

**The Warning to True Spiritual Leaders**  
**Matthew 23:8-12**  
**Gerry Andersen**  
**Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School**

Matthew 23 records the condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees by Jesus. 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 specifically addressed His disciples rather than the crowd. This is then a warning to them about how they should act, not a warning to the crowds about the Pharisees. His exhortation to His disciples was for them to avoid the example of the scribes and Pharisees who sought to exalt themselves by their religious status.

This address to His disciples is the precursor to His address to the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:13-36. He gave them a series of seven distinct statements of condemnation. He concludes His words by speaking to the Jews, whose capital city and temple were under pending judgment for their rejection of their Messiah.

**Avoiding titles that exalt (23:8-10)**

In Matthew 23:8-10, Jesus exhorted His disciples not to assume titles for themselves, in stark contrast to the scribes and Pharisees. He listed three titles in particular that they should avoid taking, and with each title, Jesus provided the reason why they should not accept that title.

1. Do not be called Rabbi (23:8)

The title “Rabbi” essentially means “teacher” (cf. John 1:38) Yet this was a greater honor in the first century, for it included an elevated sense of authority. The scribes and Pharisees loved this honorific title (23:7) because of the status that it communicated. The scribes and Pharisees enjoyed this title because of their position in the society, but Jesus was called Rabbi by His disciples (John 1:49; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8).

The disciples used the title “Rabbi” for Jesus even though He did not hold the position the Jewish leaders did. This was their terminology to communicate their great respect for His teaching authority. This title was even used by Judas, when he was betraying Jesus (Matthew 26:49). While Judas obviously was not respecting Jesus’ authority at this point, it was likely simply the title that he had become accustomed to calling Jesus by.

The reason that Jesus gave for not allowing people to call us by the title of “rabbi” was because *“One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers.”* That One Teacher is clearly Jesus, who Himself accepted the term “Rabbi” for Himself whenever the disciples used it for Him. Also, when Nicodemus used the term “Rabbi” in addressing Jesus in John 3:2, Jesus did not correct him either.

Because Jesus is the One Teacher, there is no one else who should be called “teacher” or “rabbi.” To assign this title to someone then competes with the One who alone is our teacher. The instruction *“do not be called”* places the onus on each of us to eschew this title if it is applied to us by anyone.

The other reason that Jesus gave for not allowing people to call us by the title of “rabbi” was because *“you are all brothers.”* This is why the followers of Christ are referred to as “brethren” by the early church, a reference that appears in practically every New Testament book and often repeatedly. That Jesus uses the term “all” indicates that once we place our faith in Him, we become part of the spiritual family of God. This includes each believer equally, beyond the twelve disciples. We know this because Judas was not their spiritual brother, for he was the *“son of perdition”* (John 17:12) and destined for destruction. Therefore, the all must be all true disciples, not all the twelve.

Since we are all brothers, there is an egalitarian relationship between believers in Christ. For anyone to be promoted to the position of teacher not only competes with the Lord’s position, but also puts that person above their fellow brothers in Christ. Rather than elevate our fellow believers, those who are teaching should remember these words of Jesus, that we are all brothers.

## 2. Do not call anyone on earth your father (23:9)

The second title that Jesus forbade us to use was father. When He said *“Do not call anyone on earth your Father,”* He obviously meant this in a spiritual sense, not regarding our own earthly fathers. In the church, no one should have such a title given to them.

The term father was another such title communicating honor and reverence. In the Jewish tradition, there were some who were called fathers in the Old Testament (Judges 17:10; 2 Kings 2:12). In the Catholic tradition today, priests are typically called “father,” and the Catholic Pope is given the title of “holy father,” communicating superiority over others.

This prohibition was similar to the first, in that it forbade use of such an elevated title for believers. However, it reverses the responsibility for in this case the instruction is “do not call anyone” rather than “do not be called.” This then communicates an admonition to not use such titles both by us to others as well as to us by others. We should not use it about others, nor allow others to use this about us.

The reason we should not call anyone by the title of father is similar to the reason to not be called rabbi, “*for One is your Father, He who is in heaven.*” Just as Jesus is our only Teacher, God is our only Father. He alone deserves this term, for as with the analogy of our human fathers, He alone has authority over us for He alone has brought us into being. Furthermore, God the Father is in heaven, whereas everyone else we address is not in heaven.

### 3. Do not be called leaders (23:10)

This third prohibited title is one of a leader, “*Do not be called leaders.*” This word translated “leaders” in the NASB is translated as “instructors” in the ESV and NIV. This is the only place in the New Testament that this Greek word is used, and its meaning is basically “teacher” and is a synonym for another Greek word for teacher in 23:8. The NASB translates this as leaders because teachers take a leadership role.

The reason given, “*for One is your Leader,*” uses the same term as leaders earlier in the verse, only in the singular. Obviously, the reason is the same as in 23:8, where there is only One who has the authority to teach, and here, the One is specified to be Jesus with the words, “*that is, Christ.*” If there is only One who is our Teacher in 23:8, there is likewise only One who is our Leader in 23:10, and that One is Jesus Christ alone.

Also as with Matthew 23:8, this prohibition regards what we allow people to call us. We ought not to be referred to as instructors, or leaders, for we all must be taught by Jesus. Jesus knew that once titles were bestowed upon men, they would usurp His supreme teaching authority.

The terms rabbi, father, and instructor or leader all refer to a position of power or authority. They would all be contrary to the statement by Jesus that *“you are all brothers.”* These words are certainly not the only words that communicate a position of authority over fellow believers. There are countless titles that have been used to elevate leaders above other Christians throughout the history of the church, and even today.

These words of Matthew 23:8-10 leave the outstanding question of how to apply this today. We can more easily see the violations of these words of Jesus when the Catholic Church uses the term “father” for those in their priesthood, but find it harder to apply these words to evangelical churches. While evangelical churches do not use the term “father,” they regularly use the term “teacher” and “leader,” along with various other titles that elevate certain people to positions of power.

Certainly, one of the reasons that spiritual, sexual, and financial abuse have been prevalent in the modern church has been the power that has been bestowed on religious people in the church. Such authority has been taken advantage of to the disgrace of the cause of Christ. When people are led to believe that some people have greater religious authority, they can become susceptible to church abuse.

One of the reasons these titles are not easily dispelled within the church is because organization is required, *“But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner”* (1 Corinthians 14:40). This is the purpose for elders being appointed as instructed by Paul in Titus 1:5, *“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you.”* This organization includes positions, such as elders and deacons (cf. 1 Timothy 3:1-13).

However, such positions are strictly for the purpose of doing the work of the church, not for gaining authority over others or holding a position of esteem. Elders ought to desire the work, not the status, *“It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do”* (1 Timothy 3:1). Even when Paul references the honor that an elder deserves, it is strictly on the basis of their work, *“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). Therefore, there ought to be no special elevation of anyone on the basis of their position in a congregation. This exaltation of people based upon their position was the very thing that Jesus condemned the Pharisees, *“They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men”* (Matthew 23:6-7).

There are positions that the Lord has provided to the church, but these positions were given for a purpose, to serve the church, not to build up themselves, *“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ”* (Ephesians 4:11-12).

It is instructive to note how those who held the position of apostle regarded themselves. Colossians 1:1 reflects nearly every other epistle of Paul, when he introduces the letter with *“Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.”* Peter likewise writes, *“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ”* (1 Peter 1:1, cf. 2 Peter 1:1). In other words, the New Testament writers always use the term apostle as a description of their function, and not as a title for themselves, such as “the apostle Paul.” Indeed, the only occurrence of the term apostle as a title refers to Jesus Himself, *“consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession”* (Hebrews 3:1).

Neither the New Testament nor the early church used the title of “saint” to refer to the higher status of any Christian. The term “saint,” meaning “holy one” or “one set apart,” was used dozens of times in the New Testament, but only for Christians in general. Indeed, the use of the term saint to refer to specific people as uniquely “holy” was not practiced for centuries, and not until 993 AD was it used by the Roman Catholic Church as an official designation.

The practice of the early followers of Jesus using descriptives for their function, and not titles for esteem, appears to follow the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:8-10. The New Testament writers emphasized egalitarian terms such as *“fellow worker”* (Romans 16:9, 21; Colossians 4:11), *“fellow heirs”* (Romans 8:17; 1 Peter 3:7), and *“fellow elder”* (1 Peter 5:1), to speak to the brethren. Therefore, believers in Jesus should also follow these words of Jesus and refrain from titles in order to promote the equality of all believers as ones who have been set apart by faith in Christ.

Evangelical churches typically avoid terms for leadership from Catholicism, such as pope, bishop, priest, and father. However, churches have substituted other titles, such as doctor, reverend, clergy, minister, and pastor. This elevation of the professional clergy is beyond problematic when the Scripture refers to all believers as *“a royal priesthood”* (1 Peter 2:9).

Certainly, churches need leaders. However, these leadership positions, whether as pastor, elder, deacon, shepherd, teacher, or whatever the term, ought to be used for the function of their service to the church, not as a title of admiration.

### **Appreciating service that exalts (23:11-12)**

Matthew 23:11 is very similar to Jesus' words to His disciples in Matthew 20:26-27, *“whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave.”* In that case, it was the disciples' desire to be advanced in the kingdom of God that did not align with the path to greatness, for Jesus taught them it was only through a life of service.

Matthew 23:11 is then the same reminder that true greatness comes through service, not through the rise to positions of power. The role of leadership and teaching must be done with the motive of love for God through service to others, and not for our own benefit or exaltation. Any form of self-exaltation is prideful and is opposed by God (James 4:6).

This opposition by God to those seeking to exalt themselves is emphasized in Matthew 23:12, *“Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.”* This is a powerful statement against those seeking to advance their own status in any way, and certainly in the context of the practice of religion. To seek to do any deed to be noticed by men will not be rewarded by our Father who is in heaven (Matthew 6:1). The desire for recognition, advancement, honor, or legacy is not the path of humility that the Lord will exalt. Rather, such selfishness is what God will oppose. Humility is the only path to exaltation by God and greatness in the kingdom of God.

### **Conclusion**

In Matthew 23:1-7, Jesus addressed various corrupt religious practices by the scribes and Pharisees that exhibited a desire for power, prestige, and privilege at the expense of their fellow Jews. In Matthew 23:8-12, Jesus warned His disciples not to follow in their pattern of self-exaltation. The appetite for the acclaim of men is the opposite of true service to our fellow believers, who must be served in the love 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.

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.

When people in the church use positions and titles to pursue their own fulfillment, status, and authority, they undermine the Lord's words about our brotherhood in the faith. To aspire to greatness in this manner is to adopt the practices of worldliness. *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you"* (Matthew 20:25-26). The practice of self-exaltation will result in being humbled by God.

Christian leaders must not regard themselves as above others, and similarly, they should not be regarded as above others either. We must not only abstain from clamoring for honorific titles, but we ought to be reticent to use them when referring to others as well. Unfortunately, the modern evangelical church has been too willing to bestow such titles of honor upon its leaders.

The core reason for this restraint is the words of Jesus, *"for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers"* (Matthew 23:8). As servants of one another, some of us take on different roles that involve leadership, but never to be advanced to a more privileged state, for we are all created and delivered from destruction by the One who is above all. He alone is worthy of titles of honor. We ought to regard these words as seriously as the rest of God's word.