

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

G. Campbell Morgan, D.D.

Copyright © 1929

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

MATTHEW 23:1-12

THIS passage constitutes a brief parenthesis in the special work which the King was doing at this time. It gives the account of words spoken to the multitudes and to His disciples, between His conflict with the rulers which ended in their discomfiture; and His pronouncing of woes upon them, and doom upon the people who had rejected Him.

The passage is a very interesting one in that it reveals a remarkable contrast between the false and the true in religion.

The King addressed Himself to the multitudes and to His disciples, and it is by no means difficult to see that part of the address was intended for the disciples, and that part was intended for the multitudes. He first spoke to the multitudes. Having done so in general terms of warning, He addressed Himself specifically to His own disciples.

This contrast between the false and true in religion is made by the comparison between the false rulers with whom He had been in conflict, and the true spiritual teachers, His own disciples, whom He was commissioning to go forth to exercise a religious authority as they should interpret the meaning of His own message.

At the close of the thirteenth chapter of our Gospel, after the King had spoken the great parables of the Kingdom, part of them to the multitudes and part of them to His own disciples, He ended that parabolic instruction by declaring that a scribe instructed to the Kingdom of heaven must bring forth out of His treasure-house things new and old; and by that statement He appropriated the word scribe for His own disciples.

In that statement He enunciated His rejection of the official scribe of the period, but also indicated the fact that His disciples constituted the new order of scribes for the days to come.

In this passage, He first warned the multitude against the false teachers, the scribes and the Pharisees, that sit on Moses' seat. Turning from that warning He charged His own disciples as to what their attitude and relationship to men should be, when He said to them:

- Ye shall not be called Rabbi,
- You shall call no man father,
- You shall not be called masters or guides.

The false teachers are exposed in the words our Lord addressed to the multitudes contained in verses two to seven; and as He exposed the false rulers, He revealed what false religion is.

The true position of spiritual teachers is revealed in His charge to His own disciples, to be found in verses eight to twelve; and in that charge He also revealed the essence of true religion.

First, then, we have His revelation of the essential failure of the rulers.

Christ's conflict had never been with the people, it had been with the rulers. All His anger wherever it was manifest, wherever it flamed and flashed, was directed against false shepherds, men who, standing between the people and God, had misinterpreted the way and will of God; and we find in this passage a very remarkable and carefully expressed estimate of that which was wrong in the rulers; against which, Christ, with all the dignity of His Kingship, with the force of His personality, cast Himself.

Notice in the first place His recognition of the position occupied by these men; He said: "**The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.**"

There is a fine discrimination in the statement, which perhaps we are apt to lose sight of in the reading. We can only express what Christ said by using another tense, and using the verb in a slightly different form. Said He, "**The scribes and Pharisees have seated themselves in Moses' seat.**" That is not to say that Christ was saying their position was a false one, although there was a remarkably fine indication of the fact that they were never appointed by God.

He was not saying their position was out of harmony with the thought and purpose and intention of God, because immediately afterwards He said to the people, "**all therefore whatsoever they bid you, that observe.**"

He recognized that a certain authority belonged to scribes and Pharisees. Bearing these two things in mind we must be careful to see what He really meant.

First of all He said that they had seated themselves in Moses' seat. This was not a reference merely to the men of His own age. This was His definition of the position occupied by the whole order of the scribes. In all likelihood the order was instituted in the days of Ezra; and the scribe was the interpreter of the law, the man who taught the people its meaning.

Now there was nothing wrong in such a position, and yet Christ was very careful to indicate in the way He stated the case, that they were self-appointed teachers.

They seated themselves in Moses' seat. The expression, "**Moses' seat,**" demands our attention. It is peculiarly the word that indicates authority. The Greek word here is *Cathedra*. These people sat in Moses' seat, the seat of the teachers, of authority, the seat from which they spoke in interpretation of the law with final authority.

Their position was authoritative so far.

It is impossible, however, to imagine that Christ meant here that men were to obey all the things that the Pharisees were telling them to do. We must not omit the “**therefore**” from the text, because He Himself resolutely broke the traditions of the elders, treated with disdain the thousand and one things which they had superadded to the Mosaic economy, ignored their multitudinous technicalities, sat down with unwashed hands to eat as a protest against the externality of their religious ideals.

So that He certainly did not mean to say that everything the scribes and Pharisees said to men, they were to do. We shall understand Him by putting emphasis on the “**therefore**.”

They have seated themselves in Moses’ chair, therefore, that is, in so far as their interpretation is indeed true to the Mosaic economy, you must obey them; so far as they fulfil the function of the position they have taken, they have authority, and their teaching is binding upon men.

But having said so much, our Lord proceeded to show the failure of these men.

There is no need for exposition, for the statement is so clear.

“**They say, and do not.**” “**They bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers;**” which does not mean they put burdens on men’s shoulders, and then would not help men to bear the burden; but that they put burdens on men’s shoulders which they would not carry themselves even with the finger. That is to say, they were not true to their own ethical teaching.

The King then proceeded to show the supreme motive of these men.

They wore the phylactery. Christ did not say it was wrong to wear it. Tradition has it, and perchance tradition is accurate, that He Himself wore phylacteries. They wore phylacteries, and were careful to wear them conspicuously. They widened the borders of the garment, broadening the cases in which the phylacteries rested, in order to attract the notice of men, in order that men might see the phylacteries.

There we have the underlying reason of all the failure of the scribes and Pharisees, “**to be seen of men.**”

It was a ruthless unveiling of the false in religion. The false in religion is that which is punctilious and particular in all the matters of external observance, and this in answer to the underlying desire to be notorious religiously, in the view of men.

In the Manifesto He had said that men prayed at the corners of the streets. He did not say it was wrong to pray at the corners of the streets, but He said these men prayed at the corners of the street to be seen of men, and with a fine scorn for them He added, “**Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.**” That is, they pray to be seen of men, and they are seen of men, and they get out of their praying all they want. So here again, coming to the end of the conflict, with the rulers standing around Him, listening to Him, He denounced the same evil.

We miss very much of these stories if we allow the local setting to fade from our mind.

Christ was in the Temple, multitudes were with Him, His disciples were there; and there all around were the men who had been questioning Him, and He had silenced and defeated them. With these men as object lessons, the broadened borders of their garments visible, the enlarged receptacle for the phylactery patent, He said, All this to be seen of men!

All their interpretation of law had as its inspiration, the desire to create for themselves a position of authority, of pre-eminence. They loved the salutation in the market-places, they loved the recognition of the crowd, and in order to gain these things, they sat in the Mosaic seat, and interpreted the law.

Now the false in religion stands revealed in Christ's contemplation of these men, not only in the case of the men themselves, but in the case of the people who are under the influence of such men.

The false in religion in the case of the people is due to failure to discriminate between the human and the divine; and consists of submission to unauthorized authority.

This always issues in degradation. Obedience to anything other than the highest, issues sooner or later in bondage to the lowest. Here was the peril of the age; nay more than the peril; here was the reason of its doom, when presently it was uttered by the lips of the gentle Servant of God.

Immediately turning from His warning, He addressed Himself to His own disciples, and He said to them:

- **“But be not ye called Rabbi;”** you are not to claim to have in your teaching any final authority;
- You are not to call any man your Father; there is to be no claim on your part of spiritual-life relation to any human being;
- You shall not be called Master, or Guide; you have no right to direct the conduct of any other individual soul.

This was His threefold charge to His own disciples. How largely we have lost sight of these things!

In that threefold negation the King recognized the essential element in religion. The deepest fact in religion is suggested by the central of the three things, and we will take that first.

You shall call no man Father.

It is a superficial treatment to imagine that Jesus meant, we are not to give other men the title of father; it is not the title that matters; it is the thing the title indicates that matters. **“Call no man your father.”** This is our Lord's forbidding of the recognition of any man's power to impart by ceremony or in any other way, spiritual life to his fellow man.

The father is the one who begets, the one from whom life comes. That is the essential and deepest fact in fatherhood in our common use of the word. So undoubtedly the word means in this connection.

The essential thing in religion is life. The false knew nothing of life in the soul, the false spent its time in making burdens, and binding them on men. There is the difference between false and true religion.

False religion is on, true religion is in.

That is Isaiah's teaching, in that fine chapter in which he satirizes idolatry. The man goes to the forest, he cuts down a tree, makes an image, *and he carries it*. That is false religion.

But Isaiah goes on to say *the Lord hath carried us*.

That is true religion. And the difference between the two is Life. That is the central word.

Now said Jesus Christ, "**Call no man your father on the earth,**" you shall never recognize any man who claims to be able, by sacramentarian grace or any other thing, to communicate life to your soul. The life of God in the soul of a man must come by the begetting of God.

The other two words reveal the other essentials in true religion.

First, Authority. Every man feels his need of it. It is of the very essence of religion. When we have life, our life needs authority, the ultimate and the binding fact, that which commands us.

The whole story of religion, false and true, in its conflict in the world, gathers around this question of authority. The Roman Church claims authority, and pity us who are not within the pale of that Church, because they say we have no authority. Let us dismiss all the differences and recognize the need. The soul of man needs authority, needs the voice that speaks to it with authority, needs the word that is binding upon it.

And more, the soul needs direction, not merely that direction of truth, which is authoritative and binding and final, but the perpetual application of truth to the incidents of everyday life, to the commonplaces and the crises as they come.

We are always needing in the religious life someone to say to us, "**This is the way, walk ye in it.**"

The relating of truth to conduct at every point in the life.

- Religion is life first;
- Secondly it is the authority to which man yields allegiance;
- Finally it is the perpetual guidance which he follows.

These are the things that Christ recognizes.

Here we have revealed the standard of truth, and here we have revealed to us the fact of what the real essence of religion is.

First, it is the life of God in the soul of a man.

And that life can only come to us by His imparting. It was He Who said to an honest and sincere inquirer upon the housetop, in the loneliness of the night, You must be born again, you need life.

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth may in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

This is how you will obtain life by My lifting up. We can only understand what Christ meant as we track Him through, and hear when He uses the phrase again, **“And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.”**

And that there may be no doubt as to His meaning the Spirit interprets it for us, **“This He said, signifying what death He should die.”**

So the King offers men life which is the fundamental necessity of religion, through the mystery of His own dying. And then He stands for evermore as the final authority.

Remember that His authority is not the authority of the interpretation of truth. His authority is the authority of essential truth. He said not, I teach, I declare, I explain truth, but, **“I am the truth.”**

If we can bring the soul of man face to face with the Christ, not with any human interpretation of Him, but to the actual Christ of the New Testament, that man immediately knows that he stands in the presence of essential and eternal truth. The one and final authority in religion, is the authority of Christ, and the authority of Christ as revealed to us in the Scriptures of truth.

Finally, the immediate guidance of Christ, for He is near to every one of us, and in every moment waiting to “Direct, control, suggest, each day.”

He sweeps away the intermediation of the man who claims authority, the intermediation of the man who claims to be able by any process to communicate life to the soul of a man, the intermediation of the man who dares to interfere in the conduct of another soul as between that soul and God.

We see at once how religion has been falsified wherever its vital principles have been interfered with.

We speak with awe and profound respect, of the saints of the great Roman Church, and we see at once how that Church recognizes this threefold conception of religion. There is the reason of its long-continued strength. It recognizes that man needs authority, that man needs Life, that man needs guidance, and in the threefold office of its ministry it professes to meet those needs.

- In the priestly office falsely it claims to communicate life through sacramentarian processes.
- In the teaching office it falsely claims to speak infallibly to man and answer his cry for authority.
- In the office of the confessional it falsely claims to investigate and guide men, and so to meet their need at that point.

It's appalling heresy consists in the fact that it takes hold of the essentials of religion and attempts to continue them by cutting their nerve, and denying what Christ said concerning them.

Our protest, in the name of spiritual religion, is for evermore to be made against all such blasphemous misuse of sacred things.

First against all that intermediates between the soul and God as Life Giver; we can only receive life directly from Him; neither through official priesthood nor sacramentarian arrangement can life touch the soul; the Supper of the Lord is the Eucharist, beautiful word indeed; the sacrament of thanksgiving; but the Table of the Lord is not the place where we receive life; it is the place where we give back our song in praise to God; but no man is richer in life by sitting there.

So also with baptism. There is no sacramentarian grace in it. No infant was ever made an inheritor of the Kingdom of heaven in baptism. No adult was ever made a member of the Church by baptism. These things may be valuable external symbols of internal truths, but there is no communication of life to the soul thereby, or kind or measure. The soul can only have life by His begetting, by its actual contact with God.

So also in matters of guidance. Let us make our perpetual, our constant, our vehement protest, against any human interference in matters of conduct.

Remember here that priestism is a very insidious thing. It reappears in strange new forms with the passing of years, and there are some people, most pronounced in their objection to Roman Catholicism, who themselves are practicing it in their interference with others. Away with priestism! Let us take our orders from Him alone.

But do not let us forget that this conception of religion is more than a negative responsibility; it reveals a positive duty, that of actual submission to Christ's authority if we deal with authority as something which is to illuminate our intelligence, and not command our will, it is a peril and a poison. But if we remit our soul to the Christ for His commanding word, and when we hear that commanding word obey it, then are we fulfilling our positive duty.

This fact that One is our Father, lays upon us the positive duty of the practice of fellowship with God. If indeed His life be in our soul, then our life in all its externality is to be ordered by the fact of the impulse of that indwelling life. We are to have fellowship with Him, not merely on the morning of the first day of the week in assembling for worship, but in all the acts and attitudes of everyday life. We are to remember that the only constraining force to which one must yield oneself is the force of the life of God in the soul.

Finally, if indeed we are determined that we will suffer no interference in matters of conduct, we must be equally determined that we will remit every matter of conduct to the arbitration of the Christ.

- We have no right to have anything in our business that we have not asked His will concerning.
- We have no right to have anything in our recreation that we are not quite sure He approves.
- We have no right to have anything in our attitudes towards civic, or national, or world-wide interests, that we have not held up in the light of His present and immediate interpretation.

This is religion. It is the bringing of the individual soul into direct relationship with God; the answer of the soul to the lonely authority of Christ; and the testing of the life in the presence of Christ, and by His will and His will alone.

May God lead us into these deepest things of religion.

~ end of chapter 61 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
