

*Humility Exalted*  
September 6, 2020  
Matthew 23:1-12 (Pew Bible, 828)

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on September 6, 2020.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:1–12).<sup>1</sup>

Beginning with Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and his cleansing of the temple, the leaders of Israel began their attack. The chief priests and scribes responded to his healing of the blind and lame and the praises of the people with indignation. When he taught in the temple, the chief priests and elders challenged his authority. The Pharisees in plot with the Herodians tried to entrap him in his words. The Sadducees sought to discredit his doctrine. And a lawyer tried to trick him with the Law.

Despite their attempts, Jesus reveals that the Son of God is worthy of praise; the King of kings has authority; the living Word speaks the Word; the embodied Truth tells the truth; and, he who fulfills the Law knows its essence. As such, they failed in their attack, only to be taught that he who is the rightful son of David is the very Son of God. He is the Lord of glory, and Israel’s Messiah.

Now consider who has witnessed all of this. The crowds that followed Jesus into Jerusalem have not left. If anything, the crowds have grown, as confrontation after confrontation the most, humble man to ever live humbled the leaders of Israel. And now, Jesus turns to the crowds. The verbal jousting is over. It is time that Israel be warned.

### **Legal Honor**

Surprisingly, Jesus’ warning begins by directing the crowds to honor the scribes and Pharisees by doing and observing what they say. What kind of warning is that? This instruction presents a problem for us, because we tend to think in binary ways. We do this with people, and places, and things. I like my coffee hot, not cold. You like your tea iced, not boiling. I love the weather in Scotland; Sydney is not a fan. Of course, there is no significant problem with binary thinking

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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except on important matters, then it can lead to unnecessary division, even reducing human beings to arbitrary categories. Your political view is good while your neighbor's is evil. Your opinion on mail-in voting is right while your neighbor's is wrong. COVID-19 is a catastrophic pandemic, or is it a hoax? Your news source tells the truth and the others lie. The point I'm making is that, whether we realize it or not, we all fall prey to binary thinking and are often unaware of how it confuses our perspective.

Just when we thought that the scribes and the Pharisees were the embodiment of evil, Jesus challenges our binary thinking by telling the crowds to "do and observe whatever [the scribes and the Pharisees] tell you." Why? Listen carefully to how Jesus explains this: Because they, "sit on Moses' seat." What is Moses' seat, and why does it matter? Jesus is using a likely well-known figurative expression. As God gave Moses ordained authority over Israel through the giving of the Law, so those who follow Moses in upholding God's Law share his authority. Now, consider those who sat in "Moses' seat": The *scribes* were the academic experts on God's Law, including their interpretations. The *Pharisees* were the practical theologians applying God's Law, including its enforcement. Therefore, together they represented the authority of God's Law to Israel.

Given what we know about the scribes and Pharisees, as well as the other leaders of Israel, and given what Jesus is about to say about them, Jesus' instruction can be hard to believe and even harder to follow. Yet, this is not different than the surprising imperative of the Apostle Paul that "every person [is to] be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1-2). Let us remember that as sinister as the scribes and Pharisees may have been, the Roman Emperor at the time of Paul's writing was Nero, who is remembered for his tyranny and debauchery, as well as persecution of Christians, among other things.

The point is that God ordains authority, and we are to honor authority, even if that authority acts in a way that is contrary to God's ways. This does not mean that we condone what they do, or even justify it. It doesn't mean that we encourage what they do. It may be that we stand in opposition to them, in obedience to God, if what they command conflicts with God's commands. But it does mean (and here is where we must push back against binary thinking) we still honor them so long as they are in the seat of authority.

We are then to "Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed" (Rom 13:7), but we owe no one disobedience to God. As Jesus says of the scribes and Pharisees, "so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do." Why? "For they preach, but do not practice."

### **Honoring Legalism**

I would imagine, for those of us who are parents, at some point we have said, literally or in practice, to our children, "Do what I say, not what I do." Why is it necessary to say this? Because our children are brilliantly perceptive at observing our inconsistencies, aren't they? For many of

us, it becomes a point of humble realization how frequently we do not do what we expect of our children.

In contrast, the scribes and Pharisees were blind to their own hypocrisy. So blind, in fact, they could preach one thing yet not practice it and see no inconsistency. As Jesus puts it, “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.” Their hypocrisy led them to extensive rules in their honored seat, but in their hearts they did not honor God. They were hypocritical task masters over the people freed from slavery, and their means of indenture was *legalism*.

What is legalism? It is a term we hear often in the church. We may have used it or even been accused of it, but what is it? As I understand it from examples in Scripture, legalism is taking the Law of God out of its covenantal context of grace, advocating obedience without love, and representing man-made rules as God’s law. Let’s consider the three aspects of this definition.

First, legalism is taking the Law of God out of its covenantal context of grace. For example, what is the introduction to the Ten Commandments? “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2). Before the first commandment is given, God reminds his people of his grace and their redemption. Legalism places the commands first, telling us what to do and disregarding why and for whom we obey.

Second, legalism is advocating obedience without love. R.C. Sproul explains, “The legalist isolates the law from God who gave the law. He is not so much seeking to obey God or honor Christ as he is to obey rules that are devoid of any personal relationship.”<sup>2</sup> Certainly, Jesus startled the Pharisees when he summarized the Law as: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind;” and, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-39). Our obedience to God is in response to his love for us, as he is the source of our love.

Third, legalism is representing rules as God’s law. This was the expertise of the scribes and Pharisees. Consider their expanded legal code for Sabbath observance. The disciples broke it by merely plucking and eating grain (Matt. 12:1-3). And, the lame man healed by Jesus was charged with disobedience for taking up his bed and walking (John 5:9-11). Honoring their own rules as if they were the Word of God, the scribes and Pharisees were blinded by legalism, unable to see the Lord of the Sabbath, even as he stood before them (Matt. 12:8). Rule-keeping had replaced worship. And in their legalism, it was not God they sought to please but themselves.

### **Exalting Hypocrisy**

If our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever (WSC Q.1), who gets all the glory? Not us. Our purpose is God’s glory, not our own. Therefore, our personal anthem could be: “For from

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<sup>2</sup> R.C. Sproul, “3 Types of Legalism,” Ligonier.org, July 17, 2019, <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/3-types-legalism/>.

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him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” Such orthodoxy motivates our orthopraxy: whatever we do, we do to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

But what happens when our motivation is not for God’s glory but our own? What happens when our faith becomes performative, a staged production for others. This is the height of hypocrisy, “Pharisaical” as the idiom goes. It is, as Jesus explained, giving to the needy to be seen (Matt. 6:1), fasting to be acknowledged (Matt. 6:16). And it’s all about looking the part.

The Shema instructs Israel that the Law of God is to be bound “as a sign on your hand” and “as frontlets between your eyes” (Deut. 6:8). These similes of devotion, while figurative, had been interpreted literally by the scribes and Pharisees. As a result, small leather boxes, called phylacteries, were worn on the forehead and arm in literal compliance with the Shema. You can imagine the performative nature of these accoutrements, as the breadth of one’s box might seemingly reveal the depth of one’s devotion.

Although not a misinterpretation of Scripture like the phylacteries, the Mosaic tassels on the fringe of the Hebrew garment (Num. 15:38-39) had lost its memorial significance in the hearts and minds of the scribes and Pharisees and become lengthy vestments of religiosity. As with a sense of drama, the tassels drew attention not to the Law of God but to the wearer of the tassels, waving emblems of supposed piety.

But the scribes and Pharisees want not only to be recognized but recognition as well, to be seated in seats of honor at the banquets, to be addressed as one of greatness. It was not merely a point of respect or courtesy, or even office, but glory. Among the people of God, they coveted exaltation. And in their hypocrisy, they were blinded to their chief end and consequently the glory of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

## **Humility Exalted**

It is then the humble One who turns to his disciples to teach. The case study, as he has presented, is the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. What is seen as greatness through men’s eyes does not mean that it is truly great. As J.R.R. Tolkien wrote,

All that is gold does not glitter,  
Not all those who wander are lost;  
The old that is strong does not wither,  
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.<sup>3</sup>

God told Samuel, “man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).

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<sup>3</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of the Lord of the Rings* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2014).

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Therefore, Jesus reveals that while there are teachers, there is only One worthy. For, in Christ's church there are varying offices, but we are all children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ. Likewise, we have fathers both literally and figuratively, but in Christ we have only One eternally, our Father in heaven.

In Christ's church, he gifts and uses those called to his service but never for *their* glory. It is not without significance that even the title "minister" is derived from the word meaning "servant." For, in the body of Christ, we are all called to serve in Christ: "There is one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). As such, our lives are to be lived by God's grace alone through faith in Christ alone, who

"humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every name should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 4:8-11).

And so, we have assembled on this Lord's Day to confess in worship what the scribes and Pharisees denied. The humble has been exalted, and he is our Lord!