

DOES JESUS FORBID TITLES OF HONOR?

Matthew 23:1-12



You would think that there was a competition with a huge cash prize to the Bible commentator, trained or arm-chair, who could come up with the most literal interpretations/applications of the teachings of our Lord Jesus.

What I mean is there doesn't seem to be any sense of balance or careful consideration of what the text is actually saying, and further, what other passages might say to shed light on the verses in question. And secondarily, what has the Church of Jesus Christ thought about the teaching in question in the past?

You wonder if some Bible teachers actually understand that Jesus frequently uses the technique of hyperbole in His teaching. Many times His teachings sound shocking...and that's the point!

Here are some examples:

READ: Matthew 5:27-30, 10:34-39; John 6:53-60

Are we ready to pluck out our eyes, cut off our hands, hate our parents, and eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ, literally?

When Jesus shocks us with a teaching, shouldn't we carefully seek to understand His meaning without importing our own 21st century baggage into the text? Shouldn't we, as protestants, take more care that we are not simply looking for another anti-Roman Catholic proof-text?

This passage in Matthew 23 presents us with an opportunity to think as whole Bible Christians, not as wild-eyed sectarians pushing an agenda.

Below are notes on this passage from 19th century Anglican Bishop, J.C. Ryle.

In the twelve verses which begin the chapter, we see firstly, the duty of distinguishing between the office of a false teacher and his example. "The Scribes and Pharisees sit 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. And 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 Brentius, "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 improper 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 officers that holds it. The example of Paul on a certain occasion is worthy of notice, "I didn't know, brothers, that he was high priest. For it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'" (Acts 23:5.)

We see secondly, in these verses, that inconsistency, ostentation, and love of pre-eminence, 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 instructed the 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 to make people think how holy they were. As to **LOVE OF PRE-EMINENCE**, 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. They are soul-ruining sins. "How can you believe, who receive glory from one another?" (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. (1 Thess. 5:13.) Even 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." (1 Cor. 4:15.) 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 consists 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." (1 Peter 5:5.) Let us seek that blessed grace day by day. No grace is so beautiful, however much despised by the world. No grace is such an evidence of saving faith, and true conversion to God. No grace 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, "Whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

What was the problem with the Scribes and Pharisees? Isn't self-exaltation?

So how should we view the "prohibition" on titles of honor? How should this be applied in the Church? I think a modern analogy might be a politically shrewd church leader who has no graduate education but has been given an honorary doctorate, and yet who publicly insists on being called "doctor." I think that is probably the kind of thing Jesus had in mind in Matthew 23. And the same would apply to Pastor, Father, or any other title that is claimed for the purpose of self-glorification. This would be especially true for men who are self-ordained!

Likewise, the claim that Jesus forbids all titles while placing oneself in a more righteous role by claiming the same rejection, saying or implying that those who do use titles are not biblical or spiritual, falls into a similar category of self-glorification. The functional result is a great deal of pride in how humble they are because they do not take titles. Either example is about status, which Jesus' teachings in Matthew 23 aims to reject.

TEACH US, O LORD

BRIAN L. PENNEY, 2009

NICHOLAS HERMANN, 1560

1. Teach us, O Lord, with all our heart, with all our
2. And like - wise to our neigh - bor show A sac - ri -
3. O Lord our God, to Thee we cry, Have mer - cy

soul, and all our mind; To love Thee with a
fi - cial love like Thee; Who off - ered up Thine
on us now, we pray; In - cline our hearts to

stead - fast love: This Law a stat - ute most sub - lime.
on - ly Son, To bear our sin and set us free.
keep this Law, And lead us in Thy per - fect way.