

THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

Lesson 75, Chapter 23

In opening Matthew 23, if I were to give it a title, it would be "Exposing the Hypocrisy of the Leadership". It is an interesting reality that as a person gets older and knows that death is not far off, or at most any adult age a person becomes aware that their death is imminent, they see that continuing to hide behind any kind of personal facade of one's own building no longer serves a useful purpose. Therefore we hear of "death bed confessions"; people who reveal starkly truthful things they have done (good and bad), or they speak of things they might know about others or about a traumatic event that needs to be confessed, but had never wanted to talk about it for whatever reason. Sometimes because it might have involved getting in trouble or causing upset or facing the past.

My own father served and fought in WWII; but he avoided talking about it. About all any of me or my siblings knew about it was that he was in the Navy, and that he was a Sonar man. It wasn't until several weeks before he passed away in his early 70's from cancer that he finally opened up and told me some of the hair-raising and deeply traumatic experiences he suffered, some of his regrets, and how he felt about them. Yeshua has been building up for some time, now, to the no-holds-barred diatribe He unleashed against the Jewish Leadership beginning in earnest with Matthew chapter 22... but had been holding back. He was acutely aware of His purpose and His impending fate, and to some degree, at least, the timing of it. He also knew that when He finally did set His filter aside and said exactly what He thought about that corrupt, deceived and deceiving religious leadership, His demise would be swift and certain... as what happened to His cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist, when he spoke his mind. So knowing that He had but days and hours left to live, Jesus let fly all that He had been

wanting to say to these leaders, but also in a forum that the common people could hear it as a warning to them.

Open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 23 and follow along.

READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 23 all

If you can accept it, this chapter has Yeshua displaying a distinctly negative if not pessimistic tone that we're not used to hearing from Him. Might I even suggest a good old-fashioned rant of sorts? Many Bible academics are so taken aback by Jesus's tone that they express doubts as to the authenticity of the account and say that perhaps the Gospel writer Matthew was embellishing. Assuming those particular academics are wrong (which I do) with his life in the balance, Christ no longer sees a need to harness His feelings. And while His ire is directed at certain of the Jewish Religious leadership, the effect He's hoping for is to the benefit of the onlookers who can only be astonished if not shocked at this Galilean **Tzadik** so publicly and frankly taking on these men of such great stature and authority in Jewish society.

It is critical to grasp that while Rome was indeed the formal civil and legal governing authority over the Holy Land, the day to day operation of Jewish society was under the watchful eye and de facto control of the Jewish leaders of the Synagogue system. For Jews, there was no such thing as separation of Church and State. Their religion was the basis for everything they did. Behaviors, ethics, morals, the system of families and how businesses operated... virtually everything... was set by the Synagogue leaders who seem to have been (nearly exclusively) members of one branch or another of the sect of the Pharisees. So when Jesus was attacking those Synagogue leaders it is because He saw them misleading the common people and putting their spiritual condition, and eternal future, into great jeopardy.

While the Temple was similarly guilty (and in chapter 22 Yeshua specifically called them out as well) the Temple leadership had far less daily influence over the lives of the people, except perhaps for the ones who lived inside Jerusalem at the site of the Temple and thus those folks resided at the seat of Jewish religious government. The Sadducee leadership controlled the Jewish court system and all matters concerning the Temple; meaning that they controlled all aspects of what went on during the 7 biblically ordained feast events, on Sabbaths, and the various sacrificial and other Temple-oriented rituals. But for the average Jew, the

Temple was far away from where they lived and so their local Synagogue was where they looked for guidance on everyday matters and without doubt the Synagogue leaders represented the greatest influence in their lives.

So in verse 1 we read that Yeshua turned His attention away from the religious leadership and now directly addressed the crowds that included His ever-present disciples. He was essentially serving up a scathing criticism of the Pharisee leadership... the people's spiritual and daily life leadership. He calls these leaders the Scribes and the Pharisees who sit in the Seat of Moses. The Scribes were in this era those who were at the top of the leadership of the Synagogue system. They were considered experts on the Law and more often than not they were the ones who taught at Synagogue congregational meetings. While most Scribes belonged to the Pharisee sect, not all did. However the vast majority of Scribes were Pharisees such that, when speaking of Synagogue leadership, the terms Scribes and Pharisees were nearly interchangeable the same way that only a few decades ago in the United States the terms American and Christian were nearly interchangeable even though we all knew that technically they meant different things.

There remains much debate about what the Seat of Moses meant in the 1st century. Was it literally some kind of chair located in a religious facility? Or was it a colloquial way of speaking about the position and authority that each Synagogue leader held? In Christ's era very few synagogues were actual dedicated buildings used the way Church buildings are today. Synagogue in its simplest sense means assembly. The Talmud claims that around Jesus's time there were 400 Synagogues in Jerusalem alone. Archeologists have found none. And considering the size of Jerusalem, it boggles the mind to think that there would have been 400 dedicated Synagogue buildings there. No doubt nearly all so-called Synagogues were what we might term "house Churches". A few Jews would gather together for various religious reasons at someone's home and it was called synagogue. So there could indeed have been many, many house Synagogues in Jerusalem at that time, each one composed of but a handful of individuals.

As for dedicated purpose-built Synagogue buildings, very few have been found in the Holy Land. And those that have been found are from a later era. It is from that later era (3rd century and beyond) that Synagogues have been unearthed that have a special seat carved out of stone, located inside the Synagogue at the front of it. Although no inscription identifies it, it is assumed that this chair is the

Seat of Moses. Later and modern Synagogues have Seats of Moses in them. But as for Christ's day, probably not. The likeliest scenario (although it is speculation) is that the Seat of Moses referred to the one person in each Synagogue that was its supreme authority and teacher, and then eventually a chair of honor was included in the structure of the Synagogue building for this supreme leader to sit upon during services, and so that is how the special chair got its name. Bottom line: Jesus was speaking about the person that was at the head of each Synagogue.

Yeshua gives His listeners an instruction. He tells them to do what these Synagogue leaders tell them to do. But... don't behave as they do because while these guys talk a good game they must not really believe what they're saying or they'd do it themselves. Western culture has a saying that probably came from this: Don't do as I do, but do as I say. What this is talking about is hypocrisy. In other words, Jesus is telling the people to continue to listen to the teachings of the Synagogue authorities... obviously He means that what they teach is generally true. Now does that mean that He holds with everything they teach? Goodness no! He has already accused them of misleading the people and will accuse them of it again in the next verses. However, no human is going to teach God's Word and His truth in perfection. Those of us who teach God's Word are (hopefully) sufficiently aware of that reality so that we ourselves remain teachable such that when one way or another we are made aware of an error we can admit it, correct it, and move on.

What is rather astonishing to me is Yeshua's acceptance of the authority of the Synagogue leaders, and His call to the people of the crowd to acknowledge it as well. It reminds one of the Sermon on the mount when He said:

^{CJB} **Matthew 5:17-20** ¹⁷ ***"Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete.*** ¹⁸ ***Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened.*** ¹⁹ ***So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.*** ²⁰ ***For I tell you that unless your righteousness is far greater than that of the Torah-teachers and P'rushim, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of Heaven!***

Just as Yeshua is telling the people to continue to listen to what the Scribes and Torah Teachers say, so it is that He tells the people to **do** what the Torah and the Prophets say. It is the Scribes and Torah Teachers that instruct the people in the Torah and the Prophets. And, just like in Christ's speech to the crowds here in Matthew 23 where Yeshua is specifically calling out those same Scribes and Pharisees as not living righteously themselves, He did the same in the Sermon on the Mount...only not quite as harshly.

We know from their writings and what Yeshua Himself says about what these Scribes and Pharisees teach is from what we could call a doctrinal viewpoint. That is, while Scripture passages most certainly were read in the Synagogues, what those passages said were often effectively overridden by doctrines (Traditions) created by these Scribes and Pharisees. So while these leaders claimed they were teaching the Torah, in fact they were teaching the preferred manmade Traditions of the Pharisees. Back in Matthew chapter 15 Christ said this:

^{CJB} **Matthew 15:7-9** ⁷ *You hypocrites! Yesha'yahu was right when he prophesied about you,* ⁸ *'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from me.* ⁹ *Their worship of me is useless, because they teach man-made rules as if they were doctrines.'*"

Notice something that matters for us to ponder, taken from what Yeshua said in Matthew 15 (quoting the Prophet Isaiah). It isn't just that manmade rules and traditions can be technically incorrect (that is, interpretations of the Torah that are regularly off the mark in order to justify the beliefs of a sect), and thus the details given by the religious leadership are in error or are agenda oriented. The far larger issue is that the result of too much bad theological information (that comes by replacing God's Word with manmade doctrines) is that the substance of these wrong doctrines inevitably builds up, one upon the next, to become the accepted basis for how we think we ought to worship God. In our eyes it is good worship; but in God's eyes it is vain worship that He does not and will not accept. Folks: if God does NOT accept our worship of Him then we have lost our relationship with Him. I wish I could tell you at what point believing and living out and trying to worship God based on incorrect doctrine given to us from the pulpit reaches a tipping point that God finally says "no more; I don't accept it, so I don't accept you"; but I don't know where that point is.

We also need to notice that Yeshua was not teaching hypothetically; this was

happening in His day and it was a very dangerous problem... even though the people were entirely blind to it due to the leadership's irresponsible behavior. And I assure you the same thing is happening today just as it was in His era... it is prevalent throughout our faith institutions... and it is something we must address as Believers or bear consequences that I don't think any of us are prepared to face. As I said earlier, we'll not reach perfection of teaching or learning this side of Heaven. But we can understand and acknowledge that there is a problem and respond by seeking teaching and learning that is based on the biblical Word that isn't watered down, or papered over, in order to agree with new and changing societal standards. Or even worse (to my way of thinking), to continue to intentionally validate long held doctrines and traditions that never should have had a place in our worship of God.

As is our custom, when another of the Synoptic Gospels relays the same or nearly the same message from Christ, we read it to gain as much information as we can glean about the event and what He said. The Gospel of Luke has much of this message that we find in Matthew, but Luke sets the scene in an entirely different arena, spoken to different people. Open your Bibles to Luke chapter 11.

READ LUKE CHAPTER 11:37 - 54

It is hard to know exactly where the setting of Luke's narrative took place, but it's easy to see the difference in settings between it and Matthew. Wherever it was in Luke, it certainly wasn't in Jerusalem at the Temple. In Luke the context is that Jesus was in the home of a Pharisee, dining with him, and the issue of ritual hand washing came up. It was out of this that the diatribe against the religious leaders came, as well as the prophesy of the 7 woes. Back to Matthew.

At this point Yeshua is no longer speaking to the Pharisees but rather they are hearing what He is saying to the crowds. It seems that Christ has determined that the most hardened of the Jewish leadership cannot repent, and therefore they are not redeemable. Thus to spend any more time trying to teach them and show them the error of their ways is useless; all that remains is a pronouncement of their fate. Again: Yeshua is not condemning **all** of the Jewish leadership, or **all** of the Pharisees; only those whom He is addressing (probably also including those that "if the shoe fits").

I think perhaps the reason that Yeshua deems these particular religious leaders as irredeemable is reflected in the words of verse 3. That is, they know the truth,

they speak the truth, but they don't live the truth. So in verse 4 He lays out one of the offenses they commit. It is that they place heavy burdens on the people, but do little to help them. Paul, who called himself the Pharisee of Pharisees, knew better than most the inside workings of the Pharisee sect and what it is that they demanded of their followers.

CJB Acts 15:10-11 ¹⁰ So why are you putting God to the test now by placing a yoke on the neck of the talmidim which neither our fathers nor we have had the strength to bear? ¹¹ No, it is through the love and kindness of the Lord Yeshua that we trust and are delivered- and it's the same with them.

What are these burdens that Jesus and later Paul are referring to? The most common answer that we hear is that the burden too great to bear is the Law of Moses. But finally among the more modern conservative Bible scholars comes the admission that this cannot be talking about the Law of Moses as the burden. For one reason, the Pharisees were not about the Law of Moses, they were about their Traditions...Jewish Law. The burdens Jesus and Paul spoke of were what came from the demands of the Pharisees, not from the demands of God. So this is yet another complaint by Yeshua against **Halakhah**... Jewish law... not against the Law of Moses. Thus we see what is essentially additional context to help us understand what Yeshua meant by something He said back in chapter 11.

CJB Matthew. 11:28-30 ²⁸ "Come to me, all of you who are struggling and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

The struggling and burdened were made so by the teachings of the Pharisees. The people were constantly trying to meet the expectations of their Pharisee leaders, whom they trusted, but as Jesus tells us in chapter 23, they told people how they ought to live but didn't do so themselves. Thus Christ says to take on His yoke. The term yoke was a Jewish expression that simply meant the teachings of the teacher or religious authority that they followed... the teacher they were connected to... yoked to. Compared to the needless and fruitless heavy demands of the Pharisees' Traditions, Yeshua's demands came ONLY from the Law of Moses and so were far lighter. One example of this that we can use in modern times is Kosher eating. Biblical kosher eating isn't hard at all. If one avoids shellfish, certain birds, pork and a few other meats that most of us

would never eat anyway, that pretty well satisfies God's commands on the subject. But the **Halakhah**, the Jewish laws, on Kosher eating are complex, burdensome and very difficult to follow. Entire volumes of the Talmud are dedicated to rules for Kosher eating. It was this sort of thing that Christ railed against.

I don't think the final part of verse 4 is meant literally; rather the entire verse is a play on words. That is, the Pharisees tie heavy things on the backs of people, but then don't offer to shoulder some of the load. This is meant metaphorically like a master tying a much too heavy load on his employee or servant, and then not offering to help to carry it because he didn't want to exert himself. Rather, for these Jewish leaders, it was all about appearance and public perception; not authenticity

Thus verse 5 says that in order to get public attention and admiration, the Pharisees made their **t'fillin** broad and their **tzitzit** long. The **t'fillin** were the small boxes attached to leather straps that were wrapped about one arm, and another box strapped to the forehead. **Tzitzit** were what the English Bibles tend to call fringes or tassels (as though they were some kind of decorations used on Hebrew garments). Interestingly, these items were NOT Tradition; they were specified to be worn in the Law of Moses. However Yeshua says that while on the surface what the Pharisee leaders did had a basis in truth, their exaggeration of it made it no longer Godly, but rather was intended as attention seeking. Exactly how these men broadened or enlarged their **t'fillin** is not certain. Perhaps they widened the leather straps, or made the little boxes bigger. Some scholars think that maybe they wore them for longer periods of time than required; we really don't know. As for the matter of the lengthening of the **tzitzit**, that is no doubt literal. The Pharisees made them very long and much more visible as a sign of their piety. No doubt there was additional cost involved in these actions, and no doubt it served their purpose; they indeed were believed by the common man to be especially righteous men on account of it. In truth it was a deception and while the people were fooled, God wasn't.

By the way: while we never hear of Yeshua wearing **t'fillin** (no doubt He did or He would have been roundly criticized for not donning to fulfill the commandment) we do hear of Him wearing **tzitzit**... unfortunately our English translations obscure it.

^{CJB} **Matthew 9:20** *A woman who had had a hemorrhage for twelve years*

approached him from behind and touched the tzitzit on his robe.

Most English Bibles mistranslate this verse and make ***tzitzit*** into the "hem of His garment" or "the fringe of His cloak" rather than what it was. And what it was, was undeniable proof of Jesus's intent to follow the Torah and the Law of Moses since the entire purpose of ***tzitzit*** is to display that intent and to remind the wearer to do so.

^{CJB} **Numbers 15:38-40** ³⁸ ***"Speak to the people of Isra'el, instructing them to make, through all their generations, tzitziyot on the corners of their garments, and to put with the tzitzit on each corner a blue thread. ³⁹ It is to be a tzitzit for you to look at and thereby remember all of ADONAI's mitzvot and obey them, so that you won't go around wherever your own heart and eyes lead you to prostitute yourselves; ⁴⁰ but it will help you remember and obey all my mitzvot and be holy for your God.***

We don't need a lot of explanation for verses 6 and 7. The self-glorification that these Pharisee religious leaders sought of course included insisting on having the best seats at fine banquets (which, of course, only occurred at the homes of wealthy aristocrats), and they wanted to be seated up front at the Synagogues as a sign of their status. They also wanted people on the streets and in the marketplace to notice them and to greet them deferentially by addressing them as "rabbi". What rabbi exactly meant at that time is a little hard to ascertain; it probably meant something like "teaching master" (Yeshua was regularly called this). It was not yet an official office or position or title as it would become in only a few more decades. Later on it would take on the meaning of "great one". So the honor of being called rabbi evolved over time.

Yeshua interrupts His white-hot criticism of the Pharisee leadership to tell the people how they should behave and that meant they shouldn't imitate their leaders. In this instruction there is a direct application to the Church that, unfortunately, has been all but ignored over the centuries. Jesus's followers are to shun honorific titles and instead we are to just view ourselves as brothers; brothers, equals, assuming different roles in the community of Believers. Why? Because while humility is to be the prime virtue required for Christ's followers, it is the opposite behavior that is displayed by these Jewish leaders.

At first blush this passage might be a little difficult to cope with. For one reason, nearly every society I've ever known of bestows titles upon people in order to

establish a societal structure and hierarchy. I have no idea how we could even operate on this earth within our societies, or within the Church or Synagogue, without some means to distinguish people of different offices. The intent of seeing one another as brothers (and sisters, of course) in the Lord, is being of equal value and worth. Paul expressed this concept in a great and memorable way that is at the core of how we are to see and treat one another. We'll take a couple of minutes to read it.

READ 1CORINTHIANS 12:12 - 27

What better metaphor for which to compare the congregation of Christ than to the human body. We all understand how invaluable each part of our body is and this is the way that a congregation of Believers needs to think of it. Every part of the human body has a purpose and without each part the body doesn't function as it should. I can't tell you why, but this is one of those passages that has always affected me deeply. When we formed this Seed of Abraham Torah Class ministry, because of this passage I didn't want a title. I sort of feared having one. I well understood how easy it is to become a bit puffed up by it and I am in no way immune. I had worked too many years in the corporate world not to understand how much titles mean to people, and how much deference to people of higher title that was expected and shown. Yet, in time it became clear to me that even in ministry a title was needed or especially visitors and new comers wouldn't know how we were structured or if we had any structure at all. How do you ask for a person if you had no name for them? So reluctantly, I accepted the title of Pastor. But as you that are here today know, as do most of our many visitors, I much prefer to just be referred to as Tom. Yet if someone calls out "Pastor" I of course respond.

The point is that I don't think Christ was declaring the end of titles or structure or hierarchy nor that titles are evil and should be abolished. Rather He is saying that we are not to use titles and position the way that the Pharisees and others in the higher classes of Jewish society did as a means of self-glorification and self-indulgence, and frankly as a means as "putting others in their place"... which always means that the place of the others (their status) is below the ones with the lofty titles.

We must also factor in what those titles meant to the Jews of the 1st century. Some of them may sound a bit mundane to us, but they weren't back then. So, says Yeshua, do not let yourselves be called rabbi (probably meaning master

teacher) because they have only one rabbi. Who is this one rabbi? It is usually thought to mean either God the Father or Yeshua. And yet God the Father seems awfully abstract for what Christ is saying (God is not usually thought of as the "master teacher"), and it is also not usual for Yeshua to give Himself honorific titles. So I'm rather torn on this one. I do have one other possibility that I lean towards without discounting the others. This may be a rather oblique reference to the Holy Spirit (which had yet to indwell, but that hardly meant He wasn't present).

CJB John 14:26 *But the Counselor, the Ruach HaKodesh, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything; that is, he will remind you of everything I have said to you.*

CJB Luke 12:11-12 ¹¹ *"When they bring you before the synagogues and the ruling powers and the authorities, don't worry about how you will defend yourself or what you will say; ¹² because when the time comes, the Ruach HaKodesh will teach you what you need to say."*

There are other verses (Old and New Testaments) that characterize the Holy Spirit (the ***Ruach HaKodesh***) as our teacher. And if one was to give the Holy Spirit a worldly title, rabbi (master teacher) might not be inappropriate. As Yeshua says, don't call anyone rabbi as there is only one.

Another title that He says ought to be shunned is Father (***abba*** in Hebrew). It cannot be that ones' own parent can no longer be called "father". I see much disagreement and not a little discomfort among very good Bible scholars as they wrestle with the point Jesus is making here. Once again I think the issue is not the word father but rather how it is used to establish an honorific title in the religious sphere, which will inevitably be used to establish a pecking order of status. It seems that the desire for status is something that Yeshua has been battling against all during His ministry. Especially since Yeshua anointed Peter as the Rock upon which Yeshua will establish His congregation of followers, His disciples have worried incessantly about which among them was the greater and how they would be placed in a hierarchy of authority (and thus status) once Yeshua was king or He died.

Jesus had taught in Matthew chapter 6 how we are to pray, and He says our prayers are to be addressed to one person and only one: "Our Father" in Heaven. God the Father. So to Christ it would be incongruent to accept any

person on earth giving himself a title among His followers so unique and high as "Father". It is sad that in some Christian denominations this clear instruction is altogether ignored and the title "Father" is bestowed on certain people of authority within the Church, with the inevitable results.

This section next turns to the term "leader". Again, one has to ask how any organization can even operate if there are no leaders or the leaders can't be identified as the leaders. Yeshua has proved Himself time after time to be a practical man, and He certainly doesn't get bogged down with minutia. Thus His point must be that His body of followers is not to set anyone on a pedestal as supreme "leader"...except for the Messiah! Still Jesus doesn't identify Himself to the public as the Messiah, although He has already revealed Himself to His inner circle of 12. The commonality among the forbidden terms rabbi, Father, and leader are that they are all divine in the rather veiled sense Jesus is using them. I think "rabbi" is probably pointing to the Holy Spirit; Father is obvious as God the Father, and "leader" as the Messiah is outright said. Did the crowd get Christ's meaning? I don't think so. But it would make a good and memorable point to His disciples and later to his millions of followers as history unfolded. If only we'd pay attention to it.

We'll continue with Matthew chapter 23 next time.