



## **Temptation to authoritarianism**

### ***A study of Matthew 23:1-12***

It is noteworthy that when Jesus intended to denounce the Scribes and Pharisees and to condemn their authoritarian ways, he began with a word of caution. The Scribes and Pharisees do 'sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. Scribes and Pharisees did have a position of authority! They had an office of rule over the people of God. It was a position defined in Moses' books. Thus submission was due to them. They had a right to exercise regulative powers.

Our Lord Jesus had lived his entire earthly life under the religious authority of the Scribes and Pharisees. Although they were among the all-time worst practitioners of church discipline, Jesus fulfilled all righteousness under their leadership and rule. Now that his public ministry had begun, these office-holders were persecuting him. Yet he advises followers, '*You must obey them.*'

Certainly the Lord is reminding us that in the congregation of the people of God, it is necessary to have teachers. We are people of the Book. God has called and the Church has ordained leaders to teach this Word. Scripture expresses the will of God. Our well-being demands that men be set aside to give their whole lives to studying and teaching the Scriptures.

Each one of us then must take the Word of God seriously. We must follow its directives. Even the worst men who instruct from God's Word are not always wrong. Anyone expounding Scripture deserves attention and careful obedience to everything brought out of God's book. Our criticism of the clergy must not be reckless. It is all too easy to attack the Word which they teach.

However, the context makes it obvious that Jesus is not commanding implicit confidence in any teacher of the Word. The entire passage undermines confidence in them by exposing their unbiblical behaviour as they teach the Word. We who listen to preachers must always be thinking critically. It is our duty to evaluate sermons and judge the expositors. We must obey parents, preachers, elders, rulers so far as Scripture supports their claims and demands. Yet when they exceed or contradict God's Word, we must '*obey God rather than men*' (Acts 5:29).

That is the heart and essence of the Reformation. Roman Catholicism had taught that a proper ordination was all that was needed. If you had a trustworthy teacher (properly ordained), you could always adopt his (and the Church's) teaching. The Reformation, on the other hand, expressed confidence in the ability of the ordinary Christian to understand God's Word. As did John (1 John 2:26, 27), we teach each believer to test the spirits and teachers for himself. The Holy Spirit within will give discernment as to the correct meaning of God's Word. This liberates the individual saint from bondage to any teacher. He is free to disagree so long as he takes God's Word seriously.

In some ways the Scribes and Pharisees were like modern ministers. They devoted their lives to studying and teaching the Scriptures. They had a passionate desire to please God. They sought to adjust every facet of life to Bible standards, every detail of living to biblical teachings. On the other hand, they became extreme authoritarians. They crucified the Son of God and persecuted his people with disciplinary measures at their disposal. It is frightening that those who shared a zeal for the Bible and for reformation drifted into a shocking abuse of God's people. It is important to ask how they came to such wicked misuse of church power; for we who devote ourselves to teaching God's Word and who have a longing to bring every detail of church life into conformity with God's Word will be subject to similar temptations.

- **First:** *they began to love the honour of their position* (v. 5-7). When we are constantly teaching God's Word to those who hold it in high esteem, a strange thing happens. We begin to drink in the honour, praise and appreciation which God's people have for His truth. If you were to wear a beautiful gem, and everyone you met would exclaim, 'How lovely!', you might begin to imagine that they speak of you. So the Scribes came to love the title of honour, 'Rabbi' or master of God's Word. The temptation is to feed one's own ego with the praises which Scripture alone deserves.

As Jesus clearly indicated in verses 8 to 10, we must fight all tendencies to exalt men. The Lordship of Jesus Christ indicates that giving religious titles to men is out of place. The most useful and best of us are but brothers and sisters.

When men exalt themselves as something special in Christ's Kingdom, the honour of their names and offices becomes equated with the cause of Christ. Then image-polishing becomes more important than the well-being of the sheep. A parent begins to care more deeply about the family reputation than about the welfare of a child. A teacher's honour holds greater importance than assisting a troubled student. Defending the eldership becomes the chief priority of a church for which the sheep may be sacrificed. We must avoid this tendency in ourselves whenever a position of authority is held and we must watch for it in those who are over us.

- **Second:** Scribes and Pharisees *began to manipulate people with their superior knowledge of God's Word*. Verse 4: *'They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.'* These ancient officers knew how to apply God's Word to others with all the strictness and conviction which the law can bring. They placed great responsibilities on the shoulders of others and great burdens of guilt on their consciences.

Meanwhile this teaching that the flock must carry a heavy burden was a double standard, for they themselves would not undertake the same responsibilities. Using the Bible, these master-teachers found escape clauses for themselves (v. 16-22). If the people express their concerns to any other individual it is called 'gossip' or 'slander'. Meanwhile church officers are simply exercising their concerns for the flock to 'counsel' with others about difficult cases.

God's law must be used carefully and sparingly on the tender consciences of Christ's disciples. Guilt for sin is painful. At times it is a necessary work of the Holy Spirit to lead men to forgiveness and mercy in Christ. But careless leaders may begin to manipulate men and women with guilt, bending them to much lower aims than to lead them to the love of Christ.

Have we not at times demanded of our children standards of conduct we ourselves have never lived by? If a mature and advanced Christian cannot live up to the high ideals contemplated, then he should beware of binding them on the consciences of the young and weak.

- **Third:** Pharisees *began in teaching to blur lines of authority*. The Bible which they taught is God's Word. It is an absolute authority. But there is a great temptation to equate the teacher's explanation and application with Scripture itself. Preachers may mix their opinions with God's Word as much as anyone else. This tendency especially comes in at the transition from biblical principle to particular applications.

It is essential for all men to examine the Scriptures whether their teachers' words are so. All Christians agree that the Bible is God's Word. Not all agree with the specific, personal conclusions some draw from their study of God's Word. Even the tendency to find a specific biblical directive for the details of daily living is Pharisaical.

- **Fourth:** *the Scribes and Pharisees lost their perspective*. In their thirst for attention, they began to love the novel. Oh, these Rabbis so studied God's Word that they discovered minute things no one else ever thought of (v. 23-26). Some discovered that all the increase of the garden should be tithed. The spices should be tithed. A spotlight is shined upon the spice garden and

what the housewife does with it. The teachers debated and refined our duty to God in the spice garden! How wonderful! Now we know how to please God when we grow spices. It was so practical. It was a new thing. It was down to earth.

By degrees they moved away from religion of the heart. Justice and mercy were forgotten. External forms and specific observances became everything. This is not a tale of other days. Have not churches pressed their less important distinctions from other Christians until they have seemed all-important? Have not the reforms become so prominent that sinners cannot hear the gospel among us. They are too busy observing their own peculiar do's and don'ts.

Is heart-religion foremost in your ministry and your congregation? Is it the first impression to be made on those who visit? Are lesser things kept in lesser places?

The four noted inward tendencies of the Scribes and Pharisees continue to be temptations for those who have a zeal to know and to apply thoroughly God's precious Word. These are four very real temptations: self-importance, manipulation of others by the Word, confusion of human and divine authority and loss of perspective. The teacher of Scripture who yields to these is on the way to authoritarian abuses. May the Lord be pleased to deliver us and our churches from them.

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