

## Chapter 95: Spiritual Leadership

*Matthew 23:1–12*

Since Jesus arrived in Jerusalem at the triumphal entry, the religious leaders have swarmed him, seeking to discredit him in order to defend the territory that they had usurped for themselves. With questions and accusations, they have posed the most difficult challenges they could muster against Jesus; however, time and again, they fell short of their goals of toppling Jesus. Now that their volley of attacks is exhausted, Jesus has an opportunity to say what he wishes to them. After asking a question about the identity of the Christ as the Son of David that left them speechless, Jesus now excoriates them for their hypocrisy. As Jesus begins his scorched-earth denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees, he begins by laying down the foundational basis for judging them so harshly: *church leadership is spiritual leadership*.

### **Spiritually Genuine (Matt. 23:1–4)**

After the Pharisees were unable to answer Jesus' question about the identity of the Son of David, Jesus now begins to speak "to the crowds and to his disciples" (v. 1). It is unclear how much time (if any) has passed since the end of the previous section, as well as whether the Pharisees or other religious leaders are still present when Jesus speaks to the others. Yet, while Matthew does not tell us that those religious leaders were present, only twice did Matthew tell us *indirectly* that the crowds were present during the various challenges that the religious leaders have brought against Jesus (Matt. 21:23, "as he was teaching"; 21:46, "they feared the crowds"), and never that the disciples were present. Nevertheless, the religious leaders sought to discredit Jesus in front of the crowds, and the disciples had accompanied Jesus into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:20), so that Matthew did not need to mention their presence explicitly. Thus, while it may be true that Jesus did not "directly address" his words to the scribes and Pharisees,<sup>1</sup> this in no way means that they were absent. I am inclined to agree with Lenski, who suggests that "the scene was charged with a dramatic tenseness that is hard for us to imagine" as Jesus speaks out against the scribes and the Pharisees, even as Jesus specifically "warns his own disciples."<sup>2</sup>

Morris observes that "There is nothing comparable to this sustained denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees in any of the other Gospels."<sup>3</sup> Yet, although Jesus will excoriate these leaders, he begins with an acknowledgement that they should be regarded as possessing a formal authority: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do" (vv. 2–3a). Regarding this expression, France writes:

---

<sup>1</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 340.

<sup>2</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 893.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 569.

Teachers normally sat to teach (see on 5:1; and cf. 13:1–2; 24:3), and 26:55 will tell us that Jesus followed this custom during his period in the temple courtyard. Given that cultural norm, it is likely that to “sit on Moses’ chair” is simply a figurative expression (cf. our professorial “chair”) for teaching with an authority derived from Moses. Moses himself gave Israel the basic law, but ever since then it had been necessary for other teachers to expound and apply it, and those who did so with due authority “sat on Moses’ chair.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, it is unlikely that “Moses’ seat/chair” refers to any physical piece of furniture.<sup>5</sup> Even among those who have argued that this “chair” was a physical piece of furniture, however, the emphasis was on the symbolic nature of that chair as a reference to the teaching office of those who sat in it.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus, then, differentiates between the authority of the office and the abuse of that authority by those who inhabit the office. So, in one sense, Jesus can urge the crowds and his disciples to do all that the Pharisees read from what *Moses* wrote in the Scriptures: “Seated in Moses’ seat, these teachers read the word of Moses and of the prophets, and these are the words, whatever they may be, that Jesus bids the people ‘do and keep guarding.’”<sup>7</sup> Yet, in another sense, Jesus does not here affirm that these Pharisees have been lawfully appointed to this office, and he rejects the broader, more comprehensive teaching that the Pharisees offer as they move beyond the law.<sup>8</sup> Hagner therefore characterizes Jesus’ words as “an approval in principle rather than fact.”<sup>9</sup> Carson has suggested that Jesus’ qualified affirmation of the Pharisees may be a “biting irony,” but that interpretation is not necessary to distinguish v. 3 from the rest of the passage.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Jesus’ first warning against the Pharisees is that “they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger” (vv. 3b–4). This is the “leaven of the Pharisees” about which Jesus warns elsewhere (Matt. 16:6).<sup>11</sup> Whereas they preach the words of Moses, they do not practice what Moses actually taught, but instead weigh down God’s people with impossible burdens. They fail to offer the people the promises of the gospel that Moses held out, in part because they are not in the least willing to do so.

---

<sup>4</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 859.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 572.

<sup>6</sup> “‘Moses’ seat’ referred to an actual chair in the synagogues and stood for the teaching authority of Moses’ successors as interpreters of Torah (cf. Deut 17:10 [*sic*; 17:9]). The expression is roughly parallel to our reference to the pulpit as the symbol for preaching or scriptural exposition.” (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 340.)

<sup>7</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 894.

<sup>8</sup> “They were not called to this seat as Moses had been.... They were self-appointed usurpers and acted as though their dicta were as binding as the revelations God made to Moses, 15:3–9.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 893–94.)

<sup>9</sup> Hagner, *Matthew 14 – 28*, 659.

<sup>10</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 530–33.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:75.

## Spiritually Motivated (Matt. 23:5–7)

The second warning Jesus sounds is that the scribes and Pharisees “do all their deeds to be seen by others” (v. 5a). Jesus had warned against this attitude of seeking to perform righteousness in order to be seen by others back in Matthew 6:1–18. Now, Jesus indicts the scribes and the Pharisees for this, with two major specifications. First, Jesus says that “they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long” (v. 5b). The “fringes” were related to prayer shawls, and the “phylacteries” were “small prayer boxes containing tiny copies of the texts of Exod 13:2–16; Deut 6:4–9; and 11:13–21, which pious men wore on one arm and as a headband. The wearing of these boxes probably developed as an overly literal application of Deut 6:8 and 11:18 and was used as a reminder to prayer and piety.”<sup>12</sup> For the scribes and Pharisees, Scripture meditation and prayer were not private devotional acts done in secret communion with God, but external displays to be seen by others. Calvin observes, “how ingenious men are in mixing up vain deception, in order to conceal their vices under some pretext and cloak of virtues, by turning to the purposes of their own hypocrisy those exercises of piety which God has enjoined.”<sup>13</sup>

In the second specification, Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees “love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others” (vv. 6–7). Their labors are not driven by “love to God and a sincere desire to promote His glory in the Gospel of His Son.”<sup>14</sup> Instead, they were “wholly devoted to ambition.”<sup>15</sup> The first specification identified how they displayed their piety publicly, but this specification deals with the fruit of those public displays: broad admiration from their fellow Israelites. Whether at parties, in worship, in marketplaces, they wanted to be held in honor, set in the highest places, and hailed as rabbis with special knowledge that the common people did not possess.

## Spiritually Humble (Matt. 23:8–12)

After the general charge and two specifications, Jesus warns his disciples not to follow in their footsteps. Against the example of the scribes and Pharisees in pursuing honor and prestige, Jesus exhorts his disciples, saying, “But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ” (vv. 8–10). If Jesus’ earlier acknowledgement about sitting in Moses’ chair raised a number of questions about Jesus giving too much credit to the scribes and Pharisees, then this statement raises other questions about whether Jesus goes too far in reaction against the Pharisees. Does he really exclude anyone from exercising an office of teaching in his church?

Of course, we cannot interpret this to mean that Jesus forbids all teaching within his church. Jesus himself will send his disciples explicitly to teach (Matt. 28:20), so he cannot say this as an absolute restriction on teaching. Instead, Jesus is rebuking a specific approach to the teaching office

---

<sup>12</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 341–42.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:78.

<sup>14</sup> This language comes from one of the ordination vows for ministers in the Presbyterian Church in America (*PCA Book of Church Order*, 21–5.5).

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:78.

that holds oneself out as a special authority. Indeed, it was in “teaching...as one who had authority” that distinguished Jesus from even the religious teachers of the day (Matt. 7:29). Those rabbis claimed authority over the people in the way that Jesus rebukes here; however, even they did not pretend to carry that authority that Jesus exercised in his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus does not here reject a sense in which someone may teach another, or a sense in which someone may be recognized as the spiritual father of another in the sense of having exercised positive leadership in another person’s life.<sup>16</sup> The last word, “instructor,” suggests “a leader who assumes full responsibility for those led and who thus commands and is obeyed.”<sup>17</sup> It is not, therefore, the act of teaching, but the claim to intrinsic authority that Jesus rebukes. Jesus rebukes those who claim such a status by insisting upon being *called* a rabbi, a father, or an instructor in that sense.

On the other hand, those who exercise lawful authority in the church do so differently than what Jesus rebukes here in two senses. (1) They do not presume to take this authority upon themselves, but with the calling and approval of the whole church, and (2) they exercise authority as those who are under the authority of Christ, and in subjection to their brethren in the Lord. Calvin puts this well: “The general meaning is, that his authority must remain entire, and that no mortal man ought to claim the smallest portion of it. Thus he is the only Pastor; but yet he admits many pastors under him, provided that he hold the preeminence over them all, and that by them he alone govern the Church.”<sup>18</sup>

There is, then, rightful authority in the church; however, that authority must be exercised as servanthood rather than domination: “The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (vv. 11–12). We are to follow in the leadership of our instructor Jesus Christ by coming to serve others, rather than seeking to be served.

## Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean for Jesus to say that “the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat” (v. 2)? What legacy did Moses leave behind, and how were the religious leaders supposed to minister to the people from that legacy? To what degree does Jesus insist that the people should practice what the scribes and Pharisees teach (v. 3a)? What warnings does Jesus give about ways in which the people should not follow the scribes and Pharisees (vv. 3b–4)?
2. Why do the religious leaders want their “deeds to be seen by others” (v. 5a)? What do they gain from that? What were phylacteries and fringes (v. 5b)? What did the leaders gain from making those accessories more prominent? What kinds of rewards were motivating the religious leaders (vv. 6–7)?

---

<sup>16</sup> “The objection may be raised, however, that Paul, by implication, calls himself the ‘father’ of the Corinthians and of Timothy, and even the ‘mother’ of the Galatians (respectively in I Cor. 4:15; I Tim. 1:2, and Gal. 4:19). However, to state a fact is one thing; to yearn for distinctions and honors above one’s fellowmen, and unrelated to the glory that is due to Christ, is something different. It is the latter that Jesus condemns.” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 824.)

<sup>17</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 900–01.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:79.

What was so attractive about those things? To what degree do such honors tempt you in your own spiritual life and leadership?

3. Why does Jesus not want anyone among his people to be called “rabbi” (v. 8a)? How does that undercut the brotherhood of all God’s people (v. 8b)? Why does Jesus not want anyone on earth to be called “father” (v. 9a)? How does that distract us from our Father in heaven (v. 9b)? Why does Jesus not want anyone to be called “instructor” (v. 10a)? How does that undercut the instruction of Christ (v. 10b)?

4. What part of this passage was the most convicting for your own life? Why? Is your spiritual life truly genuine before the Lord? Are you motivated by earthly rewards, or by pleasing your Father in heaven? What role does your pride and humility play in the way that you relate to others in the church? To what degree are you a humble servant in the church? How does this lead you to relate toward the leaders in the church?