

The Warning About Corrupt Spiritual Leaders
Matthew 23:1-7
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

Matthew 23 records the condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees by Jesus. In the prior chapter, Jesus had engaged various questions posed by Jewish leaders who were seeking to trap and discredit Him. These interactions were on the Wednesday of His final week and occurred at the temple area with the crowds of Jesus, along with His disciples, listening. After answering them so that no one dared to ask Him another question, Jesus proceeded with His condemnation.

This condemnation is addressed sequentially to each of the three groups who had gathered. In Matthew 23:1-7, Jesus addressed His condemnation of these false leaders to the crowds who were listening. This served as a final warning to the Jews to beware of the scribes and Pharisees before His crucifixion. It is therefore His last public address.

In Matthew 23:8-12, Jesus addressed His disciples. His exhortation was for them to avoid the example of the scribes and Pharisees who sought to exalt themselves by their religious status. Then in Matthew 23:13-36, Jesus turned His attention to the scribes and Pharisees, and spoke to them directly with a series of seven distinct statements of condemnation. He concludes His words by speaking to the Jews, whose capital city and temple was under pending judgment for their rejection of their Messiah.

Their hunger for power (23:1-2)

Matthew 23:1 reaffirms that the crowds and disciples were still gathered for the words of warning by Jesus. Jesus boldly implored the Jews to see their leaders for who they really were—prideful, self-exalting Jews who used others for their own benefit. They were unworthy of respect and must not be emulated. They were fraudulent religious enemies of God.

In His warning to the Jews about their leaders, Jesus addressed five ways in which the scribes and Pharisees had corrupted their leadership of the Jews. The first of these was their desire for the position of spiritual authority. Jesus said, "*The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses.*" The way Jesus phrased this statement communicated that they lacked the authority of God in the position that they held among the Jews.

The “*chair of Moses*” is thought by some to be a reference to the seat in the synagogues where authoritative teaching would be done, yet it is questionable if this practice existed as early as the first century. More likely, this is simply a metaphorical reference to the position of teaching authority. An example of this is Nicodemus, “*a man of the Pharisees*” (John 3:1), to whom Jesus said, “*Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?*” (John 3:10). We use the word “chair” in the same metaphorical sense when we reference the person who leads a committee, or department of a university.

Moses was the one through whom the Law was given, and who authored the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Therefore, the scribes and Pharisees had positioned themselves in the place of delivering the authoritative interpretation of the Law to the Jews. Yet they were not faithful to this work, for they were “*teaching as doctrines the precepts of men*” (Matthew 15:9).

From their perspective, the Pharisees could have viewed Jesus as being guilty of what He had charged them. Jesus had not been through their educational system. Unlike Paul, He had not studied under Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3; cf. Acts 5:34), nor any other rabbi. His following was entirely based upon the content of His teaching, and His miraculous works, rather than a position of authority that had been bestowed upon Him by some human religious system.

Of course, Jesus’ authority came from God, “*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth*” (Matthew 28:18). The Jewish people recognized that “*He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes*” (Matthew 7:29). He had authority to forgive sins (Matthew 9:6). Even the demons recognized His authority (Matthew 8:29). He was able to grant authority to His disciples (Matthew 10:1). Jesus had authority because it was given by God and because of who He was, “*He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man*” (John 5:27). But the scribes and Pharisees did not recognize this, and viewed themselves as having authority over Him on the basis of their religious position.

Today, the authoritative teaching exists solely in being faithful to accurately represent the word of God to people. It does not exist by the bestowal of academic degrees, the advancement to an ecclesiological position of authority, or by any persuasive words of wisdom (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:4). This is why there is no need for ministers of the word of God to be ordained by any clerical organization, to be granted a degree by any educational institution, or develop homiletical tactics of oratory skill.

Their hypocrisy (23:3)

Jesus spoke also of the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, *“Do not do according to their deeds, for they say things and do not do them.”* Jesus would later speak specifically of what they failed to do, saying they had *“neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness”* (Matthew 23:23). Their teaching was not supported by the example of their lives.

There is a question around what Jesus meant when He said, *“all that they tell you, do and observe.”* Earlier, He had told His disciples not to follow them, *“they are blind guides of the blind and if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit”* (Matthew 15:14), and to beware of their teaching, *“Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees”* (Matthew 16:12).

Some have suggested that Jesus’ instruction to do all that they tell you was said in sarcasm or was merely ironic. However, that does not appear to be the clear meaning or even implication of this text. Others have said that all of their teachings should be followed by virtue of their authoritative position among the people. Yet that certainly seems in conflict with Jesus’ public opposition to their teaching, such as regarding the Sabbath.

We do find Jesus at times supporting their teaching, such as regarding the resurrection, or their teaching on tithing *“mint and dill and cummin”* (Matthew 23:23). The best view of Jesus’ words, *“all that they tell you, do and observe”* is that they were teaching properly, but applying the teaching erroneously. Jesus opposed their interpretations of how the Law must be practiced, He opposed their emphasis on the external, lesser matters of the Law, and their hypocritical practice of their own teaching. In other words, they ought not be followed because they were walking away from God, and their teaching was dangerous because of how they led people away from the primary issues and adding their own applications as being necessary for others.

Their heavy-handedness (23:4)

Jesus expanded on the problem of how the scribes and Pharisees led the Jews away from God through their applications of the Law, *“They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger.”* This drove His point that their failure was in how they led the Jews with their teaching.

The manner in which they added heavy burdens was by demanding their specific applications of the Law. Their traditions would end up requiring many interpretations of the Law that become codified in the Talmud, which was a collection of rabbinical commentaries on the Mishnah, which itself was a collection of oral traditions about the Law. These traditions resulted in burdensome regulations, rules and rituals.

Peter in Acts 15:10 spoke of those who had once been Pharisees and later believed in Jesus, but advocated that Gentiles were required to obey the Old Testament Law, *“Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?”* Paul likewise warned believers to not revert back to these requirements, *“It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery”* (Galatians 5:1).

This burden was the antithesis of following Jesus. Jesus made this contrast clear in Matthew 11:28-29, *“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, 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.”* The yoke of Jesus brings rest, not a burden.

True faith in God results in a love for God, and loving God moves us internally to obey Him. This is not an external yoke upon us, but an internal eagerness to do His will. *“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome”* (1 John 5:3).

Not only did the scribes and Pharisees *“tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders,”* they had no sympathy with those who were burdened by their traditions. They provided no help to those suffering under their load of obligations. This was related to their hypocritical practices, for they demanded that others do what they themselves were unwilling to do. They served themselves alone.

This sort of burdensome, heavy-handed ministry occurs today through people who teach that certain applications are moral requirements and therefore judge others accordingly. When people impose legalistic expectations, they weigh down believers under a load that produces external guilt from the desire to please men. This not only is false teaching, hinders faith by undermining the teaching of the grace of God. *“You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness”* (Galatians 5:4-5).

Their hubris (23:5)

Jesus also condemned the scribes and Pharisees for doing *“all their deeds to be noticed by men.”* In Matthew 6:1, Jesus taught against this motivation, *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.”* This sort of self-service brings no eternal benefit. The scribes and Pharisees were living for the fleeting moment, to benefit themselves alone.

Jesus also specified how they acted to be noticed by men, *“for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments.”* Phylacteries were small boxes in which the Jews placed copies of four Old Testament texts (Exodus 13:1-10, 11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; and 11:13-21). These boxes were tied onto their foreheads or forearms with straps according to the Law (Exodus 13:9, 16; Deuteronomy 6:8, 11:18). Furthermore, God commanded the wearing of tassels on garments to remind the people of their holy calling (Numbers 15:37-41; Deuteronomy 22:12). As a Jew, Jesus wore these tassels (Matthew 9:20; 14:36).

The issue that Jesus spoke about was not the use of phylacteries or the wearing of tassels, but it was the self-aggrandizing broadening of the phylacteries and lengthening of the tassels. By making the boxes bigger and the tassels longer, the scribes and Pharisees appeared to have greater religious devotion than the common Jewish person. This display of spiritual superiority to be noticed by others provided a degree of self-exaltation in their prideful ungodliness.

Any attempt today to be noticed by men through the appearance of outward piety is to fall in the same sinfulness. The expression of supposed spirituality in religious trappings not only brings false inflation of our own self-importance, it becomes a barrier in ministry to others. People will either be drawn to such unrighteous pretentiousness of religion themselves, becoming pharisaical in the process, or may observe this holier-than-thou attitude and become hostile to spiritual truth.

Their haughtiness (23:6-7)

Whereas 23:5 refers to certain external religious practices that exhibit the prideful expression of self-importance, 23:6-7 refers to certain external religious positions that exhibit the prideful expression of self-importance. These positions are places of honor, both at banquets and in synagogues, and attributes of honor, both with respectful greetings in the marketplaces and by the title of Rabbi, which all served to exalt those who are allegedly more spiritual.

As is true in certain settings today, their banquets had seats where the most important people sat. The scribes and Pharisees aspired to those positions of honor and they loved the attention that came with such perceived lofty status. This desire for prestige is a common, fleshly attribute, but it is even worse when it is manifested in the context of religion.

The synagogues were the places of worship in populated areas beyond Judea to the Roman Empire as the Jews dispersed. There were synagogues in even less significant towns such as Nazareth (Luke 4:16) and Paul visited various synagogues in Cyprus (Acts 13:5), Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:14), Iconium (Acts 14:1), Thessalonica (Acts 17:1), Berea (Acts 17:10), Athens (Acts 17:17), Corinth (Acts 18:4), and Ephesus (Acts 19:8). Such synagogues had raised platforms where the leaders and visiting dignitaries sat. The scribes and Pharisees sought to advance themselves to such places of honor.

When the scribes and Pharisees went to the market, they sought and expected to be greeted respectfully by their fellow Jews. Such flattery was appealing to them, particularly when done in public. Positive public recognition distinguishes a person as important in any society.

Finally, they especially loved the title of “Rabbi,” which conveyed the idea of great knowledge. John 1:38 tells us the Greek translation of “rabbi” means teacher. Indeed, we derive our English word “doctor” from the Latin term for “rabbi.” The ancient writings of rabbis depict detailed protocols for addressing rabbis. While Jesus was called “Rabbi” by His disciples in other Gospels (Mark 9:5; 11:21; John 1:38, 49; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8), Matthew only describes Judas as using this term for Jesus.

Such acclaim was sought out by the religious leaders as there was a vying for recognition among them. Paul testifies to His own desire to outdo His fellow Pharisees in his pursuit of honor, *“I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my countrymen, being more extremely zealous for my ancestral traditions”* (Galatians 1:14). He described his pursuit of such advancement as *“If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more”* in Philippians 3:4. This was nothing more than fleshly ambition.

This competition for self-exaltation was at the core of the conflict the scribes and Pharisees had with Jesus. The reason they were so against Jesus was because His popularity ascended their own and began to diminish their place as the respected teachers of Israel, viewing Jesus as usurping their cherished position.

Conclusion

These corrupt religious practices of the scribes and Pharisees that desired power, prestige and privilege at the expense of their fellow Jews is the antithesis of how believers ought to function. In particular, Christian leaders must actively eschew all forms of self-exaltation and the acclaim of men. Such behavior is hypocritical to the ministry of true worship of God. The Lord must be exalted, not ourselves, and His people must be served by church leaders, not used by church leaders to serve their own ends.

Unfortunately, Christian ministers succumb to the temptation to pursue their own fulfillment, status and authority over others. Any good thing can become corrupted by the selfish desire of personal ambition, but particularly so with religion. When men are inflated, the worship of God is diminished. Men can use the greatness of their churches, the spread of their writings, the influence of their voices, the status of their position, the honor of their degrees, and their power over others to elevate themselves.

This sort of religious exaltation of men ought not only be avoided by Christians, but it should also be valued by them either. Those who are in places of leadership should not be exalted over other believers, for it becomes a stumbling block when people view themselves as necessary. *“For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think”* (Romans 12:3).

Christian leaders must not regard themselves as above others and should not be regarded as above others either. While elders ought to be honored, *“The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching”* (1 Timothy 5:17), it is on the basis of their work, not their title. Indeed, we should *“honor all people”* (1 Peter 2:17). Paul expresses the appropriate attitude that all Christians must possess, *“For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?”* (1 Corinthians 4:7).

“God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).