

# Expository Thoughts On Matthew - Matthew

## 23:1-12

by J.C. Ryle

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### Transcript

We are now beginning a chapter which in one respect is the most remarkable in the four Gospels: it contains the last words which the Lord Jesus ever spoke within the walls of the temple. Those last words consist of a withering exposure of the scribes and Pharisees, and a sharp rebuke of their doctrines and practices. Knowing full well that his time on earth was drawing to a close, our Lord no longer keeps back his opinion of the leading teachers of the Jews. Knowing that he would soon leave his followers alone, like sheep among wolves, he warns them plainly against the false shepherds by whom they were surrounded. The whole chapter is a signal example of boldness and faithfulness in denouncing error. It is a striking proof that it is possible for the most loving heart to use the language of stern reproof: above all, it is an awful evidence of the guilt of unfaithful teachers. So long as the world stands, this chapter ought to be a warning and a beacon to all ministers of religion: no sins are so sinful as theirs in the sight of Christ. In the twelve verses which begin the chapter we see firstly the duty of distinguishing between the office a false teacher and his example. «The scribes and Pharisees sat in Moses' seat» rightly or wrongly, they occupied the position of the chief public teachers of religion among the Jews; however unworthily they filled the place of authority, their office entitled them to respect. But while their office was respected, their bad lives were not to be copied. Although their teaching was to be adhered to so long as it was scriptural, it was not to be observed when it contradicted the Word of God. To use the words of a great divine, «They were to be heard when they taught what Moses taught, but no longer. That such was our Lord's meaning is evident from the whole tenor of the chapter we are reading: false doctrine is there denounced as well as false practice. The duty here placed before us is one of great importance. There is a constant tendency in the human mind to run into extremes: if we do not regard the office of the minister with idolatrous veneration, we are apt to treat it with indecent contempt. Against both these extremes we have need to be on our guard. However much we may disapprove of a minister's practice, or dissent from his teaching, we must never forget to respect his office: we must show that we can honor the commission, whatever we may think of the officer that holds it. The example of St. Paul on a certain occasion is worthy of notice: «I wist not brethren that he was the high priest: for it is written, thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people. Acts 23:5 We see secondly, in these verses that inconsistency, ostentation and love of preeminence among professors of religion are specially displeasing to Christ. As to inconsistency it is remarkable that the very first thing our Lord says of the Pharisees is that «they say and do not.» They required from others what they did not practice themselves. As to ostentation, our Lord declares that they did all their works «to be seen of men»: they had their phylacteries, or strips of parchment with texts written on them, which many Jews wore on their

clothes, made of an excessive size; they had the borders or fringes of their garments, which Moses bade Israelites to wear as a remembrance of God, made of an extravagant width; Num 15:38 and all this was done to attract notice and make people think how holy they were. As to love of preeminence, our Lord tells us that the Pharisees loved to have the chief seats given them in public places, and to have flattering titles addressed to them. All these things our Lord holds up to reprobation. Against all he would have us watch and pray. can ye believe which receive honour one of another? (i) John 5:44). Happy would it have been for the church of Christ if this passage had been more deeply pondered and the spirit of it more implicitly obeyed. The Pharisees are not the only people who have imposed austerities on others and affected a sanctity of apparel and loved the praise of man. The annals of church history show that only too many Christians have walked closely in their steps. May we remember this and be wise! It is perfectly possible for a baptized Englishman to be in spirit a thorough Pharisee. We see in the third place from these verses that Christians must never give to any man the titles and honors which are due to God alone and to his Christ. We are to call no man father on earth. The rule here laid down must be interpreted with proper scriptural qualification. We are not forbidden to esteem ministers very highly in love for their work's sake (i) 1 Thessalonians 5:13 ). Even St. Paul, one of the humblest saints, called Titus his own son in the faith and says to the Corinthians, I have begotten you through the gospel (i) 1 Corinthians ). But still we must be very careful that we do not insensibly give to ministers, a place and an honor which do not belong to them. We must never allow them to come between ourselves and Christ. The very best are not infallible. They are not priests who can atone for us; they are not mediators who can undertake to manage our soul's affairs with God: they are men of like passions with ourselves, needing the same cleansing blood and the same renewing Spirit; set apart to a high and holy calling, but still after all only men. Let us never forget these things. Such cautions are always useful: human nature would always rather lean on a visible minister than an invisible Christ. We see in the last place, that there is no grace which should distinguish the Christian so much as humility. He that would be great in the eyes of Christ, must aim at a totally different mark from that of the Pharisees: his aim must be not so much to rule as to serve the church. Well says Baxter, Church greatness consisteth in being greatly serviceable. The desire of the Pharisee was to receive honor, and to be called master the desire of the Christian must be to do good, and to give himself and all that he has to the service of others. Truly this is a high standard, but a lower one must never content us. The example of our blessed Lord the direct command of the apostolic epistles both alike require us to be clothed with humility (i) 1 Peter 5:5 ). Let us seek that blessed grace day by day. None is so beautiful, however much despised by the world; none is such an evidence of saving faith and true conversion to God; none is so often commended by our Lord. Of all his sayings, hardly any is so often repeated as that which concludes the passage we have now read. He that shall humble himself shall be exalted.

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