

The Lord's Denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees for their Hypocrisy

Matthew 23:1-12

Matthew 23 1-12 - *"Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, ² saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. ⁴ For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. ⁵ But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. ⁶ They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷ greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' ⁸ But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. ⁹ Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. ¹⁰ And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. ¹¹ But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

Background Notes

The Lord's denunciation of the self-righteous, hypocritical scribes and Pharisees was spoken to the disciples and to the "multitudes." Large crowds of Jewish people had come from all over Israel - and all over the Roman Empire - to celebrate the Passover feast in Jerusalem. This speech would have taken place in the Temple courts, probably on the Wednesday of the final week of our Lord's earthly ministry.

"The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat" (v2). By this the Lord meant that the scribes and Pharisees had proudly set themselves up as the official teachers and interpreters of the Mosaic Law.

The Lord said that these Jewish leaders *"make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments"* (v5). Phylacteries are small, square, hard leather boxes that are worn during prayer times on the foreheads and forearms of Orthodox Jewish men. The phylacteries contain small portions of Scripture, especially the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6, which is Judaism's basic creed: *"Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord is one..."* The practice of wearing phylacteries is based on a strict, literal interpretation of Deuteronomy 11:18 *"You shall lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes."*

The Lord didn't condemn the use of phylacteries, but He condemned the way the scribes and Pharisees were using them. They used them to draw attention to themselves in an attempt to try to show how pious they were. They even broadened the leather straps that bound the phylacteries to their foreheads and forearms so that the phylacteries would be more

noticeable! Even today, at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, orthodox Jewish men go through their ritual washings, then elaborately bind on their phylacteries with long black, leather straps and go up to the Wall to pray.

The practice of wearing tassels on the garments (v5) is based on Numbers 15:38-40, *“Speak to the children of Israel: Tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a blue thread in the tassels of the corners. And you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them, and that you may not follow the harlotry to which your own heart and your own eyes are inclined, and that you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy for your God.”*

Orthodox Jewish men today wear small “prayer shawls” under their outer shirts. The tassels on these garments are usually visible, hanging down from under their shirts.

Again, the Lord didn’t denounce the scribes and Pharisees for wearing tassels on their garments. Numbers 15:38-10 is part of the Old Testament Law. However, the Lord certainly denounced them for making the tassels larger than usual in order to impress people, or to show how much more religious and pious they were than everyone else. The Lord hated the hypocrisy and outward show of piety of the Scribes and Pharisees!

Doctrinal Points

1. Don’t confuse religious orthodoxy with eternal salvation.

The Pharisees and the scribes were quite correct and orthodox in their doctrine of God, and in their interpretation of God’s Law - so much so, that the Lord could say, *“Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.”* But the scribes and Pharisees were hypocrites! Their lives didn’t match their false outward display of devotion to God. They placed the heavy burden of keeping every “letter of the law” on the people of Israel, but they didn’t do anything to assist them in performing this heavy task.

These religious hypocrites loved to draw attention to their observance of the Law by their large phylacteries and tassels and by their long prayers in the market place. They wanted everyone to recognize their positions as religious teachers and authorities, and call them by their titles - but they would step on others to get the seats of honor at banquets and in the synagogues! There was no evidence of inward reality under their outward show. They were orthodox on the outside, but unbelievers on the inside. Their conduct was not in line with their creed. Their conduct was evidence of their unbelieving hearts.

Twice in this chapter the Lord indicated that these false religious hypocrites were on their way to hell: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as*

much a son of hell as yourselves” (v15). And, “Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?” (v33).

Is it possible that you're in the same category as these scribes and Pharisees? Maybe you're orthodox in what you believe. You know the correct doctrine of God and the Bible and the Christian faith - but you're not yet truly saved? It's all “religious activity” in your case, but no inward reality. Don't think that you're saved just because you made an outward, lips-only profession of faith in Jesus. Don't confuse religious orthodoxy and eternal salvation!

2. Don't confuse “religious clericalism” with spiritual authority.

“But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ” (v8-10).

What was our Lord teaching here? He didn't say that children can't call their fathers “father,” and He didn't say that students can't call their teachers “teacher”! And He wasn't teaching that it's wrong to recognize that some Christians have the spiritual gift of teaching, or that some Christians are called to be spiritual leaders with spiritual authority. Of course not! What the Lord denounced in these verses is religious “clericalism.”

Clericalism is the idea and practice of creating and maintaining the power and authority of a **religious hierarchy**. Clericalism is not taught in the Bible - in fact, it's denounced in the Bible! The concept of separating Christians into “clergy” and “lay people” is not scriptural. It is wrong to put mere human beings on religious pedestals, and consider them to somehow be in a higher spiritual class. It is unbiblical and therefore incorrect, regardless of education, or ordination, or religious garb. The Holy Spirit of God is the power and authority in the Church.

The Lord taught, *“you are all brothers” (v8)*. There are God-given spiritual gifts - yes! There is God-given spiritual leadership and authority - yes! We should give honor where honor is due - yes! But clericalism? No! Don't confuse religious clericalism with spiritual authority.

3. Don't confuse “religious fame” with genuine greatness.

“But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (v11-12).

The world calls certain people “great” because of their accomplishments. As we've mentioned before, “Alexander the Great” is called “great” in history because of his great military accomplishments, and “Herod the Great” because of his massive construction and building accomplishments, many of which are still standing today. But in view of what the Bible

teaches, were these men really great? No! They were not denying themselves to serve others. They were primarily serving themselves!

Sadly, this is true in the religious area. There are well-known TV evangelists, mega church pastors, musicians and other so-called “celebrities” in the Christian spotlight - but are they genuinely “great” by Jesus’ standards? When you look behind the scenes at some of their lives, you may find that many of them are primarily serving themselves. They may have started out well, and they may still **say** they’re serving others - and they may truly **think** that they’re serving others. But behind the scenes their lifestyles reveal that they have it backwards: **others are serving them**, while they enjoy fame and the money that comes with fame. Thankfully, not all “famous” Christians fall into this category, but sadly many do.

The point is, **we shouldn’t confuse religious fame with genuine greatness. Genuine greatness is characterized by a selfless life of servicing others for the Lord.** Don’t confuse religious fame with genuine greatness.

Practical Application

Are you a “great” Christian?

Are you a great Christian - **in God’s eyes**? Here’s the good news: you can be! **You** can be a great Christian! Serving others in the name of Christ is what it’s all about. You may not be a “famous” Christian or in the Christian spotlight, but you can be great in God’s eyes if you serve Him by serving others. You may not have a lot of natural talent or ability or up-front spiritual gift, but you can be a great Christian if you serve others in the name of Christ.

Serve in whatever way you can - even in little, quiet ways, like writing encouraging letters to missionaries, or to prisoners who have become Christians, or to Christian students on secular college campuses. Have you ever written an encouraging letter to anyone in the name of Christ? Try it! It’s a step toward being great in God’s eyes! You don’t have to wait until you’re a mature believer and have a lot of Bible knowledge under your belt! You can start being a great Christian today - **great in God’s eyes!**

You may never be great in the world’s eyes, but so what? Does it really matter? But every believer can become a great Christian in God’s eyes. Not every believer **is** a great Christian, and not every believer **will become** a great Christian, but every believer **can become** a great Christian! There are absolutely **no excuses** that any believer can give for not becoming a great Christian! It’s up to you - not anyone else. It’s up to you!

So the question remains for all of us - are you a “great” Christian?