

True Greatness in Pointed Contrast (Mat.23.1-12)

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Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, ³ so practice and observe whatever they tell you- but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice. ⁴ 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. ⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, ⁶ and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues ⁷ and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. ⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. ¹⁰ Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. ¹¹ The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Mat. 23.1-12).

Introduction

As we move into chapter 23 of Matthew, it is evident that the entire chapter records a scathing denunciation of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. A quick survey of the speech yields this outline:

Introduction to the speech, 1-12

Woes to the Pharisees, 13-36

Lament over Jerusalem, 37-39

In the opening to the great speech against the religious authorities (23.1-2), and in their hearing, no doubt, Jesus speaks to the crowds and His disciples (Mat. 23.1, **Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples**). He speaks here about "True Greatness in Pointed Contrast." He says to them "You have true greatness if you live in pointed contrast to the pious-sounding leaders." Two things surface in this text: 1) you have true greatness if you learn from the Pharisees and scribes. 2) You have true greatness if you humble yourself as a servant. We can outline the message on this text by stating these two conditionals as imperatives or duties: learn all you can from the Pharisees, and humble yourselves as servants. True greatness has two components: learning and serving.

1A. The learning component in true greatness

Learn all you can from the Pharisees. It is surprising to hear the Lord say, **The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, ³ so practice and observe whatever they tell you** (23.2). We can easily picture these Jewish leaders taking the place of Moses and pontificating, and we probably think that the next thing Jesus would say is, "So do *not* practice and observe *anything* they tell you." Instead, He begins with the positive and affirms a basic duty to put what the Pharisees teach into practice. Thus, we respond with "Say what? Did I hear the Lord correctly?" Well, you did hear Him correctly. What helps is to see how the Lord puts this basic duty into perspective and then to see how He qualifies it.

1B. Note how the Lord puts this duty into perspective

He begins His denunciation of the Pharisees with this perspective on their work: no matter how bad the teachers may be, still, learn all you can from them. Without compromising His exhortation that His disciples distance themselves from Pharisaic practice, Jesus encourages His listeners to learn from them.

Jesus sets before us the way to true greatness. In the first place, it involves learning. That is patently clear, but He gives this point to us in a somewhat ambiguous exhortation **so practice and**

observe whatever they tell you- but not what they do (v. 3). Interestingly, Jesus says, “do what they say but not what they do.” He seems to be telling the people and His disciples to *follow their teachings*, to listen to them and hear them in the sense of “*harken*” to them or obey them. He exhorts His hearers to observe whatever they teach and practice whatever they tell you, but when it comes to the matter of practical living, do not follow their example. What shall we make of this? Are they accurate teachers and enforcers of the things of God who fail miserably in their actions? Is their talk right on, but their walk all wrong? We definitely need some perspective to apply to the words of Jesus here. For example, we have all heard about “blind leaders of the blind.” This phrase applies to these religious authorities, as we see later in this account: ¹⁶ **“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’”** ¹⁷ **You blind fools!** (Vs. 16-17a). Here are some other indications that clarify the “whatsoever” of verse 3:

Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mat. 16.12)...But Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God (Mat. 22.29).

The authority of their position demands that the covenant people give a hearing to all that they say; there must be faithful and diligent attendance to the instruction that the successors of Moses give. The scribes are the expounders of the Law and the Pharisees are the promoters of the tradition that the scribes exposit. However, Jesus made it clear that many of their teachings were wrong and in need of much correction. There is a principle here to the effect that we are to follow them “as they follow the Lord.” We have a form of metaphor in this “whatsoever.” It is like a wisdom saying that has the design of cautioning us to avoid the abuse of authority, whether we are the teacher or student. Wisdom sayings demand studious meditation to gain from them.

Similarly, pastoral instruction today is fallible, but this is the God-ordained means for the spread of His word. The Lord’s disciples are to follow all that the pastor teaches, give a good hearing but do so with critical awareness that pastors are fallible and the teachings may stand in need of correction. This calls upon all hearers of the word to give due diligence to the study of the word. We need to keep this in balance. On one hand, this does not mean that we simply throw off pastoral instruction with little respect for it. Criticism should be respectful, engaging, dialoguing, in a way that uses the pastor as a resource; this makes the pastor all the more accountable for accurate handling of the word. On the other hand, you should test what you hear and not simply take the lazy way out to absorb all the pastor says as sufficient and needing no examination on your part.

2B. Note how the Lord qualifies the basic duty of learning

The significant qualification is that we are to avoid their practice: **practice and observe whatever they tell you- but not what they do** (23.3). There is learning; that is what a disciple is in short, a learner. However, learning for Christians is learning geared to doing.

Jesus unpacks what we are not to do in a general way and what not to do in a particular way, giving reasons or explanations for both.

1) What not to do in general and why (23.4-7)

The problem of these leaders in Israel is that they characteristically did not practice what they preached. Again, we hear Jesus stress the practical “lived life” of disciples. Therefore, Jesus tells His disciples to avoid following Pharisaic practice in general for two fundamental reasons.

a) On one hand, they create heavy burdens for others to carry, but they make no practical application of what they teach in their own lives. A deep fault of the Pharisees is that they gleefully put heavy burdens on the backs of other people; they did not put these yokes on their own backs. Jesus tells us that **they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger** (v. 4). They refused to lift even a finger to carry the law load they devised, or to help others with it. What

does our Lord have in mind in this criticism? Is He not referring to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees that came out in the way they circumvented the Law of God and made it void by their traditions? In other words, they had many ways to avoid keeping their own rules that they put forth as the teachings of Moses. A case in point is how they reconstructed the fifth commandment in relation to care for a needy parent:

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ² "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat." ³ He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' ⁵ But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God,' ⁶ he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. ⁷ You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ⁸ "'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁹ in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'" (Mat. 15.1-9).

How one speaks to father or mother is highly significant according to Jesus, **For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die'** (v. 4). How you talk to your mother, and how you talk to your father is so important that if you speak harshly and disrespectfully to them you merit death. That says it all. Thus, the commandment of God is clear, pointed, and demanding. However, the Pharisees had a way of speaking to father or mother in need. They could evade the Law by telling the parent that their money is devoted to God. That gave them cover to do slip out of the responsibility to extend them any practical care. The Pharisees were a heartless bunch of hypocrites.

They create heavy burdens and place them on the shoulders of the people of God. Jesus spoke about this yoke of the Pharisees by implication: ²⁹ **Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.** ³⁰ **For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."** (Mat. 11.29-30). Reference here is to the yoke of commandment keeping that Jesus speaks of as "my yoke" with implied contrast to the yoke of commandment keeping created by the Pharisaic tradition. Their yoke was heavy, difficult, and distressful; they offered no help to the people on whom they put their distressing yoke.

b) On the other hand, they do things for show, for their own glory. ⁵ **They do all their deeds to be seen by others.** They want the attention, notice, and compliments of others. That is what they love, desire, and seek. It comes to expression in the use they make of

Phylacteries
Tassels
Places of honor
Best seats
Greetings
Titles

They are ostentatious (they wear their religion on their shirtsleeves) even with respect to the special act of memorization and meditation on Scripture: **For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long** (v. 5b). The phylacteries are the pouches or receptacles in which God's people put passages from the Law. It was a duty common to all Israelites that went along with the commandment to love God by means of the Ten Commandments:

⁴ **Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.** ⁵ **You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.** ⁶ **And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.** ⁷ **You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.** ⁸ **You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.** ⁹ **You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates** (Deut. 6.4-9).

Tassels were also reminders of God's Law:

³⁸ "Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner. ³⁹ And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to where after. ⁴⁰ So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. ⁴¹ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the LORD your God" (Num. 1.38-41).

It is at the very heart of OT faith and love that the Pharisees sought the honor of men without hearts for God. Thus, they made their phylacteries extra wide and their tassels extra long. It was for all to see and admire; they sought the reward of human praise at the expense of the very core of pure religion.

Accordingly, they love places of honor at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, complimentary greetings in public, and titles of esteem: **they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues** ⁷ and **greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others** (Mat. 23.6-7).

2) What not to do in particular and why (23.8-10)

There are specific things to avoid in the bad example of the Pharisees. Jesus challenges His hearers along the line of some negative details. Earlier, Jesus made it clear that His disciples are not to follow the bad example in general (per the summary 23.1-7), now (23.8-10) He gives specific details that are part of this duty to avoid Phariseeism. . ⁸ **But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.** ⁹ **And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.** ¹⁰ **Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.** There are three specifics to avoid: receiving the title of rabbi, receiving the title of father, and receiving the title of instructor. Again, Jesus intends a certain amount of ambiguity to veil the truth to the extent that finding clarity will demand earnest reflection and a seeking faith (a wisdom saying to provoke thought).

Does this mean that we should not refer to Christian ministers as "father"? Does it mean that Christians should not use the titles rabbi (special teacher?) and instructor (regular teacher?)? If we want to oppose the use of father for catholic priests, then how do we square doing this with the way elders are fathers in the faith (1 Cor. 4.15; 1 Jn. 2.13-14)? Again, there is ambiguity in our Lord's teaching to call us to meditate on the use of titles. The use of these titles is not wrong, as a bare fact. What is wrong is the motivation behind the use and the way Pharisees use these titles to promote their egos. It is one thing to show respect by these terms and for leaders to receive respect by them. It is totally another thing to love these terms (father, teacher, rabbi, elder, and pastor) because they signal greatness before men. Again, Jesus calls us to examine our motives. Metaphorically, by the device of ambiguity, if you can only misuse these titles for your own glory, then do not use them at all! That is how important the matter of right motivation is with regard to seeking the applause and praise of men.

Let us apply the principle here to the role of a pastor-teacher. I value the title of pastor; it is endearing to me. When you address me as pastor, it calls forth from me greater desire to *serve* you; that is my take on how this title has a proper place in a literal sense; it is not allowed in a metaphorical sense that stresses all the baggage of self-seeking, selfishness, egoism, hypocrisy, display, and ostentation. Some of you may think of me as a father in the church (1 Jn. 2.13-14); some may think of me as a spiritual father (1 Cor. 4.15). This is the right spirit in the use of such titles as father and pastor-teacher. What is wrong with Rome's use of father for popes and priests? What is wrong is the authority structure, the hierarchy, that displaces the supremacy of Scripture and thus of Christ as the teacher, and the Father as the only father to the church family. When the church demotes the Father's word and the Messiah's teaching, then the titles that reflect teaching authority are illegitimate!

2A. The serving component of true greatness

Having hammered the false way to greatness in the process of stressing the importance of practical learning, Jesus now clarifies the “learning for living” component of true greatness. Jesus says, “Humble yourselves as servants” (take the posture of a humble servant).

The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Mat. 23.11-12).

This is not the first time that our Lord insists on humility from His people. He emphasizes that we take the posture of humility before God. Surely, that is at the bottom of the general requirement that each disciple **humbles himself** (23.12b). To enter the kingdom one must humble himself as a child (Mat. 18.3), which involves taking the posture of a prodigal and saying, **Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son** (Lk. 15. 21).

However, and this is radically important, for this humility to be genuine, we must take the humble posture of a *servant to others*; we must become the *servant of others*. We must place ourselves in the service of others. It is eminently practical and down to earth, as always in the teaching of Christ. Not only is learning for practical doing, but the practical doing has the doing of practical good deeds in the service of others at its core.

Granted, Jesus exhorts to something quite difficult in many ways. Therefore, He encourages us to take up this duty by giving a warning followed by a promise. **Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Mat. 23.12)**. If you exalt self, then God will humble you. If you humble your “self,” then God will exalt you. Of course, He will fulfill His word in His way and time for your good and His glory. In the Lord’s service, we must look away from our own families, our own possessions and ourselves (not to the neglect of good stewardship of our own things, true, but *not to neglect serving others*; the balance required allows for Phariseeism and gives opportunity for serving and true greatness). We must say to one another, “I am at your service, how can I help you? What can *I* do for you? What can *I do* for you? What can *I do* for *you*?”

Thus, the way up the ladder to greatness is down, down on your knees in humble acknowledgment of your sins and comparative smallness before the Lord Jesus Christ. The way to true greatness is the way of a servant. That is the title par excellence to have in your heart, to seek and desire, and to display in your relationship to other people. Remember, it is not wrong that people see you do good deeds in practical acts of service for the good of others:

Mat. 6.1: Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

Mat. 5.16: In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Of course, Jesus is our great example of humble service and true greatness. One of His important titles is that of a servant; that is why the Son of man came into this world: to serve and give His life a ransom for His covenant people (**even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many, Mat. 20.28**). His serving is our great example in contrast to both Jewish leaders here and to Gentiles in an earlier context, **“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mat. 20.25-28)**. Jesus shows us that a “superior” may become an “inferior” for a time of service; to do this is humbling but the path of greatness.

Applications

- 1) The most important attitude in all our actions

Again, Jesus points the way to God. It is the way of self-denial. It is the way of humble acknowledgment of our comparative smallness before God and other people. Even the title we take as a son or daughter, we must take with an acute sense of our spiritual poverty. We claim the title of children of God but with frank admittance of our unworthiness. Thus, the predominant attitude in all the titles: teacher, instructor, father (parent in the home or elder in the church) is the deep inner sense of unworthiness acknowledged in prayer to the Lord. We must even say this about being brothers and sisters. We express our unworthiness at the point where we claim membership in the family of God in light of the astounding fact that we have Christ as our brother!

2) The most important action in all our attitudes

Learning is critical and it is for living with humility before Jesus-Messiah. However, the most important act that expresses genuine humility is that act of placing ourselves in the service of others. This act (not sentiment, not talk, not good intention) is the most important way for us to follow in the steps of Christ and to find true greatness in His kingdom.

In pointed contrast, then, help others with their burdens without adding to the burdens. Guard your motives to avoid show and self-glory. Pray like the Psalmist in 115.1-2, **Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!** Guard your hearts as to what you love, seek and desire from other people with respect to your learning of Scripture. Be on guard against seeking honor in little things like where you sit at meals, the greetings you expect (as special acknowledgments) and titles you bear (together: acknowledge so and so as such and such; if you think this way, you are a such and such that we best not state). In summary, set your heart on following the example of Christ in order to practice Christ-like serving.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God in humble worship acknowledging our unworthiness to receive the titles of sons and daughters of the Father in heaven, and the titles of brothers and sisters of the Messiah at the Father's right hand. May the Holy Spirit awaken us to the importance that our risen Lord places on family relationships in His kingdom. May we therefore learn more and more how to love one another in practical, down to earth, serving, just as Jesus came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. To Him be all glory now and forevermore, amen.