

Text: Matthew 23:1-12

Title: True, Humble Religion

Truth: Jesus enjoins genuine, humble obedience to God's law.

Date/Location: September 14, 2022 at FBC

Introduction

It should be evident to any reader of Matthew's gospel that the nation has, on the national scale, rejected Jesus's offer of His kingdom. A huge proportion of the individuals in the nation have also rejected His offer of personal salvation in order to be prepared for the coming of that kingdom. This leads to the messages of "woe" in chapter 23. Jesus is pronouncing judgment upon the people for their wickedness.

Thinking big picture, please do not ascribe to Jesus an infantile or selfish desire to be number one. Jesus does not "feel" their response as a personal rejection which gives Him a "chip on his shoulder." This is the divinely-ordained King, expecting His subjects to submit to His rule. It would be *good* for the nation of Israel to receive their king, but they refuse because they have a higher "good" in mind—their own selfish pursuits. Reception of their king would be in accord with their own Old Testament prophecies (Matt. 21:5 = Zech. 9:9, Isaiah 35:4, 40:9) but rejection of him similarly fulfills the dark side of those prophecies. Only if you have a very low view of God and His Christ would you accuse God of being ego-centric in this matter.

"Live and let live" is not a philosophy that works in the long run if you are trying to tell God to abide by that philosophy and leave you alone! Without God, we *cannot* continue to live for long.

I. To the Crowds: Humbly obey the Law of Moses, v. 1-12

Jesus starts by addressing the crowd generally. Then he will get to the Pharisees and scribes starting in verse 13.

A. Do what they say... In verses 1-3a, the Lord acknowledged that the scribes and Pharisees hold the office of lawgivers and enforcers, like Moses before them. That is what it means to "sit in the seat"

of Moses. They have the authority of that seat and when they communicate Mosaic truth from it, they are to be obeyed.

This Jesus says, perhaps sadly, angrily, or disappointedly, despite the fact that they are terrible shepherds (teachers, religious leaders).

That is, if someone is *invalid* in terms of behavior or qualifications yet holds the office and is exercising some divinely-sanctioned authority, they are to be obeyed. Even leaders as objectively bad as the Pharisees were to be obeyed inasmuch as they commanded observance of the Law of Moses. The station—not the person—is the power behind the command. The office is the significant thing, not an individual who occupies the office with better or worse character traits.

Obviously, we should strive to have office holders who adorn the office instead of drag it down. That is a given, but often we simply have to deal with *reality* that there are officeholders who are not even close to what they should be.

It is clear that if the Jews were supposed to obey the Law of Moses under the hand of bad office-holders (seat-sitters) then they would certainly be required to obedient—and all the more—to office-holders who were good ones (similar to 1 Timothy 6:2). So it is today with governors, presidents, kings, teachers, husbands, and pastors. You are *never* required to violate the law of God; but certainly if these instruments of God’s administration are telling you to do things consistent with God’s word, you must obey. Do not let the “I’m not having anyone tell me what to do” mentality take you over. And if you have a good (fill in the office holder), you should observe and do what they ask. It should not be a fight all the time, as it sometimes is in the home or church (Genesis 3:16, Heb. 13:17).

Yes, this is humbling. The bad leaders are not themselves worthy of your attention or obedience. But God who set them in that place *is* worthy of your attention and obedience. And God is teaching you something through their bad leadership.

Rejoice when you have good leaders! Tolerate bad ones and follow the good things they ask you to do...

- B. But do not what they do...Verses 3b-7. The scribes' and Pharisees' works did not match what they themselves told others. They communicated probably some valid Law, and expected others to be subject to it, but they did not wish to subject themselves to it. Their works were inconsistent—and they would not admit it, nor confess it, nor repent of it like someone who is inconsistent but wants to follow the right way.
1. They made law-keeping burdensome on all their disciples. The scribes and Pharisees gave very heavy loads—difficult religious regulations that were not specifically found in Scripture.¹ They expected people to follow them to the “T” but exempted themselves from similar duty. Neither did they help those they so burdened. Burdens like this today include required celibacy for priests; indulgences and prayer services for the dead; required ritual prayers several times daily; required tithes and offerings; any system that demands good works to be assured of salvation; any cultish religion that requires attendance at one particular place or with one particular group.
 2. They do religious works in order to be seen by people, not rewarded in secret by God. They had some go-to favorite attention-attracting methods. One was to wear ostentatious religious garments. (1) They would use leather straps to prominently mount large leather boxes with the law written on it to their forehead and left arm. This “phylactery” setup is based on an extremely literal interpretation of Exodus 13:9, 13:16, Deut. 6:8, 11:18. The literal meaning is to always keep the word of God in the front of your mind and have them involved in all the work of your hands—not just when you are in prayer mode. (2) They would wear large tassels on the bottom of their garments to show how religious they were. This was on the hem of the garment, and Jesus may have had some (Matthew 9:20) in obedience to Numbers 15:37-40. (3) They

¹ There likely was *some* connection to Scripture, as an “extra level” of protection against breaking the law or some such notion.

wanted to be placed at the most prominent locations at public events like feasts and the synagogue. (4) Greetings in the marketplace that everyone could hear. (5) To have the exalted title “Rabbi” or “Father” and hear other people use it. They loved the praise of men more than the praise of God (see also John 12:43, Rom. 2:29).

3. The gist of this is that the religious leaders did not ascribe glory to God. Rather, they wanted glory for themselves and they wanted to be in a place of power. This is worldly religion.

C. Instead Jesus tells the multitude and His disciples to be humble. In verses 8-12 we see this:

1. Do not accept the title “Rabbi.” This is because there is one true Rabbi—master or teacher—who is Messiah. The human being is nowhere close to the Messiah. All of us are human brothers and sisters basically equal in standing. We can use some titles, although I would avoid these ones for sure. The real issue is the lack of humility, the religiosity, the attention-seeking that was at the heart of the Pharisaical religion.
2. Do not use the title “Father” for a person. There is only one Father, and He is God in heaven. To call a man “father” in a religious sense is nearly blasphemous, although I make room for people who simply do not know better.
3. Do not accept the title “Teacher.” In that context, the title was like a substitute for Christ, the real teacher. There is no “vicar of Christ” on earth for any of Christ’s offices or capacities. Indeed, we have people who are in the teaching office and can be described as teachers (Eph. 4:11). These men need to be extremely careful not to a) teach incorrectly or b) look for kudos from everyone for their “spiritual” service for they will receive a stricter judgment (James 3:1).

Conclusion

Instead of being like the Pharisees in their self-seeking, praise-motivated attitude, we are to be humble servants. Once again, the Lord teaches us that those who exalt themselves will be humbled (put down), and those who humble themselves will be exalted

(lifted up). This common phraseology, by the way, is a general teaching. God may put down a self-exalting person in this life to bring them to faith or improve their walk of faith, or put them down eternally in judgment. A humble person of faith he will lift up, perhaps in this life or perhaps not, but definitely in the kingdom and eternity.

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