

## Matthew 23:1-12 The Practices of Jewish Leadership

We start a new section this morning, Matthew chapter 23 verse 1-12. Matthew is divided up into five sections. We are in the third section, the longest section, chapters 5 through 25 The Public Ministry of Christ. We are in the last three chapters of this section, entitled The Prophecies of the End Times. The sermon on judgment. The actual prophecies themselves are in judgment form, the meat of which is in chapter 24. But in chapter 23 Jesus warns them, there is a warning here, there is a warning of judgment which is to come in preparation for His coming.

We have, The Circumstances. **Then Jesus spoke to the crowds, and to His disciples.** Page 3 of your study guide, it continues, The Corrupt Authority. He spoke, **Saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees sat down upon the seat of Moses. Therefore all things whatever they should tell you to observe, observe and do. But do not do according to their works, for they say and do not do. For they are binding heavy and hard to carry burdens, and they are laying them upon the shoulders of men, but they do not desire to move them with their finger. But they do all their works for to be seen by men. And they make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. And they love the first place in the suppers, and the first seats in the synagogues. And the greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' But you should not be called Rabbi, for one is your Leader, the Christ, and all of you are brothers. And you should not call anyone your father upon the earth, for One is your Father, the One in Heaven. Neither should you be called leaders, for One is your Leader, and that is Christ."** Then the last section of verses 11 and 12, The Correct Function. **But the greater of you shall be your servant. And whoever will exalt himself shall be humbled, and whoever will humble himself shall be exalted.** Hard words coming from the Lord getting ready for His coming upon the earth.

Notice, The Circumstances in verse 1 on page 2, at the bottom of page 2. **Then Jesus spoke to the crowds, and to His disciples.** So this obviously is not the leaders. You remember they left off from him at the end of chapter 22, daring not to ask Him any more questions. The multitudes of people were amazed at what He had to say according to Mark's gospel. The people wanted to hear more, the common people of the streets, the crowds, the multitudes. So Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, two groups staying to listen to Jesus, wanting to know what He had to say.

The first thing Jesus deals with in verses 2-4, The Corrupt Authority, page 3 in your study guide. **He spoke (to the crowds and to His disciples) saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees sat down upon the seat of Moses."** Now, *the seat of Moses* was a place of authority. They have even found some actual stones seats in synagogues that were named after the seat of Moses. Whenever a teacher wanted to teach the teachings of Moses he would sit in this chair and that was the chair of authority, the position of authority. So it says, **The scribes and Pharisees sat down upon the seat of Moses,** a position of authority.

**Therefore, in light of this, verse 3, all things whatever they should tell you to observe, observe and do. But do not do according to their works, for they say and do not do.** So you

are to obey what they tell you that Moses taught, but you are not to obey what they do, because they do not do what Moses says. Do not follow people. Follow the Word of God. Whatever the Word of God says, that is God's Word to you, not what a human being does or says.

Example of this in verse 4, **For they are binding heavy and hard to carry burdens and they are laying them upon the shoulders of men, but they do not desire to move them with their finger.** So the stress placed upon the people when their religious leaders sit in positions of authority and minister the laws and rules and regulations. Not just of Moses but of their own rules, burdening people down to live a certain way according to the rules. But He is pointing out that they do not go by the rules. They just make the rules. They just enforce the rules. But they sit in the position of authority. So again, do not follow the people, follow what God's Word says to do. That is always the golden rule: do not follow people, follow what God's Word says.

Then there is The Corrupt Motive in verses 5 through 7. **But they do all their works to be seen by men.** That is their motive, what they look like, and make sure people see them in positions of authority and see them living their life in this ostentatious way. **For they do all their works for to be seen by men. And they make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments.** The word *phylactery* comes from the Greek word **φυλακτήριον** (phulaktērion) and it means *containment, a box*, from **φυλάσσω** (phulassō) that means *to hem in, hedge in*. So something that is hedged in like a box or a container, **φυλακτήριον** (phulaktērion). These phylacteries were boxes that people put on their foreheads they put on their left arms. And you might have seen them. The Orthodox Jews still do that today during morning prayers, they wear their phylacteries, these boxes that are strapped to their head. The boxes hang down on their forehead and phylacteries on their left arm, as God commanded them to remember. And this is their way of remembering, on the left arm because it is closest to the heart. But they are doing this in obedience to the Lord.

God said in Exodus chapter 13 verse 9, **And it shall be for a sign to you upon your hand, and for a memorial between your eyes, that the LORD's law may be in your mouth: for with a strong hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt.**

Exodus chapter 13 verse 16, **And it shall be for a token your hand, and for frontlets between your eyes: for by strength of hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt.**

Then again in Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 8, **And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.**

And again, Deuteronomy [chapter] 11 verse 18, **Therefore shall you lay up My words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes.**

And so the Jews would make these boxes. The boxes contained three and most of the time four compartments and scrolls of the law were put in these compartments, little tiny scrolls and put in these boxes and the boxes on their forehead were a reminder to them of God's law, and God's command. But what the Pharisees and scribes would do is they would enlarge the phylacteries. They would make them bigger. You have an apple crate up there so that people can see how big

a phylactery they have. To be seen of men is the motive and the bigger the phylactery the more spiritual you are presenting yourself to be.

**And enlarge the borders of their garments**, at the end of verse 5. The Lord told them in Numbers chapter 15 verses 37 to 41, **And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribbon of blue. And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the LORD, and do them; and that you seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you used to go a whoring. That you may remember, and do all My commandments, and be holy unto your God. I am the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD your God."** So He says, put a fringe, hem a fringe on the bottom of your garments. And they would put tassels on these fringes, they are called *tzitzits* nowadays. So if you see an Orthodox Jew with a hem, a fringe going along the border of the bottom of the garment with these tassels hanging down, that is what they are doing. They are taking what God says literally and they are making physical objects to remind them of God's law.

It became such a mainstay and importance to the Jewish people that they believed if you touched the hem of an anointed Rabbi, an anointed teacher, that you could be healed of any diseases you might have. It is interesting because in Matthew chapter 9 verse 20 you remember the woman who was hemorrhaging for twelve years. And she said to herself in Matthew 9:21, **For she said within herself, "If I may but touch his garment, I shall be whole."** So she believed coming behind them and touching the hem of His garment that she would be healed, and of course she was.

But what the scribes and Pharisees would do is they would enlarge these borders. They just did not want a ribbon going down through, they wanted it large so that everybody could see these borders and large tassels, *tzitzits*. And these tassels would draw attention to themselves. And Jesus said, "Do not be like them to be seen of men." That is their motive. It is a thread that goes through this entire section that helps us understand some of the harder things that we are going to study.

Verse 6, **And they love the first places in the suppers, and the first seats in the synagogues.** Of course, at the suppers they would recline at table. And the scribes and Pharisees wanted to be closest to the host, closest to the head of the table, the place of importance. And they wanted **the first seats in the synagogues.** First seats does not mean the first one available. These are the high-backed chairs up front facing the crowds. These are called the first seats, the chief seats where people of importance would sit. That is what they wanted. You see churches doing that today, where there are chairs decorated in a certain way to attract attention and to proclaim the importance of the person that is sitting in these chairs. And those chairs will be facing the group, facing the congregation, so that people can see them. That is what they wanted. They wanted to be seen by men. **So they love the first places in the suppers and the first seats in the synagogues.**

And thirdly, **And the greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, "Rabbi, Rabbi."** So they would wear these garments - the phylacteries, the garments with the large borders on them - and they would purposely, with the wrong motive, walk through the marketplace so that people could greet them with the term *Rabbi, Rabbi*. They loved to be called Rabbi. *Rabbi* is equivalent to our *doctor*, a doctor of law.

Verses 8 to 10, the third thing, The Corrupt Character. **But you should not be called Rabbi, for one is your Leader**, and translations have a different word there. Some translations have the word *Master*, some translations have the word *Teacher*, but in the Textus Receptus that we are using, **for one is your Leader, that is the Christ, and all of you are brothers**. So now we have a problem, people calling themselves titles and taking positions of importance, at least in the sight of the people. Christ is the only leader we have. He says, all of you are brothers.

But we have a problem. Paul called himself an *apostle*. He named himself an apostle. Peter called himself an *elder*. Paul told Timothy in I Timothy chapter 3 what the requirements are for those who are bishops. Peter in I Peter 5 called the under shepherds, shepherds feeding the flock of God. So if we are not supposed to call people by special names then why did the early church name people? Well you have one set where the Lord is speaking about status and position and ego. And we get a lot of that today with people who are seeking out their spiritual gift and then walking around telling people what their spiritual gift is, and surprised when people do not accept it or are confused by it.

Paul said in I Corinthians chapter 12 that there is a diversity of ministries but there is one and the same Spirit that works all the ministries. So there is only one Spirit that ministers but through various functions within the body of Christ. So there are different functions, but one Spirit. Those functions are recognized but not for the purpose of promoting a person to prominence.

**And you should not call anyone your father upon the earth, for One is your father, the One in heaven.** That is a blatant teaching against some of the practices in both Protestant and Catholic churches today, calling people *father*. Jesus said, "Do not call anyone *father* as a title." There is only one Father, you have a Father in Heaven. Again, speaking to positions of authority, people who want to be prominent.

Interesting that Paul said in I Corinthians chapter 4 verse 15, **For though you have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you have not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have fathered you, begotten you through the gospel.** He is showing a function. You came to know Christ through me, but there is only one Father and that is in heaven. I was the vessel that God fathered you through the gospel. Again, the emphasis is on who our father is. The Bible says that He is the Father of all living spirits, the one in heaven.

**Neither should you be called leaders, verse 10, for One is your Leader, and that is the Christ.** Again, Christ is the leader. He is the head of the church. He is the one we all answer to. He is the one we all receive from by way of ministry. It is not people. God's Spirit does not minister in order to set up people as places of prominence and to make them a show.

Lastly, verses 11 and 12, The Correct Function. We have had The Corrupt Motive, we have had The Corrupt Authority, we have had The Corrupt Character, now we have The Correct Function. **But the greater of you shall be your servant.** The greatest of all is a willing servant.

I Peter chapter 5 verses [1 through] 3, Peter said, **The elders which are among you I encourage you, I who am also an elder.** See, here he is calling the elders out in the church, the leaders of the church and claiming himself to be an elder. This is in function in the body of Christ, not position. **I who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed.** He says to the elders, **Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint** (that is, *not by forcefulness*) **but do it willingly; not for greedy gain, which is money, but of a ready mind. Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but by being examples to the flock.** So do not look for your own advantage. Do not look out for what is going to benefit yourself but be examples to the flock. Do it with the right motive. Do it with the right authority. Feed the flock of God that is among you.

Then in verse 12, **And whoever will exalt himself shall be humbled, and whoever will humble himself shall be exalted.** This is a promise. If you belong to Christ and you want to be a servant, you want to serve Him, if you exalt yourself God is going to humble you. But if you humble yourself, you shall be exalted.

The word *humble*, **ταπεινός** (tapeinos) means *to be brought low, to be made low*. Or to put it in Biblical terms, is to be brought to a place of realizing one's need for Christ.

But he says, **Whosoever will exalt himself shall be humbled.** Now this is a promise. In I Peter chapter 5 verse 6, we just read I Peter chapter 5 verses 1 to 3, but in I Peter chapter 5 verse 6 in still speaking to his shepherds, **Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in time.** I Peter 5:6.

Interesting that in the English texts it says *humble yourselves*, but in the Greek text from which the English comes from, it is a passive voice, which means the humbling is coming from outside of you. The humbling is coming from someone else, something else. So instead of *humble yourselves*, the literal translation is, *be humbled*. But notice this, **Be humbled under the mighty hand of God.** So what he is saying is that God's mighty hand - if you are not humbling yourself you try to make more out of yourself at the Lord's expense and rip off God's people, is that God hand is going to come down upon you. Under the mighty hand of God He is going to bring you low, bring you down to a position where you realize your need for Christ.

**Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, in order that he may exalt you in due time.** There is a due time when we will be exalted when Christ comes but it is not here. And so be humbled, submit to God's humbling process.

**And whosoever will exalt himself, verse 12, shall be humbled, and whoever will humble himself, that is, submit to God's humbling process, shall be exalted.** Hard words. This is to the common people. The Lord is telling them just because someone sits in a place of

authority, it does not mean that you do everything they tell you to do. Do what God's Word tells you to do. And if they are correctly and rightly ministering God's Word, then follow.

Paul said in I Thessalonians chapter 5 verses 12- 13, **We encourage you, brothers, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and who admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves.** Esteem them who labor amongst you, who are the servants who take the low road, the humble road. Who are not in it for themselves, either by reputation or position, but esteem them very highly. So he is saying that there should be a difference in function within the body of Christ and those functions should be recognized as being what God's Spirit is doing. But as far as someone looking for a position or looking for prominence in the sight of people, who want to receive accolades from people, watch out for them. There are many. They are all over the place.

Okay, let's close with prayer.