

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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DO NOT DO ACCORDING TO THEIR DEEDS

Matthew 23:1-12

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught how to live. The counterpart of the Sermon on the Mount is, in my opinion, Matthew 23 where Jesus taught how *not* to live.

In this chapter, Matthew 23, Jesus criticized false religion, especially false religious leadership. The tone of His message is extremely harsh. It has a lengthy introduction (vv. 1-12), then a very long body composed of seven woes (vv. 13-36), and ends with a short conclusion (vv. 37-39). In this lesson, we will focus on the introduction. Let's read verse 1 to 12.

*Matthew 23:1. Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples,
2 saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses;
3 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.
4 "And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger.
5 "But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments.
6 "And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues,
7 and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi.
8 "But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers.
9 "And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven.
10 "And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ.
11 "But the greatest among you shall be your servant.
12 "And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.*

Directed to the disciples

Here is a very strong condemnation of the Pharisees. It is probably the most severe attack that Jesus ever spoke against a group of people. When we come to a passage like this, it is most important to approach it with the right attitude. Because if we have the wrong attitude, not only will we not be blessed by it, this passage can actually become a curse to us. Things which are meant to be a blessing can turn out to be a curse if they are not approached in the right way. That is why the apostle Paul said that the gospel can bring life to some, and death to others. The same gospel can become an instrument of death to those who approach it with the wrong attitude.

So how should we approach this passage? What is the correct attitude?

If we approach this passage with the thinking that this is the description of some people that we know, ourselves being excluded of course, then we have come with the wrong attitude. Because that is exactly the attitude of the Pharisees. You remember the Parable of the Pharisee and Tax-Collector (Luke 18:10-14) where the Pharisee says to God, 'I thank you God that I am not like that man.' It is easy, you know, to read Matthew 23 and to think, 'I thank God that I am not like those Pharisees. I don't do any of these things. These are hypocrites, but not me. I practice what I preach. I'm always consistent in the way I behave.' The moment we think in this way, we have proven ourselves to be precisely the kind of people that this chapter denounces.

Notice who the Lord Jesus was speaking to. Verse 1: *Then Jesus said to the crowds and to His disciples.* Jesus directed His discourse here to the crowds and to the His disciples. The crowds as well as the disciples needed to know something of the dangers that confront those who follow the path of righteousness. In our interpretation of this text, we must be careful not to stereotype Pharisaiism, and we must point every critical remark to us, to the church in general. I believe that this passage will become a blessing to us only if we view its content as being directed to *us* as well.

They do not practice what they teach

With this in mind, let's try to understand this passage. Verse 2: *The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses.* Teachers normally sat to teach. One example of this is Matthew 26:55 where Jesus said, *Every day I used to sit in the temple teaching and you did not seize Me.* Other examples are found in Matthew 5:1; 13:1-2; 24:3. Given that cultural practice, to 'sit on Moses' chair' is a figurative expression 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. The scribes and the Pharisees sat in Moses' chair in the sense that they were responsible for teaching and interpreting God's word just as Moses had been.

Verse 3: *Therefore all that they tell you, do and observe...* This seems strange at first because Jesus has denounced several times their teaching in the past (Matthew 12:1-14; 15:1-20; 16:6-12; 19:3-9). Yet the Lord did not toss aside the religious leaders as worthless. The scribes and the Pharisees made it their business to study and to teach the Scriptures. For the most part, they were rightly drawing people's attention to things that Moses had said. Jesus did not want to stop people from making use of the help the Pharisees provided for the understanding of the Scriptures. 'Therefore,' the Lord said, 'in that measure,' insofar as they exercise the office of that chair as teachers of God's law, 'do and keep what they tell you.'

However He did question their actions. *But do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them.* Do not follow their example. Their knowledge of the Bible is not in question. Their practice is where the problem lies. They do not practice what they teach. Therefore do not imitate their example.

Notice their unloving attitude in v. 4. *And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger.* The Pharisees, in a well-motivated but misled attempt to protect the obedience of the law, had built up a hugely expanded legal code. This they firmly imposed on others but they were lax in bearing the weight themselves. And not only did they have double standards, they also had a mercilessness where they would not help carry the loads. They taught with an attitude that lacked compassion. This unwillingness to 'move a finger' pictures a cold imperiousness, a spirit of 'this is your responsibility, not ours.'

Ostentation

A major flaw among the Pharisees now emerges in v. 5: *They do all their deeds to be noticed by men*. As they taught the law, they were very much aware of the attention they received from the people, and they loved it. Their religious practice was for show, for others to see. Jesus' accusation does not deny that they lived for God, but it does assert that even their life for God has as its final purpose the esteem of other people. It reminds us of Matthew 6:1-6 and 16-18 on alms, prayer and fasting, where Jesus spoke of the preoccupation of the hypocrites with gaining human praise for their piety.

What did the Pharisees do to be noticed? *They broaden their phylacteries*. A phylactery is a little box, about the size of a ring box, that contains strips of parchment on which are written four passages of the OT, namely, Exodus 13:3-10, 11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21. These four passages were regarded as expressing the heart of the message of the OT. You can see the symbolic importance of this tiny box. It contained the most precious passages of the OT. There were actually two boxes, two phylacteries that people wore. One was attached to the forehead with a strip of leather or cloth. The second one, with the same verses inside, was tied to the left upper arm.

Why did they do that? Well, this is, they thought, the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 6:8. Having given the law to Israel, Moses goes on to say in Deuteronomy 6:8, *You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes*. 'Between your eyes' means the forehead. And the word 'hand' in Hebrew means the arm, not necessarily just the hand. The Pharisees took these admonitions literally. That is why they wore phylacteries, one on the forehead, the other one on the left arm, at the level of the heart.

Of course, Deuteronomy 6:8 does not say that we are to wear phylacteries. It means figuratively that we are to meditate upon the law constantly, that we are to have it in our minds just as clearly as if we had the text before our eyes. And to bind it on the arm means that we are to do it, to practice it.

These boxes provided an opportunity for the Pharisees, 'who loved to be seen by men,' to show off their piety. They enlarged them, or made them wider than other people, to show, as they supposed, that they had peculiar reverence for the law. Imagine a cube of some 5 cm on every side, projecting from the center of the forehead of a person. That would surely attract great attention!

Another thing that they enlarged were the fringes or tassels. They *lengthen the tassels of their garments* (v. 5). This refers to the loose threads which were attached to the borders of the outer garment as a fringe. The use of tassels comes also from a literal interpretation of Numbers 15:38. Let's read that passage from v. 38 to v. 40.

Numbers 15:38. "Speak to the sons of Israel, and tell them that they shall make for themselves tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and that they shall put on the tassel of each corner a cord of blue.

39 "And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the Lord, so as to do them and not follow after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you played the harlot, 40 in order that you may remember to do all My commandments, and be holy to your God.

This passage tells us that a tassel was meant to be a visual reminder of God's commandments. When a person noticed it, he was to be reminded to obey God's commandments and so to be holy to the Lord. But the text does not mention how long a tassel should be. The Pharisees decided that they will wear extra long tassels to make them more noticeable and to intimate that they were more religious.

Here we see the whole problem of reducing the spiritual life to external and superficial observances. There is nothing wrong with phylacteries and tassels. It is in fact very good to have something that reminds us to walk with the Lord. Many Christians, I am sure, use spiritual visual aids. Some people, for example, stick on their refrigerator a Bible passage on a piece of paper. Every time they open the door of the refrigerator, it is an occasion to think about the truth of that passage. The Lord Jesus does not condemn the use of tassels or phylacteries. He is making the point that it is the spirit in which a person uses them that is wrong. One must not use these things to draw people's attention to one's piety.

Inordinate pride

As further indications of the inordinate pride of the Pharisees, Jesus points out how they love being shown deference and honor.

Matthew 23:6. And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, 7 and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi.

The head table at banquets received special treatment during the meal. The most prominent seats in the synagogue faced the congregation and were reserved for the most important people. The Pharisees loved those seats - and so did the disciples. Surprised? This is not much different from James and John's request when they asked Jesus, *Grant that we may sit in Your glory, one on Your right, and one on Your left* (Mark 10:37). The Bible does say that the disciples were many times influenced by this quest for honor (Matthew 18:1-5; 19:27; 20:9-16, 20-28). In fact, the desire to be number one, to be considered great, affects everyone and it is probably the most frequently denounced desire in the Gospels. When this desire becomes religious, it is bound to be pernicious. It is exposed here by Jesus as the main source of the Pharisees' hypocrisy.

They also liked the greetings in the market places and being called 'Rabbi.' Since the religious teachers were considered by Israel to be the most valuable members of the community, the honors bestowed to them in greetings were especially warm. Particularly dear to them was the greeting 'my great one,' the literal meaning of 'Rabbi.'

Jesus denounced this craving for public respect. He said in v. 8, *But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers.* Here we have to be particularly careful in our interpretation of this sentence. Does that mean that when your child goes to school, he should not address his teacher as 'teacher' and explain that the Bible says there is only one teacher and we are all brethren? That is not the idea of course. If a person is your teacher, you can certainly address that person as 'teacher.'

Then Jesus goes on to say in v. 9, *Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven.* Again, does that mean that the next time you meet your father, you should tell him, 'I can't call you 'father' anymore. The Bible says that we must not call anyone on earth 'father' because only God in heaven is our Father.' This way of understanding Jesus' words is quite incorrect. It does not mean that we cannot use the word 'father' for a parent.

These two examples highlight a concern for status which should not characterize those who follow the Lord. In the case of the word 'father,' Jesus was talking in the context of the rabbi-disciple relationship. Disciples would call their rabbi 'father,' and the relationship could be compared to that between a father and a son. The disciples were not to revere anyone as 'father' in an honorary or reverential sense. A peril in some churches is the cult of the personality, i.e. the exaltation of ministers above the level of humanity. And here we find a warning against such practice.

Similarly, we are not to be called 'rabbi' in the sense that we are to avoid the use of titles which elevate some above others. Titles are not necessarily reprehensible, but they must be used in the

right spirit - just like the phylacteries and the tassels. God wants to build a society in which we do not exalt men. We do not put the pastor, the preacher, or the elders on a special pedestal. Yes, the Bible asks us to give honor to those who are in authority in the church and in the world, but not in such a way as to make them take the place of God. God is always to be exalted above all else and no portion of the glory should be given to man which belongs to God.

The way up is down

Jesus concludes this section with those words.

Matthew 23:11. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Christians, especially those in leadership role, must constantly remember that greatness is not found in outward appearances, in places of honor or in authority over others. True greatness comes from being a servant. Such a person places his needs last, as Jesus exemplified in His ministry and especially in His death. Being a servant does not mean having a servile position. It means having an attitude of freely attending to others' needs without expecting or demanding anything in return.

Matthew 23:12. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. Here is a fundamental spiritual principle: in the kingdom of God, the way up is down. The two future passive verbs in this verse, 'shall be humbled ... shall be exalted' refer to verdicts at the Last Judgment where we will either be promoted and called to high office or demoted and sentenced to condemnation. God will exalt the one who makes himself the servant of others. But He will make low the one who exalts himself above others.

This is illustrated by the Parable of the Pharisee and Tax-Collector which closes precisely with the same saying about exalting and humbling. The tax-collector humbled himself by his position, his gestures, his prayer, his whole attitude, and that put him in a right relation to God. But the Pharisee, who showed a proud and judgmental attitude, who exalted himself above others, was not justified. *I tell you, Jesus said, this man (the tax-collector) went down to his house justified rather than the other (the Pharisee); for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted (Luke 18:14).*