

Jesus Described the Hearts of the Pharisees

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to be led by the love of Christ, so that they feel free to come to Him with boldness. This is a great contrast to the Pharisees who became controlled by fear and were afraid to ask Jesus any more questions. In this topic, we will see that Jesus went on to describe the hearts of the Pharisees.

In Matthew 23:1-4, we read, “Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, *that* observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay *them* on men’s shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers.’” Many of the scribes were also Pharisees. The scribes spent much of their time making copies of the various books of the Old Testament. As a result, they were considered teachers of the Law because they spent so much time making copies of it and teaching the common people what was written. That was why Jesus said what He did in these verses.

The title “sit in Moses’ seat” was a title that they had given to themselves and was similar to calling themselves university professors. That is why this phrase could also be translated, they “have seated themselves in Moses’ seat.” It was this title that they had given themselves as the basis for claiming authority over the people. Hebrews 4:12 tells us, “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” The Word of God has authority within itself and is able to reveal the thoughts and intents of the heart. As a result, the Word can speak to hearts even when someone who does not believe in Christ is reading it. As long as the scribes were reading the Old Testament, the Word would speak with authority. Jesus told the multitudes, and His disciples, that they were to keep and obey the Word.

Jesus went on to tell the multitudes not to follow the works of the scribes. This was due to the fact that the scribes did not practice the things that they read from the Scriptures in the services in the synagogues. The scribes and Pharisees had gone far beyond just reading and explaining the Word of God. They had added many of their own traditions to the Word of God and these traditions were the things that they were using to load heavy burdens on the people. A few of those traditions they practiced themselves were things such as the washing of hands. Mark 7:3-4 says, “For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash *their* hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. *When they come* from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, *like* the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.”

Jesus went on to say, in Mark 7:9, “*All too* well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.” Then, Jesus added, in Mark 7:13, that they were, “...making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things

you do.” However, most of the traditions the scribes taught, they did not even practice or do themselves. That is why Jesus said in Matthew 23:4, “For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay *them* on men’s shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers.” Some of the scribes and Pharisees, who later became Christians, tried to place these same burdens on Gentile Christians. This is why Galatians 5:1 says, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.” In this verse, we see that such legalism is called a “yoke of bondage”. Paul warned the new Christians not to be deceived and get entangled in such bondage.

Jesus then explained why the Pharisees did what they did. Matthew 23:5-8 says, “But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi.’ But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren.” The Jewish men would wear leather boxes called phylacteries on their forehead and on their left arm just above the elbow during their times of prayer. These would contain parchment with the following four groups of verses from the Law written on them. Exodus 13:1-10; Exodus 13:11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Deuteronomy 11:13-21. The Pharisees made the leather straps that held these boxes larger so that they would be noticed by others. They also made the tassels around the bottom of their robes longer so that people would notice them when they walked.

In addition, the scribes and Pharisees were also filled with pride. They wanted to be treated like they were the honored guests when they were at a feast. That is why Jesus said that they loved the best places at feasts. This pride also was clearly seen when they gathered at the synagogues because they wanted the best seats where they would be noticed. They also wanted to be shown special respect when they walked through the marketplaces. The Jews used the word “Rabbi”, which means *Master or Teacher*, as a title of respect for their teachers. This is illustrated in John 1:38, where we read, “Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, ‘What do you seek?’ They said to Him, ‘Rabbi’ (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), ‘where are You staying?’” However, the scribes and Pharisees wanted to be called “Rabbi, Rabbi”. The repeating of Rabbi twice made it a title which meant “most excellent Rabbi.” Jesus said that “the Christ” is the One who is our Teacher and we are to recognize that we are all brethren. Here, we see that we are all brethren or equals as Christians and do not have spiritual authority.

Christ went on to explain to His disciples and the multitudes that they were to lead through humility. Matthew 23:9-12 says, “Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” All spiritual authority belongs to Christ. We read, in Matthew 28:18, “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.’” Based on the fact that Jesus is the One who has all authority, He gave us the following commission, in Matthew 28:19-20. “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the

end of the age.’ Amen.”

In these verses, we see that Jesus gave specific things we are to avoid as we lead as Christians. First, we are not to call anyone on earth “Father”. Instead, we are to recognize that One is our Father and that is God, the Father. Second, we are not to seek to be called “Teacher”. Instead, we are to recognize that One is our Teacher, the Christ. These things are to remind us that all spiritual authority belongs to God the Father and God the Son and not to any of us. Then, Jesus explained again how to be great in the sight of God. Jesus said that those who become servants are the greatest. A servant has no spiritual authority. Jesus said, in Mark 10:43-44, “‘Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all.’” We see that we become great in the sight of God by being a servant, which is the word used here, in these verses, in Matthew. We see that we become first by being a bonds slave to all.

A servant or a bonds slave does not have any spiritual authority. The only way a bonds slave can influence others is by the attitude and example of his or her life. This is the exact opposite of worldly leadership because the world seeks greatness and authority. Paul wrote, in 1 Corinthians 4:15-16, “‘For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet *you do not have* many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me.’” In these verses, we see that Paul made a commitment to serve Christians by providing the love and example of a spiritual parent so that Christians would see by his example what it means to follow Christ. However, he did not command the people to call him either “father” or “teacher”. Later, he said in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “‘Imitate me, just as I also *imitate* Christ.’” Here, we see that a spiritual parent invites people to follow his example. A spiritual parent can give such an invitation when it is the goal of that spiritual parent to imitate Christ.

Christ said that those who exalt self will be humbled. In contrast, those who humble self on this earth will be exalted by God in heaven. This was illustrated by Jesus, in Philippians 2:8-9, where we read, “‘And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of* death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name.’” We are to lead by humbling ourselves and following the example of Jesus who chose to give His life for others. That was what Paul did as he used his life to bring glory to Christ and not to himself. Paul summarized his life in two verses. Philippians 1:21 says, “‘For to me, to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain.’” Then, Philippians 3:10 says, “‘That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.’” As we make those verses the goal of our lives, we will provide an example to follow. We can invite our physical and spiritual children to imitate our lives because we are making it our goal to imitate Christ. Christ showed, by His example, that such a humbling of self will provide a powerful example for others to follow. As our children see our example, they will see that our words and our walk agree. May the Lord richly bless you as you show your children by your example the meaning of humility.