

## Discipleship in the Lectionary – 11/05/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, November 5<sup>th</sup>

**Matthew 23:1-12**

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

### Status-seeking ministries

This week's text is the opening of the final or fifth discourse of Jesus (chapters 23-25) which begins by denouncing the spiritual failings of the Jewish religious leaders. Today, the church is experiencing a rapid decline in the West. To what extent is the Church suffering from the same leadership failings addressed by Jesus in this text? To what extent is the problem a result of people seeming to be Christians rather than *being* Christian? In this week's text, Jesus sets out behaviors for His followers that continue to challenge disciples and church leaders in our time: To be servants of the Gospel rather than being self-serving or expecting the church to serve them.

### Matthew 23:1-12 Commentary

Since the triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (21:1-11) and the cleansing of the temple (21:12-17), Jesus has been in direct conflict with the religious leaders. When challenged on His authority, Jesus delivered three parables which confronted their failings. Three times the Pharisees and Sadducees attempt to entrap Jesus, but He easily turned the tables. In chapter 23, Jesus speaks to the crowds and His disciples. Jesus' ministry opened with the lengthy Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7). Jesus' ministry closes with the lengthy discourse in chapters 23-25.

<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup> "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat,

The text differentiates between the crowds and the more committed disciples. The crowds were attracted to Jesus and thus potential followers. Here Jesus recognizes the authority of the scribes and Pharisees to interpret and teach the laws of Moses. The idea of "seat" in this case is similar to the use of "Chair" in the academic world. A fundamental tradition of Judaism was the continuity of the law that God gave to Moses and Moses gave to Joshua and so on. This is consistent with Matthew 5:17 where Jesus said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

<sup>3</sup> so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.

Jesus has previously challenged some of the teaching and traditions of the scribes and Pharisees (15:1-20; 16:6-12) but with this text Jesus recognizes the importance of the law and that God's people need leaders to interpret the Word and to challenge them to apply it in their daily lives. The disciples are to honor the office of these leaders and do what they teach if the teaching is in accordance with the Torah. The issue here appears to be the

gap between what these religious leaders were preaching versus living out such commands in their personal practices. These leaders were not walking the talk. What leaders *do* is often a far more powerful teaching than what they *say*.

*<sup>4</sup> 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.*

The original law of Moses had become broken down into thousands of rules and regulations by the human-made embellishments by the Pharisees and had become an impossible burden to the people. The religious leaders, however, protected their laws (and thus their status) at all costs. They refused to remove any burden from the people or help them please and glorify God. Jesus had the complete opposite approach in His ministry. For Jesus, compassion was key.

*<sup>5</sup> They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, <sup>6</sup> and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues <sup>7</sup> and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.*

Jesus goes on to call out the problematic behaviors of the religious leaders. To them, outward appearance was more important than the attitude of the heart. A good example is the distortion of the *phylacteries*. These were small boxes worn on the left arm or forehead during prayer that contained small pieces of Scripture. These devices were a literal, legalistic application of a verse from the *Shema*: “*You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes*” (Deuteronomy 6:8). Jesus notes how the Pharisees would make their phylacteries large and thus enhance their appearance of spirituality. Similarly, *fringes* (or tassels) were blue-and-white cords that Jewish men wore on their outer garments (see Numbers 15:38–41; Deuteronomy 22:12), and later, on the prayer shawl. While God had commanded the wearing of the tassels so the Jews would be reminded that He had redeemed them and thus remember to obey his commandments, these hypocritical leaders would lengthen their tassels in an attempt to project greater spirituality.

In essence, these religious leaders worshipped themselves.

*<sup>8</sup> But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. <sup>9</sup> And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. <sup>10</sup> Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. <sup>11</sup> The greatest among you shall be your servant. <sup>12</sup> Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*

Jesus then contrasts the expectations for His disciples. Where the hypocrites crave status and titles, Jesus' followers are to do the opposite. They are not to use titles such as rabbi or teacher (*didaskalos*) or father (elders were referred to as “Father” and perhaps major rabbinic teachers were given the same title out of respect) or instructors or tutors (*kathegētēs*). The Messiah's followers are to be on the same level - as brothers and sisters. Jesus' disciples must not pursue honorific titles out of pride. Verses 11 and 12 illustrate the radical and unconventional attitude that Jesus demands of His followers: humility.

### Reflection and Application

In this text Jesus illustrates how the problem was not God's law but what humans did with the law. The law was supposed to show God's people how sinful they were in comparison to a holy God. This realization would cause them to turn to God and throw themselves upon God's mercy with all humility. The fact that God is willing to graciously forgive our sins should cause us to demonstrate the same humility and extend the same blessings to fellow humans. Instead, those responsible for teaching the law distorted it into a legalistic system of personal piety that focused on human works rather than God's grace. The leaders also presented themselves as being

righteous yet condemned others for what they themselves did. The system was set up to exalt those in charge while refusing mercy to those who were not the owners of the system.

The same behaviors Jesus calls out in this text were rampant within the Church prior to the Reformation. Even today such behaviors are still with us in the Church, albeit adapted to our own specific culture. Many point out the titles still in use within the Church today. Jesus' interpretation of the law underscores how humans are on a level playing field. God extends His mercy to all, not just to those with the title of Right Reverend or those lauded for their seminary education, size of ministry, or number of books authored. Neither are status-seeking behaviors limited to church leaders. To any casual observer, the places of honor and the best seats in a church are sometimes obvious. So too are the occupants. This is hardly surprising since one thing is constant: humans back then and now are in a state of sin and our world is still fallen. Pride and hubris are never far off.

To avoid falling into the same trap as the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus exhorts his followers to demonstrate humility rather than seek status. Not only are we to avoid seeking honorific titles, but we are also required to dissuade others from granting them to us. The spirit of humility is the antidote to pride and self-importance. It is only through the attitude of humility that we begin to comprehend the magnitude of God's grace. It is humility that prevents us from idolizing our orthodoxy and failing in orthopraxy. The scribes and Pharisees were entrusted with the law of Moses. Today, church leaders are entrusted with proclaiming, teaching, interpreting, and living out the Gospel through love and compassion rather than uncaring legalism. They are to do this in a way that brings honor to God and not to themselves – to be humble servants of the Gospel that reflect the light of Christ rather than get in its way.

To those who much has been given, much is expected.

