

## 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.



*Woe unto You, Scribes and Pharisees (Malheur à vous, scribes et pharisiens) James Tissot, 1886-1894, Brooklyn Museum, PD-US*

## 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

In Matthew’s timeline it is (still) Tuesday of Holy Week and Jesus is still in Temple precincts. The audience continues to be the crowds gathered around the man from Galilee, but the conversation will soon pivot to the disciples - in each case a critique and warning. Jesus’ critique of the scribes and Pharisees will have three elements

- They teach but they don’t practice what they preach;
- They burden others while failing to act themselves; and
- They act for the wrong reasons: to make an impression on others.

<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. There are scholars that suggests that the word ἐκάθισαν (ekathisan) should be read as “have seated themselves” meaning that they have “assumed to themselves the duties of this office” with the suggestion of bit of usurping or self-appointment. But the question that lingers is that while Moses was not questioned as to his authority to interpret the Law given, by Jesus’ time there was no clear legacy or magisterium of authoritative interpretation. In fact, differing rabbinic leaders had different views on a whole range of matters.

In addition, many modern scholars wonder if the reference to the “chair of Moses” 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 – but together they represented the leadership of Matthew’s time - although not necessarily Jesus’ time. 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* (the verses immediately following our gospel) 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. [R.T. France, 2007,859-861]

<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.*

In general, the Pharisees encouraged the people as a whole to live out their vocation to be a priestly nation (Ex 19:6). This was especially important given the destruction of the Temple and end of the role of the priests (all this in Matthew’s time). This meant applying the priestly purity laws to the people as a whole. It was particularly onerous. But the additional criticism is that they did not practice what they preach (v. 3). The scribes and Pharisees imposed rules on other people but gave them no help in understanding the deeper meaning within the rules. So in contrast with the “gentle yoke” and “light

burden” of following Jesus, those who follow the scribes and Pharisees find themselves burdened, struggling under the weight of an arcane and complex legal code. Those who followed Jesus did not necessarily have a less stringent path, but it was oriented in a different direction.

At this point one needs to remember the refrain from Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” - “*You have heard it said, but I say to you...*” From that “launch” of his public ministry, Jesus has been working to have people understand the heart of the law and commandments and not just the rote following of rules and regulations - and in many cases to understand rightly, the real meaning and intent of the Law and commandments.

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). [R.T. France, 2007, 861]

<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.’*

This second charge levied against the scribes and Pharisees addressed some degree of vainglory. Jesus judges that their religious practices were designed to win the approval of other people rather than that of God. These verses strongly echoes Matthew 6, where Jesus has already spoken of their absorption and focus in gaining human approbation for piety rather than God’s approval - in this matter they are hypocrites. There is a contrast in their “performance.” One part is for the masses of people in their “accessories” in dress (phylacteries and tassels). Another part is aimed at their peers and those who can confer higher social status. Combined this performance extended into worship.

Scholars who hold that Matthew is also commenting on the circumstances faced by his community of Christians, note that post the 70 AD-destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Roman army, the emerging rabbinic leadership emphasized eternal signs of piety, not because they were hypocrites interested in externals, but because it served as distinctive markers for the holy people of God in a pluralistic society. While this is perhaps a minority view, it is still a pathway for what begins as a worthy endeavor (distinctive markers) soon becomes the very problem that the verses describe as hypocritical.

The Lukan narrative of people clamoring for “higher” seats at the dinner gathering is perhaps also reflected in the archaeological recovering of early Jewish synagogues which seems to have individual places of seating apart from the benches for the people.

Phylacteries were the small leather boxes (*ṭfillin*) 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 (*šīšīt*) 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 *ṭallit*, 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). [R.T. France, 2007, 861]

<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 for those who had been trained and formally recognized as scribes (like our Catholic “Reverend”), but this technical use probably came in after the time of Jesus. In Jesus’ time it is thought to be an honorary title, based on the public’s perception of his ministry rather than his formal training and position.

Having set the stage, Jesus now turns to his disciples and admonishes them to avoid honorific titles. Could this be a simple warning or is Jesus addressing a problem already present among his disciples? In any case, the admonition makes clear that concern for status, a given in secular society, is not to be a factor among those who would call themselves followers and disciples of Jesus. Another scholarly view is that Matthew is using this incident to point out that the problem still exists in his time, some 40 years after the death of Christ. 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 the same verse where Jesus says: “*You have but one teacher*” rather than students or disciples, Jesus reminds them they are all *brothers*. The point is not their training or results, but that what binds them together is not the Law, but it is the Law Giver. As a consequence, they are not to seek differences of status, but rather to act as brothers - or perhaps as “little ones.” (cf. Mt 18).

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. [R.T. France, 2007, 863]

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. 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.”

Which raises the question of the Catholic use of the term “father” for ordained men. The Catholic Church refers to priests as “father” based on the understanding of their role as spiritual fathers in the Christian community. This practice finds its roots in the New Testament, where St. Paul refers to himself as a spiritual father to the early Christian communities he founded (1 Corinthians 4:15).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains the use of the title “father” for priests in paragraph 1540, which states: “The apostolic tradition of the Church has recognized men who are chosen for the ministerial priesthood to be configured to Christ the Priest in such a way that they can act in the person of Christ the Head. Because of this sacramental configuration, priests are called to exercise a spiritual paternity towards the faithful, leading them to spiritual birth and growth in Christ.” This spiritual

paternity is understood to be a participation in the fatherhood of God, who is the ultimate source of all fatherhood. By using the title "father," the Church acknowledges the priest's role as a spiritual guide, teacher, and caregiver, who nourishes and nurtures the faith of the faithful.

A linguistic note before moving forward. The next title after "Father" and "Rabbi" is *kathegetai*. The word means instructor and in the Catholic tradition is the source of our word "catechist." Virtually all Bibles translate the word as "instructor" which helps separate it from v.8 where Rabbi and "teacher" are combined. The Catholic New American, the word is translated as "Master" which in American English takes on the sense Master-servant/slave, which is unfortunate. In the Vulgate (Latin) the word is *magister* which is an academic term

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. [R.T. France, 2007, 864]

<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.*

Further sayings about status, already familiar from Jesus' teaching in 18:1–5 and 20:26–27, complete the paragraph. Similar axioms appear in Prov 29:23 and in Luke (Luke 14:11; 18:14). 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.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reflects on this teaching in Mt 23:11-12 in paragraph 2546, stating: "The 'joy of God' is 'the gladness of humility.' Humility makes us recognize that 'God chose what is low and despised in the world to shame the strong.' Humility is the foundation of prayer. Only when we humbly acknowledge that 'we do not know how to pray as we ought,' are we ready to freely receive the gift of prayer. 'Man is a beggar before God.'"

This passage emphasizes that true exaltation, in the eyes of God, comes through humility. Humility is a virtue that recognizes our dependence on God, acknowledges our limitations, and places our trust in His mercy and grace. By humbling ourselves, we open our hearts to receive the abundant blessings that God desires to bestow upon us.

Furthermore, Jesus' teaching on humility is echoed in the example of His own life. He, as the Son of God, humbled Himself by taking on human form, living a life of service, and ultimately sacrificing Himself on the cross for the salvation of humanity. Through His humility, Jesus was exalted by the Father, being raised from the dead and given the name above all names (Philippians 2:5-11).

## **A Final Thought**

M. Eugene Boring notes that a modern reader of these verses may be prone to dismiss the concern as being of another time, especially the concern about phylacteries and tassels. A closer reading points to the “humanness” we share. We like to be acknowledged at social events, greeting in public (the marketplace). It is not hypocritical as much as it is being human, the social creatures that we are. It strikes at our self worth to be ignored or to be put down socially. We all experience internally imposed constraints of peer pressure and the desire to be accepted by others. Is it normal or is it the darker side of the cultural idol of self-esteem? [Boring, 1994, 432]

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## Scripture

*The New American Bible* available on-line at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/>