

THE FOLLY OF SELF-SEEKING HONOR

From Matthew 23:1-12

by Nick Wilson

INTRODUCTION

1. Illustration: Have you ever been in a situation where the people in charge told people to do one thing, but didn't do it themselves? Have you ever known an authority figure to use their authority as a pretext for creating burdensome rules and regulations – regulations that, to any reasonable person, are unnecessary (border-line superstitious)? Have you ever heard of someone who fell under the weight of such restrictions only to receive nothing by way of meaningful help from those who were responsible for creating the regulations in the first place?
2. Transition: If so, you know what it felt like to be part of the crowd Jesus addressed in Matthew 23:1-12. Both then and now, people in power are prone to use their status to gain preferential treatment. And both then and now, God's Word speaks to those who live under hypocritical, status-seeking leadership. Both then and now God calls His people into a deeper level of Christ-like humility and service.
3. Proposition: Because self-seeking honor results in God-ordained judgement, humble yourselves and serve one another as Christ did for you.

Right now in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is in the final days leading up to his crucifixion. After spending some time causing a ruckus in the temple (flipping over tables, etc), Jesus spent the last chapter or so engaging the religious leaders' questions and confronting them on their hypocrisy.

Now in chapter 23, Jesus' confrontation of these religious leaders reaches its climax through his *public* denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees (cf. 15:7; 16:5-12). And that's really what this chapter is all about: publicly calling out and condemning the multitude of religious elites who set themselves against God all the while presuming to be ambassadors for God.

In this morning's text (vv. 1-12), Jesus addresses both the crowds and his disciples as he calls out the folly of the Pharisees and calls for a radical commitment to humility within the family of God.

1. THE FOLLY OF THE PHARISEES

a. What they don't do [v. 1-4]

They don't do what they said. According to the religious leaders, what was taught by the Pharisees came from the 'chair of Moses'. This chair probably wasn't a physical object as much as it was a figurative expression for authoritative teaching ("he filled his predecessor's shoes nicely"). The Pharisees believed they were the true successors of Moses' teaching. By seating themselves in the chair of Moses, they "stepped into Moses' shoes."

In light of this, Jesus seems to affirm their teaching. "All that they tell you, do and observe." *because* they have assumed this authoritative role. This should strike us as a bit odd: didn't Jesus criticize them for getting Moses' teaching wrong (i.e. the sabbath, divorce, purity laws, etc.)? How could Jesus give the Pharisaical teaching credibility here when he's been so critical of it in the past?

Some have tried to resolve this tension by suggesting that Jesus' command to follow the Pharisee's teaching only applied to teachings concerning the law of Moses (and

not rabbinical laws added later).¹ Unfortunately Jesus' emphatic "all", and the fact the Pharisees understood all their teaching, however erroneous, as teachings concerning the Mosaic law, renders this view improbable.

So what do we do with Jesus' apparent affirmation of Pharisaical authority and teaching? If we step back to appreciate the flow of the passage as a whole, we'll see that Jesus' focus is on the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and not yet on the precise way in which the crowds are to live in light of that hypocrisy.

With this in mind, it seems like Jesus is employing one of my favorite (but often overused) rhetorical devices: sarcasm! Yes, it seems Jesus is being a bit sarcastic here.

Of course, there is always great irony when our leaders make rules that are supposed to apply to everyone... but somehow don't apply to the leaders themselves. And when such hypocrisy is exposed, it erodes public confidence and compliance. I'm very tempted to cite specific (and recent) examples, but I'll abstain.

Telling people to follow what someone says – in spite of what that person does – is bad advice. And that's the point! Suffice it to say, Jesus is undercutting the Pharisee's presumed authority by highlighting the disparity between what they say (on the one hand) and what they do (on the other).

Unfortunately, the hypocrisy of the Pharisees doesn't just impact them.

In doing so, they hurt others. Their fixation on the external has not only led them away from doing what the Law truly requires, it has also led them into a position where they enforced an ever-increasing set of man-made rules that did more harm than good!

Hoping in man-made rules to secure one's righteousness is an impossibly tiresome task. Thank God that He has secured our righteousness in Jesus whose yoke is easy and burden is light (Mat. 11:30).

b. What they do do [v. 5-7]

Instead of doing and teaching in view of bringing honor to God, the religious leaders did and spoke in view of bringing honor to themselves, "to be noticed by men".

- Broadened phylacteries (cf. Exod. 13:9; Deut. 6:8, 11:18) and lengthened tassels (cf. Num. 15:37-41; Matt. 9:20). Basically had become a form of Ancient Jewish virtue signaling
- Loved places of honor (banquets + synagogues)
- Loved respectful greetings (marketplaces, "Rabbi" trans. "My great one")

It's important to point out that Jesus isn't criticizing their actions as much as the heart and motive behind those actions. The Pharisee's fixation on the external appearance of things led them to an unhealthy (and ungodly) place of honor and status-seeking hypocrisy. The very clear negative example of the

Pharisees should be an invitation for each of us to examine our own hearts. Status-seeking, man-fearing, hypocrisy

¹ See note on Matthew 23:3 in the ESV Study Bible

isn't just a problem for 2k-year old Pharisees; it's a problem for us too.

Having laid bare the deficiencies of the religious elite, Jesus addresses his followers directly, calling them to radical humility.

2. A CALL TO RADICAL HUMILITY

a. Do not seek after the honor of men [v. 8-10]

"Do not be called reverend... you should revere only one, and everyone else should be treated as a brother or sister"

"Do not consider heroes of the faith as authoritative... we have only one heavenly authority"

"Do not be called a spiritual mentor/guide... only Christ can fill that role."

The Messianic community is not supposed to be like the Pharisaical community. We are not supposed to seek after lofty titles and positions of authority for their own sakes; nor are we to render unquestioning submission to those who occupy positions of authority.

Jesus is not saying that there shouldn't be any earthly authority whatsoever within the church (cf. Matt. 18), but that true church authority comes from Christ and is therefore embodied, not by fame-seeking titles or behavior, but by authentic humility and service.

Don't miss the subtle beauty of what Jesus is saying about himself in these verses. If we remember back to 22:42-46, the identity of the Christ is in question. How can Christ be

merely David's son if David himself addresses the messiah as "Lord"? Could it be that the messiah possesses a greater authority than King David?

The scribes and Pharisees presume to "sit" on the seat of Moses, yet their own lives expose them for the frauds they are. And here in verse 10, Jesus says: "only one is your Leader, that is, Christ" Only the messiah is able to sit in Moses' seat. NOT because he looks the part, has the right friends or the right degree, but because He, "being in the very nature God, did not count equality with God a thing to be used to his own advantage... and being found in human form, he humbled himself... therefore God has highly exalted him" (Phil. 2).

The messianic community should not seek after the honor of men, precisely because our messiah has forfeited all honor so that we could be brought into that community! Instead, we are to seek to serve others in humility as Christ did for us.

b. Seek to serve others in humility as Christ did for you [v. 11-12]

- i. "The eschatological reward will humble the self-exalted and exalt the self-humbled"²
- ii. As you look into the new year, what are you 'out for'? It's good to have goals, dreams, aspirations, but what is motivating them? How many of your new year resolutions are designed for and motivated by serving others?

² D.A. Carson, "Matthew", in TEBC, vol. 8., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p476.

- iii. As we live in what seems to be the ever-expanding domain of big government, how will you choose to respond to hypocrisy and authoritative presumption? In hopeless indifference or hopeful humility?