

Studies in the Gospel of Matthew #64

The Character of False Spiritual Leaders

Matt 23:1-12

Introduction:

1. This chapter records Jesus' last public sermon.
 - a. It was not a sermon on salvation, on the resurrection, or on principles for living the Christian life
 - b. Instead it was a sobering message of condemnation against false teachers.
 - c. In [vs 1-7](#) He warns the people about false religious leaders in Israel
 - d. In [vs 8-12](#) the Master admonishes the disciples and other true spiritual leaders not to emulate them.
 - e. In vs 13-36 Jesus gives His final and most scathing denunciation of the false teachers
2. Since the Fall, the world has always had false religious leaders, pretending to represent God but representing only themselves.
 - a. False leaders were active in the rebellious scheme to erect the tower of Babel.
 - b. Moses came into conflict with the religious sorcerers and magicians of Egypt when he demanded the release of God's people by pharaoh
 - c. Ezekiel faced the false prophets in Israel, whom God called "foolish
 - d. Paul battled false teachers wherever he went
3. The religion pages of major newspapers in our day are filled with advertisements for every kind of sect and false religion including deviant forms of Christianity as well as cults and the occult.
 - a. Some groups masquerade as forms of Christianity and claim to teach a new and better gospel.
 - b. Though they claim to offer spiritual life and help, they instead bring spiritual death and damnation.
 - c. While claiming to lead people to heaven, they usher them into hell.
4. Scripture makes clear that as the second coming of Christ comes near, counterfeiters of the gospel will proliferate and amass to themselves great followings and immense influence ([2 Thess. 2:3-4](#); [1 Tim. 4:1-3](#); [2 Tim. 3:1-9](#); [2 Pet. 2:1-3](#))
5. Dialogue between Jesus and the Temple authorities had ended, because "no one was able to answer [Jesus] a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question" ([Matt. 22:46](#)).
6. The Lord had frequently spoken against the unbelieving religious leaders (see [Matt. 5:20](#); [15:1-9](#); [16:6-12](#); [John 8:44](#)), but here he gives a final warning, to them and to everyone else, about the eternal danger of their perverse teachings.
7. It seems evident that many hearts were softened to the gospel that day including the hearts of some of the leaders.
 - a. On the day of Pentecost alone some three thousand souls came to the Lord ([Acts 2:41](#))
 - b. Maybe 10x that many believed in the following months as the apostles "filled Jerusalem with [their] teaching" ([Acts 5:28](#)).
 - c. Probably many of the converts in those early days had seen and heard Jesus personally and been drawn by the Holy Spirit to Him
8. Perhaps for some, this message was the point of initial attraction to Jesus

I. The Description of False Spiritual Leaders – vs 1-7

- Jesus spoke directly to the multitudes and to His disciples, but the religious leaders were within earshot nearby (see [v. 13](#)).

A. False Leaders Lack Authority – vs 2b

1 Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, **2** Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat:

1. Scribes
 - a) An ancient Jewish saying held that God gave the law to angels, angels gave it to Moses, Moses gave it to Joshua, Joshua gave it to the elders, the elders gave it to the prophets, and the prophets gave it to the men of the synagogue who were later called **scribes**.
 - b) Over the course of the years, those scribes became responsible not only for copying and preserving but also for teaching and interpreting God's law.
 - c) In Jesus' day scribes were found among both the Pharisees and Sadducees but were more commonly associated with the Pharisee
2. Pharisees
 - a) The precise origin of **the Pharisees** is unknown but they appeared around 200 yrs before Christ
 - b) Numbering around 6000, many of them were also scribes, authorities in Jewish law both scriptural and traditional.
 - c) They were by far the dominant religious group in Israel in Jesus' day and the most popular with the masses.
 - d) It was to **the scribes / Pharisees** that the people looked for religious guidance, a role those leaders greatly cherished.
3. Barclay - the Jewish Talmud speaks of 7 kinds of Pharisees
 - a) The "shoulder Pharisees," - So named because of their custom of displaying accounts of their good deeds on their shoulders for other people to see and admire.
 - b) The "wait a little" Pharisees - They had a cleaver ability to come up with a fabricated spiritual reason for putting off doing something good. Pious excuses were their stock in trade.
 - c) The "bruised and bleeding" Pharisees
 - (1) In order not to commit the sin of looking at a woman lustfully those Pharisees closed their eyes whenever women were around.
 - (2) Understandably they received many bruises and abrasions from bumping into walls, posts, and other objects.
 - (3) They measured their holiness by the number / severity of their injuries
 - d) The "humpback tumbling" Pharisees - In order to show off their supposed humility they slouched over with bent backs and shuffled their feet instead of taking normal steps, leading to frequent stumbles and tumbles.
 - e) The "ever-seeking" Pharisees - Named because of the meticulous record keeping of their good deeds in order to determine how much reward God owed them.
 - f) The "fearing" Pharisees whose terror over the prospect of hell motivated everything they did.
 - g) The "God-fearing" Pharisees - Those whose lives were motivated out of genuine love for God and a desire to please Him.
4. For the most part, the Pharisees were the Lord's most strident critics and implacable enemies.
5. They Sit in Moses' Seat
 - a) The scribes and Pharisees had **seated themselves** in Moses seat
 - b) They simply took to themselves that position of authority
 - c) **Chair** is from kathedra, from which we get cathedral, which originally referred to a place, or seat, of ecclesiastical authority.
 - d) For Jews, **Moses** was the supreme law giver, the supreme spokesman for God.
 - e) Therefore to sit **in the chair of Moses** was tantamount to being God's authoritative spokesman, and it was that very claim that many of the scribes and Pharisees made for **themselves**.
 - f) It was for that reason they were envious of Jesus and so determined to undermine Him.

BYZ **Matthew 23:1** Τότε ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐλάλησεν τοῖς ὄχλοις καὶ τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ,

BYZ **Matthew 23:2** λέγων, Ἐπὶ τῆς Μωσέως καθέδρας ἐκάθισαν οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι·

B. False Leaders Lack Integrity – vs 3

3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, *that* observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.

- False religious leaders are characterized by lack of integrity, hypocritically demanding of others many things they never do
 1. They sometimes have a good message
 - a) *Some of their instructions did conform to Scripture*
 - b) *If they speak God's truth, you should **do and observe** it, Jesus said*
 - c) *The WofG is still the WofG, even in the mouth of a false teacher*
 - d) *Insofar as the scribes and Pharisees accurately taught the law and the prophets, their teaching was to be heeded.*
 2. They do not practice what they preach
 - a) *In 5:20 Jesus made clear that the righteousness acceptable to God must exceed the hypocritical, works-oriented self-righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees*
 - b) *He also made clear that their countless man-made traditions, many of which actually contradicted God's law were absolutely worthless and led people away from God rather than to Him.*
 - c) *When the scribes and Pharisees did occasionally teach God's truth, they did not obey it themselves.*
 - d) *They were religious phonies, consummate hypocrites who did not practice what they preached.*
 - e) *Since they were lost, they were trying to obey in the power of flesh*
 3. Observe and do
 - a) *Tēreō (**observe**) is a present imperative - continuing action.*
 - b) *Jesus was saying, "Immediately obey and keep on obeying whatever the scribes / Pharisees teach if it follows God's Word."*
 - c) *In the unregenerate heart, vice cannot be restrained and virtue cannot be produced.*
 - d) *That is why even the best man-made system cannot keep its followers from doing wrong or empower them to do what is truly right—for the simple reason that it cannot change their hearts*

BYZ **Matthew 23:3** πάντα οὖν ὅσα ἐὰν εἴπωσιν ὑμῖν τηρεῖν, τηρεῖτε καὶ ποιεῖτε· κατὰ δὲ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν μὴ ποιεῖτε, λέγουσιν γὰρ καὶ οὐ ποιοῦσιν.

C. False Leaders Lack Sympathy – vs 4

4 For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay *them* on men's shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers.

- False religious leaders are not only usurpers and hypocrites but they are loveless and uncaring.
 1. The picture Jesus gives reflects the common custom of that day, of loading up a beast of burden to the point where it could hardly move
 - a) *The owner would walk alongside, carrying nothing himself, berating and beating the animal if it happened to stumble or balk, with no concern for the animal's feelings or welfare.*
 - b) *That is the way the scribes / Pharisees treated their fellow Jews.*
 - (1) They piled **up heavy loads** of religious regulations, rules, and rituals **on men's shoulders** until they were unbearable and impossible to carry.
 - (2) The people were taught that it was only by their own good works they could please God.
 - (3) If at the end of life the good works outweighed the bad, then God would grant entrance into heaven.
 2. The practice
 - a) *When the people failed to keep all of the requirements, as they were doomed to do, they were chided and rebuked by the leaders, who added the burden of guilt to those of weariness / frustration*
 - b) *Consequently, Judaism had become insufferably depressing and debilitating.*
 - c) *The good news that Jesus brought, was that He would take away the load of sin that always outweighed their good works.*
 - d) *That is why Paul was infuriated with the Judaizers, who tried to draw the Galatian believers back into legalism.*
 3. False religious leaders today are still building empires and amassing fortunes by fleecing those they pretend to serve.

BYZ **Matthew 23:4** Δεσμεύουσιν γὰρ φορτία βαρέα καὶ δυσβάστακτα, καὶ ἐπιτιθέασιν ἐπὶ τοὺς ὤμους τῶν ἀνθρώπων, τῷ δὲ δακτύλῳ αὐτῶν οὐ θέλουσιν κινῆσαι αὐτά.

D. False Leaders Lack Spirituality – vs 5

5 But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments,

- False religious leaders are characterized by lack of spirituality, by the absence of a genuine desire to please God.
 1. The Reason for Their Spirituality
 - a) *The motivation for all their pretentious religious activities and deeds is to be noticed by men.*
 - b) *Everything is done for outward show rather than from the heart, for fleshly gratification of ego rather than selfless service to God and to others in His name.*
 - c) *The issue for them is not godly character but fleshly appearance, the making of "a good showing in the flesh"*
 - d) *Their purpose is to glorify themselves, not God.*
 2. Broaden their Phylacteries
 - a) *Four times in the Pentateuch ([Ex. 13:9, 16](#); [Deut. 6:8](#); [11:18](#)) the Lord commanded that His law was to be upon the hands and foreheads of His people as a reminder of Him.*
 - b) *The law was to control what they thought and what they did*
 - c) *As the centuries passed, many Jews came to look on the injunction not as a means of making God's Word dominant in their lives but of making themselves dominant in the eyes of their fellow Jews.*
 - d) *Phylacteries were small square boxes made of leather from a ceremonially clean animal.*
 - e) *In Orthodox Judaism still today, every boy is given a set of phylacteries when he comes of age on his thirteenth birthday.*
 - f) *Like the other Jewish men, he then wears his phylacteries at morning prayer, as was the general custom in Jesus' day.*
 - g) *There is no record of the use of **phylacteries** until about 400 B.C. during the intertestamental period.*
 - h) *Rather than wearing their phylacteries only at prayer time, as the custom was for most Jewish men, the Pharisees wore them continually as a sign of superior spirituality.*
 - i) *They also would **broaden their phylacteries**, making them larger than normal to signify supposed greater devotion to God.*

E. False Leaders Lack Humility – vs 6-7

6 And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, **7** And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.

- False religious leaders are characterized by lack of humility.
 1. The scribes and Pharisees loved **the place of honor at banquets**.
 - a) *They vied with each other for a place at the host's table in order to be in the center of attention.*
 - b) *They gloried in being given places of prestige and eminence.*
 2. Out of the same motivation the scribes and Pharisees prized **the chief seats in the synagogues**.
 - a) *Synagogues typically had a raised platform in front where the worship leaders would sit.*
 - b) *Visiting rabbis and other religious dignitaries were often asked to participate by reading Scripture and giving a homily.*
 - c) *The religious leaders often used such opportunities to ostentatiously display themselves before the congregation.*
 3. Scribes and Pharisees also loved to have **respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi**.
 - a) *As they traveled through town they doted on being treated with special honor.*
 - b) *They especially loved the formal and respectful title **Rabbi**, which was used in that day much as "doctor" is today.*
 - c) ***Rabbi** carried the exalted ideas of "supreme one, excellency most knowledgeable one, great one," and such.*

^{YZ} **Matthew 23:5** Πάντα δὲ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν ποιοῦσιν πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις· πλατύνουσιν δὲ τὰ φυλακτήρια αὐτῶν, καὶ μεγαλύνουσιν τὰ κράσπεδα τῶν ἱματίων αὐτῶν·

Phylacteries (phulaktēria). An adjective from phulaktēr, phulassō (to guard). So a fortified place, station for garrison, then a safeguard, protecting charm or amulet. The rabbis wore tephillin or prayer-fillets, small leather cases with four strips of parchment on which were written the words of Exodus 13:1-16; Deut. 6:4-9; Deut. 11:13-21. They took literally the words about "a sign unto thy hand," "a memorial between thine eyes," and "frontlets." "That for the head was to consist of a box with four compartments, each containing a slip of parchment inscribed with one of the four passages. Each of these strips was to be tied up with a well-washed hair from a calf's tail; lest, if tied with wool or thread, any fungoid growth should ever pollute them. The phylactery of the arm was to contain a single slip, with the same four passages written in four columns of seven lines each. The black leather straps by which they were fastened were wound seven times round the arm and three times round the hand. They were revered by the rabbis as highly as the scriptures, and, like them, might be rescued from the flames on a sabbath. They profanely imagined that God wore the tephillin" (Vincent). It is small wonder that Jesus ridiculed such minute concern for pretentious externalism and literalism. These tephillin "are still worn at the present day on the forehead and left arm by Jews at the daily Morning Prayer" (McNeile). "The size of the phylacteries indexed the measure of zeal, and the wearing of large ones was apt to take the place of obedience" (Bruce). Hence they made them "broad." The superstitious would wear them as mere charms to ward off evil.

^{BYZ} **Matthew 23:6** φιλοῦσιν τε τὴν πρωτοκλισίαν ἐν τοῖς δεῖπνοις, καὶ τὰς πρωτοκαθεδρίας ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς,

^{BYZ} **Matthew 23:7** καὶ τοὺς ἀσπασμοὺς ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς, καὶ καλεῖσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, Ῥαββί, Ῥαββί·

II. The Declaration to True Spiritual Leaders – vs 8-12

- Contrary to the proud and ostentatious practices of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus declared, true spiritual leaders are to avoid elevated titles and be willing to accept lowly service.

A. True Leaders Avoid Elevated Titles – vs 8-10

8 But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, *even* Christ; and all ye are brethren. **9** And call no *man* your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. **10** Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, *even* Christ.

1. Avoid titles of honor
 - a) Those who faithfully proclaim and interpret God's Word are to be appreciated and loved by those they serve (*1 Thess. 5:12-13*).
 - b) But they are not to seek honor, much less demand it or glory in it.
 - c) Remember that they are neither the source of truth, which is God's Word, nor the illumination of truth, which is God's Spirit.
 - d) Human teachers **are all brothers** with every other believer.
 - e) No man's calling, however unique, justifies his being given a title intended to portray him as being spiritually superior.
2. The Lord commandd, "**Do not call anyone on earth your father.**"
 - a) Jesus was of course using the sense of spiritual **father**, indicating a superior spiritual position
 - b) Members of the Sanhedrin, loved to be called by the title **father**, especially when acting in official capacities.
 - c) In direct contradiction of Jesus' prohibition, the RCC uses the term father as an official form of address for their clergy.
 - d) The title of **Father** in a spiritual sense is to be reserved for God, who alone is the source of all spiritual life and blessing.
 - e) To call any human being by that name is a clear violation of Scripture.

B. True Leaders Accept Lowly Service – vs 11-12

11 But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. **12** And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.

1. Godly leaders not only avoid elevated titles but also willingly accept lowly service following their Lord's example.
 - a) As Jesus Himself beautifully exemplified, **the greatest person is the one who is a willing servant.**
 - b) Jesus' human greatness not only was manifested in His perfect sinlessness and love but in His being the perfect **servant.**
 - c) His mission on earth was not to be served but to serve, He said, "and to give His life a ransom for many" (*Matt. 20:28*).
2. "**And whoever exalts himself shall he humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall he exalted.**"
 - a) That is the opposite of the world's standard for exaltation.
 - b) The world teaches that it is the one who **exalts himself** who gets ahead and the one who **humbles himself** who loses out
 - c) Looking out for number one is the accepted principle for success.
 - d) And just as assuredly the humble, unpretentious, self-giving, serving person ultimately **shall he exalted.**
3. The nineteenth-century Scottish preacher and author Andrew Bonar said he knew a Christian was growing when he talked more of Christ than of himself.
4. Unlike the proud and arrogant scribes and Pharisees, the true spiritual leader works in God's authority and he lives in integrity sympathy spirituality humility and lowly service.
5. He is filled with grace, mercy love, and willing self-giving.
6. Like his Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, he manifests the heart of a servant who humbles himself and exalts God.

BYZ **Matthew 23:8** ὑμεῖς δὲ μὴ κληθῆτε Ραββί· εἰς γὰρ ἐστὶν ὑμῶν ὁ καθηγητής, ὁ χριστός· πάντες δὲ ὑμεῖς ἀδελφοί ἐστε.

BYZ **Matthew 23:9** Καὶ πατέρα μὴ καλέσητε ὑμῶν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς· εἰς γὰρ ἐστὶν ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν, ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

BYZ **Matthew 23:10** μὴδὲ κληθῆτε καθηγηταί· εἰς γὰρ ὑμῶν ἐστὶν ὁ καθηγητής, ὁ χριστός. Masters (kathēgētai). This word occurs here only in the N.T. It is found in the papyri for teacher (Latin, doctor). It is the modern Greek word for professor. "While didaskalos represents Rab, kathēgētes stands for the more honourable Rabban, -bōn" (McNeile). Dalman (Words of Jesus, p. 340) suggests that the same Aramaic word may be translated by either didaskalos or kathēgētes.

BYZ **Matthew 23:11** Ὁ δὲ μείζων ὑμῶν ἔσται ὑμῶν διάκονος.

BYZ **Matthew 23:12** Ὅστις δὲ ὑψώσει ἑαυτὸν, ταπεινωθήσεται· καὶ ὅστις ταπεινώσει ἑαυτὸν, ὑψωθήσεται.