across rugged terrain for days on end! After stumping up a substantial sum of money, you find yourself needing to bend down a bit, to lift this rucksack on your shoulders, and need the assistant’s help with the bag straps. As you stumble slowly towards the shop door, held open for you by the ever

so helpful salesperson, you say, “I suppose you get used to carrying your world on your back”, and find yourself completely taken aback, as they say, “Actually, I’ve never been camping. Beach holidays are more my thing”. It reminds you of the Scribes and Pharisees...

Today’s passage from Matthew’s Gospel finds Jesus teaching both his disciples and the large crowds gathered in the Temple courtyard in Jerusalem to hear him preach. Having survived challenges made, and questions posed, and traps laid, by a variety of subgroups from within the diverse and lively Judaism of his day, he was now able to speak freely on his own terms. What results is undeniably feisty and hard-hitting stuff! But, before we dive into exploring it, it is worth just pausing to note that there is some debate amongst Biblical scholars as to whether Matthew 23, in which Jesus really took on the Scribes and Pharisees, belongs within the fifth and final block of his teaching grouped together by the Gospel writer. These five sections are often thought to mirror the five books of the Torah, and they consist of:

- the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 – 7
- the commissioning of the disciples in Matthew 10
- the Kingdom parables in Matthew 13
- the teaching on Jesus-centred community in Matthew 18
- the warnings & teaching about the future in Matthew 23 – 25

Those who support this way of reading it argue it matters, because it is all part of Matthew’s efforts to depict Jesus as the ‘New Moses’, who this time didn’t stop on the edge of the Promised Land, but led Israel into new beginnings like his namesake of old, Joshua. Others claim the final teaching block starts when Jesus leaves the Temple courtyard in Matthew 24:1 and that he’s best described as being in prophetic mode in today’s passage, such as we might find in Amos and Isaiah when the prophets call the people to come back to God. As Matthew 23 does have quite a different focus to what took place

with the disciples on the Mount of Olives, it makes sense to me that this chapter is perhaps more of a standalone unit. What I think may be said wherever one stands on this issue, is that Jesus challenged the way in which the Law of Moses and the authority of Moses were being used to lay heavy burdens upon ordinary people.

The Scribes and Pharisees were acting rather like the sales staff in the outdoor shop, loading heavy packs on other people’s backs that they’d convinced them that they needed, but without doing anything to lift the burden. They made regular reference to Moses, and what he’d taught and commanded, to justify this. Indeed, the Greek word translated as ‘the seat of Moses’ (*kathedra*) is used for the Bishop’s seat in a cathedral – the symbol of their authority within a cathedral and diocese alike. In other words, they saw themselves as walking in his footsteps and as official interpreters of those commandments he’d received on Mount Sinai. They filled the ‘bags’ ordinary people ‘carried’ with the weight of all their judgments about how the Mosaic Law was to be applied in everyday life, to the point where it resulted in many being excluded from Israel’s religious life for not being able to cope with the heaviness of the burden. At the same time, nothing was done to lighten that load or help people bear it more easily. It’s no coincidence that Jesus says this straight after being questioned about which was the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:34 – 40), and summing it up in terms of loving God with everything we’ve got, and loving others as ourselves. He was as passionate as everyone else in Judaism about the Law, but his burden was lighter, because he cut to the heart of what actually meant (Matthew 11:28 – 30).

What made matters worse, Jesus then noted, was that at the same time as ‘overburdening’ others, the Pharisees and Scribes paraded their piety in public through making the religious symbols they wore as conspicuous as possible. They sought out status, and gloried in the respectability and honour their positions brought them (we need to keep in mind that calling someone ‘rabbi’ in that context was like

referring to them as 'sir' today). They had spectacularly missed the point of what Moses was about, and the principles he taught. Given that those Pharisees and Scribes were as much political leaders as they were religious experts in the Jerusalem society of the day, it's worth noting that comparable figures today are not simply ministers who enjoy dressing up boxes or exalted status in faith communities too much. Who are those in our context who set themselves up as media darlings and rejoice in their celebrity? Who are those who've have much to say about public values and the way everyone should behave, but yet do not themselves practice what they teach and do exploit their position to further their own interests and those of their families and friends?

Our reading ends with two sayings which Jesus used several times, and which point to classic 'Gospel reversals' (Matthew 23:11 – 12). The humble will be exalted, and the exalted will be humbled. I think that Jesus was in a position to make a statement like that because, unlike those Pharisees and Scribes, he was willing to put his money where his mouth is – in other words, instead of piling heavy spiritual rucksacks on the backs of others, he walked the way of the cross, and carried the burden himself of all that stifles fullness of life in our world. Consequently, he wasn't yet another religious leader making lofty pronouncements, but one who humbled himself to the point of death upon the cross (Philippians 2:5 – 11). Jesus 'walked the talk'. So, what about you? Do you walk the talk? It's not about perfection; we all fall short sometimes. However, it is about mindset. The folks Jesus criticised exalted themselves while burdening others. Are we people who weigh others down, or do we lift their burdens? Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of integrity,
who walked the way of the cross to set us free,
we come before you today

and lay down our burdens at your feet:

For the times when we've said one thing and done another:
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

For the times when we've loaded heavy burdens onto others,
but refused to share the load:
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

For the times when we've valued outward piety and status
above integrity and humility:
Lord, have mercy. **Christ, have mercy.**

God of integrity,
who walked the way of the cross to set us free,
thank you that we can lay down our burdens at your feet,
and know our sins forgiven. **Amen**

Recommended Resource of the Week

The film *Chocolat* (2000) explores themes found in this week's text, such as outward piety and religious performance, and the impact of stifling legalism. It is also fun, and the chocolate is mouth-watering!

Prayers of Intercession (based on Singing the Faith 719)

We pray for peace, but not the easy peace
built on complacency and not the truth of God.
We pray for real peace,
the peace God's love alone can seal.

We pray for peace, but not the cruel peace
leaving God's poor bereft and dying in distress;
we pray for real peace, enriching all the human race.

We pray for peace, and not the evil peace
defending unjust laws and nursing prejudice,
but for the real peace of justice, mercy, truth and love.

We pray for peace: holy communion
with Christ our risen Lord and every living thing;
God's will fulfilled on earth and all creation reconciled.

We pray for peace, and, for the sake of peace,
look to the risen Christ, who gives the grace we need to
serve the cause of peace and make our own self-sacrifice.

God, give us peace; if you withdraw your love
there is no peace for us, nor any hope of it.
With you to lead us on, through death or tumult,
peace will come. Amen

Lord's Prayer

Blessing