Matthew 23:1-12 is about the perceived hypocrisy of the religious leaders of Israel. Jesus’ criticism included their dress, their deportment, their teaching, their demand for salutations that gives them a high place of honour amongst the people. He viewed these religious leaders very presence as a magnificent pretence, in which they inflated their egos on the lowliness of others. They demanded and expected others to recognize their worth based on their titles such as Rabbi, Father, or Instructor which were seen to be used authoritatively to put others in their place. Such a self-appointed privileged status was to habitually put others into a lower place than themselves in order to make them feel important just as it was intended to make others feel less blessed.

The obvious issue of these self-inflating ego acts of false piety by these religious leaders was, in Jesus’ view at odds with the commands of God against haughtiness. What Jesus implored from his followers was the opposite, that is, to bring blessing and freedom through authenticity and transparency. We need to realize that we should not reach out to others in our pride, but rather in our humble lowliness.

His point was that the ideal authentic presentation of oneself is a beautiful and most accessible bridge over which scarred seekers of truth may walk towards healing in Christ. As such, a Christ-like leadership should always, first and foremost, be one of servanthood. We must not exalt self-exaltation. We must exalt humility.

So just how do we go about this? How do we avoid these demons of self-aggrandizement? Jesus showed us how. Jesus exalted the virtue of humility through servanthood, loving relationships, and personal sacrifice. **The Christian virtue of humility is a virtue most to be desired because it is the opposite of pride.**The Pharisees surpassed other Jews in their religious knowledge, and Jesus’ problem with the Pharisees and scribes was not with their intentions in relation to the knowledge of God. In fact, he instructed his disciples to follow their teachings of the Torah. The Torah for Jews constitutes the first five books of the Hebrew Bible traditionally thought to have been composed by Moses, and includes teaching, direction, guidance and law.

We see from this passage that the two significant critiques Jesus provides have to do with the religious leader’s lack of obedience to the Torah themselves as they teach it to others, and their motivation in preaching the Law as a way to control the ordinary worshipper, plus gain human favour and honour.

Jesus further criticized the Pharisees and scribes for putting their hard-line interpretation of their oral tradition above the command to honour parents, thereby breaking God’s command in their attempts to keep it! In addition, the Pharisees were described as putting heavy burdens on those they teach. By this Jesus placed the Pharisees in direct contrast to himself as a teacher, since his religious teaching is easy and light, not heavy and burdensome, in part because his interpretation placed centrality on love, mercy, and justice.

Jesus’ critique of the scribes and Pharisees included their religious practices of wearing the required religious garment with fringes accentuating the length “to be seen by others.” They sought honour from people rather than praise from God alone for their religious observance. Nowhere do we hear Jesus faulting their religious practice per se. Instead, he was highly critical of their misplaced focus upon human accolades. Jesus publicly condemned the scribes and Pharisees.

He rebuked them for craving the honor and praise of men. He rebuked them for laying heavy religious burdens on the common people. He admonished them for what was in his eyes, personal enhancement and ungodly behavior.

In contrast, Jesus’ followers were discouraged from elevating anyone among them over the others. This is quite a counter-cultural call! Seeking places of honour and the best seats in public gatherings as the Pharisees are described as doing would have been the acceptable and expected behaviour of religious leaders in the first century context.

Rather than taking the moral high ground here, it was important to Jesus that all humans matter. All people like to matter, to be important, to be honoured. We all want to be known, loved, and appreciated; this is what it means to be human. We need to find our way to an ethical universe in which all people are valued and cherished. Such an aspiration is still salient in our churches today, where we are challenged to make piety an internal affair and, most importantly, not to impose our pious expectations on others. This is important when reaching out to others in our community, perhaps a lost soul, or a millennial who already believes that churches are hypocritical and judgemental.

A life of faithfulness is about recognising in the family of God he gifts of all – older people, children, the differently abled, those traditionally marginalised due to race or ethnicity, gender, or class. An illustration of kindness might be used to illustrate this point. We are expected to put ourselves last, to find ways to affirm and cherish others. We need to do justice, to work for that which is right and good, particularly for people who are hurting, who are impoverished, disadvantaged, suffering, oppressed or experiencing injustice. These are the fundamental ethical principles which were incorporated in the teaching of Jesus about how we are to live, with a prophetic concern for the outcast and marginalised. A congregation that takes these teachings to heart might not go far wrong from being examples of how Jesus has asked us to live with one another. In the face of Christianity becoming an endangered species, we all know that there is no such thing as perfection, but if we are realistic and know what we want for this church, then let us work towards it, and make sure that we ourselves practice what we preach.

* Do not lay heavy, strict, narrow, and discriminating moral burdens on others.
* Do not make a show of our faith as a status to exalt ourselves.
* Be humble; do not look for rewards.
* Treat one another as equals and love your neighbour as yourself.
* look out for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged with compassion, justice, and human care.

Amen