

Jesus Exposes the Religious Leaders
Matthew 23:1—12

Chapter 22 ends with the leaders of Israel stymied and silenced. Each of their questions to Jesus was designed to test and trip up Jesus to make Him look foolish in front of the crowds gathering each day at the temple. Instead, with each answer they became increasingly amazed at His wisdom and authority. This infuriated the leaders and they finally realized that they would lose every battle of wits. It was when Jesus asked them to explain how David's son is also called Lord in Psalm 110:1 that finally caused them to stop asking Him any more questions. It's at this point that Jesus now turns to the crowd to address them directly with the leaders of Israel looking on.

Jesus speaks to the crowd

Jesus now warns the people about the dangers of following the religious leaders of Israel. The people saw them as great leaders who were the symbol of godliness. They were accepted as great examples of holiness. Jesus, however, could see deep into their hearts and knew how corrupt they were. This whole chapter is devoted to excoriating these religious leaders and by so doing to lead the people to a true knowledge of their Messiah.

Sitting in Moses' seat (verses 1—3)

A distinction must be made between criticizing leaders for what they are doing and civil disobedience. These leaders were given a special authority to sit in Moses' seat—to uphold Mosaic Law and lead the people. Jesus never once encouraged the people to rebel or ignore the authority that these leaders had. This is because God gave them their authority (see Acts 23:1—5).

Even though they have this special place of authority, the people are told not to do what these leaders do. They need to respect the office of leader as sanctioned by God but they are not to follow the evil things they are doing. The rest of this chapter is devoted to the evil things the leaders were doing. Outwardly they were godly but inside they were full of evil. This is why they are so often characterized as hypocrites.

Jesus never once encourages these people to disobey the Law, in fact, He upholds the Law. He was a Man born under the Law (Galatians 4:4) and a man who perfectly obeyed the Law (John 8:29, 55). He was unaccusable and sinless (Hebrews 4:15). He taught that others should keep the Law (Luke 10:25—28; Mark 7:8—13).

There are some who teach that the Law was done away with at the cross but this is not true. Romans 10:4 says that those who believe (in this Dispensation of Grace) are not under the Law while Colossians 2:14 expands on this by saying that it was only through the cross that it was possible for those of us who believe to no longer be condemned by the Law. Jesus never negated or invalidated the Law but contrariwise demanded not only that people live by the Law but also that they live beyond the Law. For instance, Jesus taught that they should not commit murder but added that they shouldn't even be angry toward a brother (Matthew 5:21—22). This is what the Sermon on the Mount is all about (Matthew 5:17—20).

Hypocritical behavior (verses 4—12)

Now Jesus lays out plainly how these religious leaders act while they expected everyone else to submit to a more stringent set of rules. They were so ready to put heavy burdens on men that they themselves wouldn't even consider doing. They would add many things to the Mosaic Law in order to build a hedge around the Law. This hedge was supposed to make it impossible for anyone to ever transgress the Law. They also would take the purity ordinances meant for the priests and impose them on the people. For instance, there were certain ritualistic washings that were to be done in the temple (Hebrews 9:10; Exodus 29:4; 30:18—

21; 40:29—32; Leviticus 1:9—13). The Pharisees made these washings compulsory on the people supposedly in an attempt to keep the nation holy before God. (Matthew 15:2). Jesus lists some of their hypocritical deeds:

1. They make broad their phylacteries. The phylactery is a box containing a scroll of scripture that is bound around the head and/or arm. They take the words of Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18 very literally by binding this box to themselves. The Pharisees of Jesus' day would make their phylacteries large to be noticed by men.
2. They would also do the same with tassels along the hem of their outer garment. Numbers 15:38—39 tells them to do this to remember the commandments. They would carry this to extreme by making their tassels wide, long and ornate. They lost the true meaning of having of the tassels using them for show instead of for a godly reminder to keep the commandments.
3. These religious leaders would also take great gratification in sitting themselves in places of honor in banquets and in the synagogue.
4. They are also built up by honorific greetings in the market places. The acknowledgment of men is what they lived for but this is all the reward they will get. When they die, there will be no additional reward (Matthew 6:16). I believe this is pictured in what I believe to be a true account of the afterlife in Luke 16:19—31.

The people would call them Rabbi, father and leader. I don't believe there was anything inherently wrong with these titles. Many of them were Rabbis (teachers). Many could certainly be fathers and they were of course leaders. I believe it become a problem when they were honored as God. The Rabbis of their day were certainly revered as were the leaders. Many leaders at that time were viewed as a god or at least desired to be thought of as a god (Acts 12:20—23). The term father was sometimes synonymous with priest (Judges 17:10; 18:19). Many of the people looked at these men as acting in the place of God and this was the problem. Even today people inappropriately refer to religious leaders as father. There is nothing wrong in calling someone father unless they, in so doing, give a man honor in the place of God.

Jesus finishes this particular section telling the people that those who puff themselves up will be brought low while those who are humble will be exalted. This is a contrast between their current earthly position and their future Kingdom position (Matthew 6:1—6).

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