

**Matthew 23:1–12**

<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying, “The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice. <sup>4</sup> They tie up heavy burdens (hard to carry) and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. <sup>5</sup> All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. <sup>6</sup> They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, <sup>7</sup> greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation ‘Rabbi.’ <sup>8</sup> As for you, do not be called ‘Rabbi.’ You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. <sup>9</sup> Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. <sup>10</sup> Do not be called ‘Master’; you have but one master, the Messiah. <sup>11</sup> The greatest among you must be your servant. <sup>12</sup> Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

**Context**

On the 29<sup>th</sup> Sunday, we moved into a section of Matthew’s gospel that comprises a series of controversies between Jesus and the religious authorities of Jerusalem.

- “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” (asked by Pharisees and Herodians: 22:17);
- “In the resurrection, whose wife of the seven will she be?” (asked by Sadducees; v. 27);
- “which commandment in the law is the greatest” (asked by a lawyer; v.34; the core of the Gospel for the 30<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Year A)

It is the third controversy which is the context of our gospel this week. Where the lectionary draws the boundaries of a reading and where scholars mark the boundaries can be different. For purposes of studying Scripture, the boundaries of our gospel narrative is usually taken to continue and includes vv.41-46, where at the end of the questioning by the leaders of Jerusalem, Jesus asks them a question:

<sup>41</sup> While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus questioned them, <sup>42</sup> saying, “What is your opinion about the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They replied, “David’s.” <sup>43</sup> He said to them, “How, then, does David, inspired by the Spirit, call him ‘lord,’ saying: <sup>44</sup> ‘The Lord said to my lord, “Sit at my right hand until I place your enemies under your feet”’? <sup>45</sup> If David calls him ‘lord,’ how can he be his son?” <sup>46</sup> No one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. (Matthew 22:41–46)

For our gospel reading, the setting is still in the temple courtyard (see 24:1 – “Jesus left the temple area and was going away, when his disciples approached him to point out the temple buildings.”). Thus, here at the beginning of Mt 23, it is the same group of folks surrounding Jesus. Among them are Jesus’ disciples, and so Matthew mentions both groups as the audience. The content of this section suggests that it begins with the crowd as the primary audience, warning them against those they have been taught to regard as their teachers and leaders; but from v. 8 onward, and unmistakably in v. 10, the disciples are more directly in view, with the last two verses returning to what have already been familiar themes in Jesus’ teaching of his disciples (see 18:1–5; 20:25–28). Those earlier instructions and their synoptic parallels (and cf. also John 13:13–16) indicate that already among the pre-Easter disciple group the issue of status and ambition was a real one, but the wording of vv. 8–10, especially the unparalleled (in Matthew) reference by Jesus to “the Messiah” in the third person with apparent reference to himself, suggests that the teaching has been adapted to address an inappropriate concern for status and respect in the church of Matthew’s own day.

The immediate target, however, is the scribes and the Pharisees, two groups who belong naturally together and probably in fact overlapped to a large extent, most scribes being Pharisaically inclined (see on 5:20). They enjoyed popular respect and authority as the recognized experts in understanding and applying the OT law and its subsequent elaborations, and Jesus’ opening words note the authority

of their office, though in the light of what follows there is surely an element of irony in his endorsement. His criticism focuses, however, not on the role they purport to fulfill but on the way they fulfill it. The charge of inconsistency in their behavior (v. 3b) is not developed at this point, but much of what follows in vv. 13–36 will fill it out. But two more specific charges are developed, their lack of consideration for the problems their teaching generates for ordinary people (v. 4), and their concern for appearances and reputation (vv. 5–7). It is the latter which triggers Jesus' return to his disciples' preoccupation with status, which takes up the rest of the paragraph.

In the larger context of the story of Jesus, this pericope is taking place on the Tuesday of Holy Week. In other words, after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on "Palm Sunday" but before the events of Holy Thursday and beyond.

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## Commentary

<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice

Teachers normally sat to teach (see 5:1; and cf. 13:1–2; 24:3), and 26:55 will tell us that Jesus followed this custom during this 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." There is evidence of special front seats for synagogue leaders at the time of Jesus (see v. 6), but the suggestion that such a chair was literally described as the "chair of Moses" lacks clear evidence. In addition, many modern scholars wonder if the reference also points to a powerful political, religious and social position – in addition to simply teaching. Surprisingly, and in contrast both to what precedes (16:6,12) and to what immediately follows (23:4, 16–22), Jesus condemns only the practice of the scribes and Pharisees, not their teaching. There are many scholars that would see a large degree of overlap in the teachings of Jesus and the Pharisees.

"Scribes" and "Pharisees" are two distinct groups – although a scribe could be part of the Pharisee movement. Scribes were a professional class with formal training, somewhat like lawyers in contemporary American society. They were schooled in the history and tradition of the rabbis that had come before them and their interpretation/application of the Torah to current issues. Pharisees were a group within Judaism defined by strictly religious rules, composed mostly of laypersons without formal theological training. They were committed to the ideal that the holiness prescribed for the priestly class, was a goal for all people.

Not all Pharisees occupied a formal teaching role, but they no less than the scribes saw themselves as the true successors to the Mosaic tradition. On the face of it Jesus' words acknowledges the legitimate teaching authority of the scribes, but in what follows Jesus will dispute their right to that authoritative role. There are some scholars that offer v.3a as evidence both that Jesus himself conformed to the scribal tradition and also that Matthew's church still operated within the confines of rabbinic law, and was not yet in conflict with the Jewish establishment. But the words must be read in their context.

From Mt 23:13 *ff* Jesus begins the eight "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites..." in which these people are declared quite unfit to guide God's people. The rhetorical effect might be better paraphrased: "Follow their teaching if you must, *but be sure not to follow their example.*" But then, their behavior in effect annuls their "Mosaic" authority. Jesus has already clashed with these groups regarding their teaching on the sabbath (12:1–14), purity (15:1–20) and divorce (19:3–9) and in more general terms in 16:6–12.

<sup>4</sup> *They tie up heavy burdens (hard to carry) and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them.*

By saying and not doing (v. 3) they imposed rules on other people but gave them no help in coping with them. So in contrast with the “kind yoke” and “light burden” of following Jesus (11:30), those who follow the scribes and Pharisees find themselves toiling and heavily loaded (11:28) struggling under the weight of a hugely expanded legal code which enslaves rather than liberates those who follow it. The imagery of the scribes tying up these loads before placing them on people's shoulders is perhaps intended to allude to the extensive study and debate which have gone into formulating the scribal rules (e.g., 12:1–14 concerning the sabbath regulations). Yet they are not willing to help those whose troubles they have themselves caused; far from reaching out to the people, the Pharisees kept them at a distance (see 9:10–11). Contrast Jesus himself, who offers rest to the burdened (11:28–30).

<sup>5</sup> *All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. <sup>6</sup> They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, <sup>7</sup> greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation ‘Rabbi.’*

A second charge against the scribes and Pharisees is that their religious practices were designed to win the approval of other people rather than that of God. These verses strongly recall 6:1–6, 16–18, where Jesus has already spoken of the preoccupation of “the hypocrites” with gaining human applause for piety rather than pleasing God. To the examples given there, he now adds others which focus on clothing and on social status.

Phylacteries were the small leather boxes (*ṭfillîn*) containing key texts from the law which were (and are) worn on the forehead and arm in literal fulfillment of Deut 6:8; 11:18. They were presumably intended as a spiritual aid for the wearer, but they provided an opportunity for religious ostentation: either the boxes themselves or the straps by which they were fastened could be made more conspicuous by making them wide. The “fringes” are the tassels (*šîšîṭ*) on the corners of Jewish cloaks which were required by Num 15:38–39; Deut 22:12. In biblical times they were worn on the ordinary outer garment, as Jesus himself did (9:20; 14:36); it is only in subsequent Judaism that the *tallit*, the fringed shawl worn especially for prayer, has developed. The fringes too were intended as spiritual visual aids (Num 15:39), but to increase their length was an obvious way to draw people's attention to one's piety. Their length was discussed in Jesus' day, the school of Shammai favoring longer tassels than that of Hillel (*Sipre* on Num 15:37–41).

The social opportunities for enjoying people's adulation are found both in secular life (dinners and market-places) and also in worship. Recall the narrative of the best couch at dinner cf. Luke 14:7–11. Remains of early Jewish synagogue buildings include some individual stone seats which presumably stood in front of the benches where other worshipers sat and were for the leading members, among whom the scribes and Pharisees would expect to be.

<sup>8</sup> *As for you, do not be called ‘Rabbi.’ You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. <sup>9</sup> Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. <sup>10</sup> Do not be called ‘Master’; you have but one master, the Messiah. <sup>11</sup> The greatest among you must be your servant.*

<sup>12</sup> *Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*

By the second century the title “Rabbi” (etymologically “my great one”) was properly used of those who had been trained and formally recognized as scribes (like our “Reverend”), but this technical use probably came in after the time of Jesus: as applied to Jesus (26:25, 49; Mark 9:5; 10:51; 11:21; John 1:49; 3:2 etc.) it was apparently an honorary title, based on his reputation rather than his official status.

In contrast with the scribes' love of human approbation, Jesus calls on those who follow him to avoid honorific titles. Verses 8–10, while taking up the theme of the scribes' craving for public respect, are

clearly aimed primarily at Jesus' own disciples (the "scribes" of the kingdom of heaven, 13:52), those for whom he ("the Messiah," v. 10) is the one true teacher and leader. They highlight a concern for status which, while taken for granted in secular society (20:25) ought not to characterize those who follow Jesus (20:26). Matthew's inclusion of this warning in his gospel testifies to the fact that the problem had not gone away, as indeed it still has not among Christians today. The three titles singled out were probably all being used in Matthew's church. It is not difficult for a modern reader to think of similar honorifics in use today, and to discern behind the titles an excessive deference to academic or ecclesiastical qualifications.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus himself is addressed as "Teacher" only by outsiders, never by his disciples, and the actual Hebrew term "Rabbi" is heard only from the lips of Judas after his apostasy (26:25, 49). But the title is not in itself objectionable, since it is here forbidden not for Jesus himself but for his disciples, and the reason for the ban is to avoid confusion with the only true "teacher" they have, Jesus himself. To recognize him as such is not false adulation but sober fact, but not even the most prominent of his followers is to be placed alongside him in this position of authority. Cf. the comment in 7:28–29 on the unique authority of Jesus the teacher in contrast with "their scribes" who are here under the spotlight. If anyone is entitled to "sit on Moses' chair," it is Jesus.

The statement that "you are all brothers" might seem more appropriate after the next verse; here we might have expected "fellow-disciples" as the correlative to "teacher." But "brothers" is apparently for Jesus a way of expressing *equality*; it is not for one brother to be set above the others. This usage deserves to be noticed by those who value the biblical view of disciples as brothers and sisters: the term rules out differences of status, for the discourse of Mt 18 (which also made prominent use of the term "brother") has cast us all together in the role of "little ones."

The introduction of familial terminology in "you are all brothers" now leads into another family title, which is also open to abuse: "father." It is found in the OT as a term of respect, usually applied to someone older and/or socially superior to the speaker (e.g. 1 Sam 24:11; 2 Kgs 2:12; 5:13; 6:21). Its use in Judaism for an authoritative teacher is illustrated by the title of the mishnaic tractate *'Abot*, "The Fathers," a collection of sayings of revered teachers past and present. But Jesus' special emphasis on the disciple's relationship with God as the one "heavenly Father" (especially prominent in the Sermon on the Mount) means that it should no longer be thoughtlessly used of other people—except of course in its literal sense. Paul will speak of his evangelistic role as that of a "father" to those whom he has brought to faith (1 Cor 4:15; cf. Phm 10), but there is no NT record of him or any other Christian leader being *addressed* as "father."

The third title, "instructor," occurs only here in the NT, nor is it found in the LXX. Its original sense was "leader" or "guide," one who shows the way, but it came to be more commonly used for teachers, those who show the way intellectually or spiritually. It may therefore be a virtual synonym of "teacher" in v. 8; perhaps our term "mentor" might convey the same sense. As in v. 8, Jesus is the only person who truly fulfills that role for his followers.

It is surprising that Matthew here portrays Jesus as using "the Messiah" as a third-person title (Mark 9:41 is the only other synoptic example), especially as he has forbidden his disciples to use that term to describe him (16:20) and has previously carefully avoided doing so himself. His disciples were, of course, well aware by now that Jesus did see his mission in messianic terms, and would have understood him here to be speaking of himself, as in v. 8. But the audience is still, according to v. 1, the general public as well as his disciples. We noted above, however, that from v. 8 the primary audience is clearly Jesus' disciples, and in such a context Matthew has not found the title inappropriate, perhaps because the wording does not actually say that "the Messiah" is Jesus, however

obvious this must have been to his disciples at the time, as it would be also to Matthew's Christian readers.

Further sayings about status, already familiar from Jesus' teaching in 18:1–5 and 20:26–27, complete the paragraph. Prov 29:23 for an aphorism similar to v. 12. Such sayings occur at several places in the synoptic tradition, v. 12 being closely paralleled twice in Luke in different contexts (Luke 14:11; 18:14). Like "The first will be last and the last first" (19:30; 20:16) these sayings encapsulate Jesus' repeated assault on pomp and self-importance, and reinforce the portrait of Jesus' disciples as a community of "little ones" which is important to Matthew.

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## Notes

**Matthew 23:2 the chair of Moses:** The earliest known use of "chair of Moses" apparently to describe a literal seat is in the later rabbinic work *Pesiq. Rab Kah. 7b*, but the context does not make it clear that a synagogue seat is being referred to. For the archeological evidence see L. Y. Rahmani, *IEJ* 40 (1990) 192–214; Other scholars and archeologist argue that in some synagogues a "chair of Moses" was used to support the Torah scroll, but finds no evidence that the term was used for a teacher's chair.

**Matthew 23:3 they tell you:** Mark Allen Powell argues that what the scribes "tell" (Matthew does not say "teach") is not their teaching but simply the law of Moses which they are authorized to read to what is a largely illiterate populace. In that case, there is no endorsement of scribal *teaching* here at all. As tempting as that position is, one must note that a dichotomy between words and deeds is foreign to ancient Jewish culture. It is more plausible that scribal *teaching* is displayed within their *ἔργα*, "deeds" (better than "example")

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