Jesus often argued with the Pharisees. Sometimes he used harsh words. But he also ate in their homes, worshiped alongside them in the temple, and joined them in teaching the *Torah*. At least one Pharisee, Nicodemus, came to Jesus for private instruction. Even in this passage, Jesus commends the Pharisees for the quality of their teaching: "Do whatever they teach you and follow it" (v. 3). His complaint is not about their teaching; it is about their living. Jesus' complaint is not that they are wrong, but that too many of them are frauds, not practicing what they preach. If we're honest with ourselves, we must admit that we are often guilty of the same.

So, we need to beware: Jesus sneaks up on us in Matthew 23. The elephant in the room can show up anywhere. There is an elephant that sits quietly in the corner of every worship service, church council meeting, and denominational gathering. The elephant is in the church whenever faith becomes performance. The elephant is in the preacher whose words become easier than obedience. The elephant is in the congregation that confuses respectability with faithfulness. The elephant is in us whenever we would rather be seen doing holy things than being quietly remade by God's grace.

The issue is faithfulness versus performance. Faithfulness is when you serve because your neighbor needs support or mercy; performance is when you serve so that others will notice and reward you. Faithfulness is when you pray because you need God; performance is when you pray because you need people to think you have religion figured out. Faithfulness is when you give because grace has loosened your grip; performance is when you give so your name will appear on a plaque. Faithfulness is when you proclaim the truth and know that you are still learning and growing; performance is when you teach the truth as though your education and experience wiped away your need for grace.

False religion is the elephant in the room. Faith that becomes a stage, religion that becomes a costume, or church that becomes a theater is the elephant in the room. Jesus calls out the worshipper whose faith is hollow, who stands and sits on cue, repeating the prayers by rote, and treating God as a prop. False religion's burdensome rules and artificial expectations will break your back and then call the fracture faithfulness. False religion will try to convince you that your broken back proves God is happy with you.

Freedom for the Weary. To this kind of religion, Jesus says, "No thanks!" He sees the elephant-sized burden we often carry and says, "This is not my way!" Jesus does not come to add weight to the weary. He comes to carry sinners who are already bent low, and to raise from our shoulders the false burdens of the world. Earlier in Matthew, Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (11:28). Notice that Jesus does not say, "Come to me, all you who have successfully managed your religious image." He says, "all you who are weary." All of you who are tired of pretending and performing. All you who are tired of carrying burdens on your shoulders in the name of God. All you who have mistaken exhaustion for holiness. Come to me, Jesus says, and I will give you rest.

That is the gospel message hiding in the middle of this hard word from Jesus. Jesus names the elephant in the room, not to humiliate the weary, but to expose the system that keeps weary people trapped. Jesus names the elephant in the room not to shame the burdened, but to free them. Oddly enough, the problem with the Pharisees is not that they care too much about holiness; the problem is that they turn holiness into a performance that benefits them at everyone else's expense. We may not all wear the professional attire of a religious leader, but we each have our own version of it. We have curated lives and managed impressions. We have social media posts, titles, credentials, humblebrags, public acts of concern, and subtle ways to let people know we are in the room they wish they were invited into.

Church people, as much as we might protest, are not immune to this elephant. We habitually turn service into status and prayers into performance. Before we know it, our generosity becomes our reputation, turning ministry into admiration. Even humility can become a brand or a badge of honor for us.

Jesus sees through all of this, which is both terrifying and liberating. Terrifying because Jesus is not fooled by our religious stagecraft and liberating because we no longer need to perform for God. Jesus sees what is true. He sees our mixed motives and our insecurities. He sees underneath our fears and our desire for control. He sees the loneliness that lies beneath our hunger for status. He sees our exhaustion.

Still, Jesus calls us, not because our words and lives are always matched perfectly, but because he is merciful. Matthew 23 releases us from shallow faith's heavy expectations and reminds us that the realm of God does not run on our performance, but on grace. God's grace makes false-faith-performers nervous because grace means we cannot create our own importance. Grace means we must stop confusing visibility with value.

The Elephant Is Us. Jesus announces that in God's realm greatness looks like service. "The greatest among you will be your servant," he says (v. 11). "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (v. 12). This is the grand reversal of God's realm: not strategy, performance or impressiveness; just simple service.

Jesus had every right to bask in peoples' praise and to take the seat of honor: instead, he chose the shame of the cross. Jesus took our burdens upon himself that we might walk free. Jesus did not merely point to the servant's path; he walked it all the way to the cross. On the cross of Christ, the elephant in the room is exposed for what it is: our pride, our hypocrisy, our love of status, and our religious games are named. Our ability to praise God with our lips and resist God with our lives is defused. The whole hairy, smelly, wrinkled, enormous, grey elephant is there, and Jesus carried it all the way to the cross for us.

Which means that the emerging realm of God does not belong to the performers; it belongs to the crucified and risen One. Since it belongs to him, we are free. Free from pretending and performing. Free of the glare of the spotlight and from the best seat at the table, and free from turning every good act into a resume builder.

Freedom in Christ is not an excuse to avoid obedience. Rather, freedom in Jesus Christ is the only way obedience becomes possible. Once grace tells you that you are already loved, you no longer need holiness to prove yourself. You can serve and take the lower seat. You can tell the truth and confess that there are times when your words do not match your life. You can acknowledge the elephant in the room, even when the elephant is you.

The church does not need any more performers. The church needs sinners who know they need God's grace. The church needs servants who see how they are served by Christ their Savior. The church needs people who can say, "Yes, there is an elephant in the room, but by the mercy of God, we do not have to keep tiptoeing around it."

Friends, there is an elephant in the room. Our words and our lives do not always match. Jesus sees it. Jesus names it. Then, Jesus does what only Jesus can do: He climbs underneath the weight of our mistakes, takes it upon himself, and raises up the people trapped beneath it.

Prayer: God, grant us the humility to recognize our faults and the courage to seek true repentance. Help us to live with integrity and to act with genuine love and compassion towards others. Cleanse our hearts so that our outward actions reflect a sincere and pure spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

The Elephant in the Room

Sunday, November 1, 2026 Matthew 23:1-12
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

When something is obvious, awkward, unavoidable and yet somehow *still* unnamed, we call it "the elephant in the room." At work: a team spends an entire meeting discussing minor project details while ignoring the fact that their department manager was just fired, or that the project is weeks behind schedule and over budget. At a family dinner: two family members have a massive blowout but sit across from each other acting completely normal. In a relationship: one person notices their partner's sudden, unexplained withdrawal or financial trouble, but both pretend nothing is wrong. That's the elephant in the room. Everyone sees it, steps around it, and pretends everything is alright. We maintain the peace by staying quiet and avoiding certain topics that would make people feel uncomfortable.

Jesus never worried much if he made people feel uneasy. Sometimes, Jesus purposely made people squirm. In Matthew 23, Jesus finally says out loud what everyone is thinking, but no one is willing to admit. The religious leaders know how to talk. They can quote Scripture and interpret tradition. They are skilled at instructing *others* in the way of righteousness. They prance around in fancy robes and take the best seats at banquets. But somewhere along the way, their lives stopped matching their words. Jesus points right at the elephant in the room and says, "There it is!"

Jesus says, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach" (vv. 2-3). The words of the Pharisees are correct, he says, but their lives are a contradiction. They know the language of God, but they have forgotten the heart of God. They know how to bind burdens on others, but not how to lift them. They know how to be seen as righteous but have forgotten how to serve faithfully. What they do is not okay, and Jesus is done pretending that everything is fine.

Faithfulness vs. Performance. There is a temptation here to make Matthew 23 all about "those people": those dishonest hypocrites, those snooty religious elites, those mean-spirited Pharisees. We like to pick on the Pharisees who were not always "fair-you-see." We like to contrast their words and deeds with our own, because we believe we are humble, faithful people who are more self-aware and deeply grateful to Jesus who provides us with such a useful text to judge others.