

PHARISAI SIM EXPOSED
The Character of False Spiritual Leaders
Matthew 23:1-12

Matthew 23 records Jesus' last public sermon. The *hypocrisy* and *unbelief* of the nation's religious leaders prompted a strong message from Jesus. It wasn't a sermon on *salvation*, or on *resurrection*, or even on *principles for kingdom living*...but rather a spirited and sobering message of *condemnation against false teachers*. In **verses 1-7** He *warns* the people about *false religious leaders* in Israel...and in **verses 8-12** He *admonishes* the *disciples* and other *true spiritual leaders* not to emulate them.

He warned them about the teachings of the religious leaders saying that their *authority* and *position* was to be recognized (i.e. they sit **in the chair of Moses**...they teach the *Law* and its *truths*)...but their *practices*, being *hypocritical*, should not be followed.

As we continue to study **chapter 23**, we will see Jesus turning His attention directly to the *false leaders* themselves, characterized by the **scribes** and **Pharisees**, and gives them His final and most scathing denunciation (**vs. 13-36**). Then in His closing comments (**vs. 37-39**) Jesus expresses His intense compassion for unbelieving Israel and gives the assurance that one day, in fulfillment of God's sovereign promise, His chosen people will turn back to Him in faith.

I. A DESCRIPTION OF FALSE SPIRITUAL LEADERS: (vs. 1-7) Five characteristic of false teachers and spiritual leaders.

When the Jews returned to **Palestine** after **70 years** of captivity in **Babylon (Nehemiah 8:1-8)**, there were no more prophets after that *exile*. At that point the **scribes** inherited the primary role of spiritual leadership in Israel. It was the **scribes** and **Pharisees** that the people of **Israel** looked to for *religious guidance* and *authority* ...a role those leaders *greatly cherished*.

- They are self-promoting...they lack divine authority

The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the **chair of Moses (vs. 2)**...They weren't *God called*...they were *self-appointed* and *self-promoting*.

Chair...Gk. *kathedra*, refers to a *place, or a seat of ecclesiastical authority*. We get the word *cathedral* from it. It's the same idea found today in such expressions as "*Chair of Evangelism*"...

"*Chair of Philosophy*"...or "*Chair of History*." It refers to an *esteemed* or *honored position*.

For Jews, **Moses** was the supreme *law giver*...the supreme *spokesman* for God. Therefore, to sit **in the chair of Moses** was *synonymous* to being God's *spokesman*...a claim that many of the **scribes** and **Pharisees** made for themselves...and enjoyed.

- They are hypocrites...they lack integrity

Therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them (**vs. 3**)...False spiritual leaders *expect* and *demand* of others things they *aren't willing* to do themselves...just like the **scribes** and **Pharisees**.

Jesus wasn't giving a blanket approval for following the teachings of the **scribes** and **Pharisees**...but was rather warning them against throwing the baby out with the dirty bath water.

That's why **Paul** later wrote...

"But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!"

~Galatians 1:8-9

In other words...*if they speak God's truth*, you should **do and observe** it. Jesus was saying...*the Word of God is still the Word of God*...even if through the mouth of a false teacher (**Matthew 7:21-23**). As long as the **scribes** and **Pharisees** are *accurately teaching* the law and the prophets...their teaching was to be followed.

Do...Gk. *poieo*, an **aorist imperative** and *demands an immediate response*.

Observe...Gk. *tereo*, a **present imperative** and *carries the idea of continuing action*.

Jesus was basically saying..."*Immediately obey...and keep on obeying...whatever the scribes and Pharisees teach if it follows God's Word.*"

But do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them...When the **scribes** and **Pharisees** did occasionally

teach God's truth, they *didn't obey* it themselves...they were *religious phonies*...consummate *hypocrites* who didn't practice what they preached.

- They are uncaring...*they lack sympathy*

They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger (vs. 4)...

The picture Jesus gives reflects a common custom of that day...one of loading up a *donkey, camel*, or some other *animal* to the point that they could hardly move. As they would travel down the road, the owner would walk alongside, *carrying nothing himself*, yet *scolding* and *beating* the animal if it happened to *stumble* or *hesitate*, with no concern for the animal's welfare.

This is exactly the way the **scribes** and **Pharisees** treated their fellow Jews. The people were taught that it was only by their own *good works* that they could *please* God. So they piled up heavy loads of *religious regulations, rules*, and *rituals on men's shoulders* until they became *unbearable* and *impossible* to carry or to keep. And when they failed to keep all the requirements...they were *reprimanded* and *rebuked* by the leaders...adding an additional *burden of guilt* to their *weariness* and *frustration*.

The *good news* was that Jesus came to take away the load of sin that always *outweighed* their *good works*.

"It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery."

~Galatians 5:1

- They are pretentious...*they lack spirituality*

But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments (vs. 5)...They lack a genuine desire to please God.

To be noticed by men...Everything was 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. The issue for them *isn't godly character*...but *fleshly appearance*. Their purpose was to *glorify themselves*...*not God!*

To flaunt their religiosity, the **scribes** and **Pharisees** would **broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments**.

Broaden their phylacteries...*Four* times in the **Pentateuch** (**Exodus 13:9, 16; Deuteronomy 6:8; Deuteronomy 11:18**), the Lord commanded that His Law was to be upon the *hands* and *foreheads* of His people as a reminder of Him. The ancient Jews understood that command as it was given...*not to be taken literally* but as *symbolic* of God's Law being the *controlling factor* in their lives. That their *thoughts* and their *actions* were to be directed by God's Word. That instruction was meant to elevate the Lord and to draw His people closer to Himself...what we call **Lordship** today.

As centuries passed, many Jews came to look on the instruction 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*. The religious leaders *literalized* and *externalized* the command and turned it into a means of feeding their own egos.

Phylacteries...comes from the **Hebrew** word translated *frontals* (**Deuteronomy 6:8; Deuteronomy 11:18; Exodus 13:16**).

Phylacteries were *small square boxes* made of *leather* from a ceremonially clean animal. After being dyed black, the leather was sewn into a box using *twelve stitches*, each stitch representing one of the *twelve tribes of Israel*. Placed into each **phylactery** were copies of **Exodus 13:1-10** and **Exodus 13:11-16** and of **Deuteronomy 6:4-9** and **Deuteronomy 11:13-21**. The **phylactery** worn on the *head* had *four compartments*, each containing one of the texts on a small piece of parchment. The **phylactery** worn on the *hand* contained a single piece of parchment on which all four texts were written.

The **Hebrew** letter *shin* (**y**) was inscribed on both sides of the box *worn on the head*...and *the head strap* was tied to form the letter *daleth* (**d**)...and *the hand strap* to form the letter *yodh* (**j**). The three letters together formed *one of the names of God*...**Shaddai**...usually translated **Almighty**. Long leather straps were used to bind one box to the *forehead* and the other to the *arm* and *left hand*...because the left side was considered to be closer to the heart.

In **Orthodox Judaism** still today, every boy is given a set of **phylacteries** when he comes of age on his *13th birthday*.

There is no record of the use of **phylacteries** until about **400 B.C.** during the *intertestamental period* (the *400 silent years*).

Lengthen the tassels of their garments...Tassels were originally given to the *sons of Israel* to *look at* and *be reminded* of all the *commandments*...and to *obey* them and not follow their own hearts or their own eyes...and to *be holy* before God (**Numbers 15:38-40**).

Jesus Himself wore **tassels**, and it was these **tassels** (or *fringes*) on His cloak that the woman with the hemorrhage touched (**Matthew 9:20**).

The purpose of both the **phylacteries** and the **tassels** was to remind the people of God and His Word, and to set them apart as His people (**Zechariah 8:23**). They were given as a means of *calling attention to God*. Unfortunately the **scribes** and **Pharisees** turned them into a means of *calling attention to themselves*.

- They are ostentatious...*They lack humility*

They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men (vs. 6-7)...They vied with each other for a place at the host's table in order to be in the center of attention. They gloried in being given places of *prestige* and *eminence*.

Out of the same motivation the **scribes** and **Pharisees** prized the **chief seats in the synagogues**. In addition to having seats of honor, the **scribes** and **Pharisees** also loved to have **respectful greetings in the market places**. As they traveled through town they doted on being treated with special honor.

And being called Rabbi by men...They especially loved the formal and respectful title **Rabbi**...which was used in that day much as *doctor* is today. In Jesus' day, the title **Rabbi** carried the exalted idea of *supreme one...excellency...most knowledgeable one...great one*. *Rabbinical writings* included detailed *protocol* as to *how one was to be addressed...consulted with...and entertained*.

II. A DESCRIPTION OF TRUE SPIRITUAL LEADERS: (vs. 8-12)

- They avoid elevated titles...*They shun pretentious titles*

But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ (vs. 8-10)...

But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers...Teachers...pastors...those who faithfully *proclaim* and *interpret God's Word* are to be *appreciated, loved,* and *highly esteemed* by those they serve (**I Thessalonians 5:12-13**)

"But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work."

~I Thessalonians 5:12-13

...But they are *not to seek honor*, much less *demand it* or *glory in it*. They need to remember that they are *neither the source of truth*...which is God's Word...*nor the illumination of truth*...which is the work of the Holy Spirit. No man's calling justifies his being given a title intended to portray him as being spiritually superior.

Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven...The title **Father** is to be reserved for God...who alone is the source of all spiritual life and blessing.

Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ...As with other titles, it can easily place barriers between those in the church (ie. *Layman* vs. *Deacon...Elder...Pastor*).

- They are servants...*Willing to accept even lowly service*

But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted (vs. 11-12)...

Godly leaders not only *avoid elevated titles* but are willing to *accept service*...even *menial service...humbling service*...in their Lord's name (ministry)...following their Lord's example.

As we will soon see, during His last time alone with the disciples in the *Upper Room*, Jesus reiterated this lesson of servanthood as He *washed the feet of the disciples* (**John 13:4-5, 12-17**).

Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted...This is the opposite of the world's standard for *exaltation*.

“Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock...clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.”

~I Peter 5:2-3, 5-6

LESSONS:

- *You know a Christian is growing and maturing when he talks more about Christ than of himself.* The maturing Christian sees himself growing smaller and smaller until, like the morning star, he gives way to the rising sun.
- *A true spiritual leader works in God's authority, yet lives in humility, with integrity...filled with grace, mercy, and love.*
- *Know God's Word to where you will recognize false teachers and false religious leaders.* Scripture even admonishes us to judge and expose that which is false.