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Matthew 23:6 - 23:10



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses Matthew 23:6-23:10 in this lecture. He states that accountability is advantageous for individuals to overcome their secret sins, and argues that Jesus admonishes religious leaders for their desire for power and status. Specifically, Gregg explains that the Pharisees wanted better seats in synagogues, and interprets Jesus' call to not call anyone "father" or "teacher" as a rejection of religious titles and a reminder to observe God's will. Gregg cautions against the wrong interpretation of Jesus' teachings and highlights the appropriate occasions that warrant religious titles, such as apostleship.

Transcript

Today we're continuing our study in Matthew chapter 23, where Jesus is giving his tirade, really, against the scribes and Pharisees who were the religious leaders and teachers in the synagogues of his day. And he's already said some pretty unfriendly things about them in the verses we've covered so far. He says that they are guilty of burdening people unnecessarily and leaving them burdened without assisting them.

And he means, of course, they burden them spiritually with guilt and with legalism and rules and regulations. And then they don't do anything to make these people, you know, relieved of these burdens, which can be done, of course. If you let people know of their guilt, they will be burdened.

If you let them know how to be right with God, they can be unburdened. The Pharisees didn't worry about that. They just burdened people and never released them from those burdens.

Also, Jesus said in verse 5 that everything they did, they did in order to impress people, to be seen by people. And that certainly is the wrong motivation for doing anything religious. And yet it is probably the motivation most common in most religions, including Christianity, is that people do a great deal of things that they would not ordinarily do in order to be seen by men.

It's quite clear, of course, when we show more consideration to our wives in public than

we do at home, for example. Or when we don't yell at our children when people are over at the house, but we do when they're not there. There's many, many ways in which we put on a false front.

Now, by the way, Christians are not alone in this. Non-Christians do it every bit as much, if not more. Because at least true Christians are less likely to be inconsiderate to their wives or to yell at their children, because the Spirit of God, I mean, they're more likely to be walking in the Spirit.

And the Spirit of God will not permit them to do that when they are walking in the Spirit. But, you know, Christians don't always walk in the Spirit, and their flesh does exhibit itself. But not very often when people are watching.

That's the point. We can do so many good deeds when people are watching that we would not do otherwise. That it's strictly a hypocrisy.

On the other hand, there's always, you know, there's always nuances to almost every truth. There is a sense in which, because we know that we are more inclined to do the right thing when people are watching, we might deliberately wish to make ourselves accountable to people in areas where we know ourselves to be weak. If we know that there's a tendency on our part to slip into some kind of wrong behavior, maybe it's a deeply ingrained habit or just a character weakness, and every time we're alone, we do it.

We fall to it. Maybe it's drinking. Maybe it's pornography.

Maybe it's something else. But we know ourselves to be vulnerable. Well, in such a case, this dynamic of being inclined to do what's right more when people are looking can work to our advantage without it being hypocrisy.

We can come to a person who's a godly friend and say, Listen, I've got this problem, and I need to be made accountable. I need to live every day as if you are watching me. And, of course, you can't watch me, but can you keep me accountable on this? Could you check up on me once in a while, ask me about it once in a while? And this accountability can work to our advantage to help us overcome secret sins.

However, this is not hypocrisy in such a case as that because the very reason we would make ourselves accountable thus is that we sincerely desire to do better. Hypocrisy exists when we don't desire to do better, but we'd like everyone to think we are. It's playing a role.

It's play acting. That's what hypocrisy is. And, therefore, a play actor is one who wants everyone to be convinced, at least for the time being, that he is the character he is playing, even though he is really somebody else.

Now, that's not the same thing as saying, Okay, I admit I've got problems. I admit I am weak, and I also know that I'm less likely to fall into these problems if I'm accountable to somebody who's keeping an eye on me, keeping track of me. And so, as I say, it's not the same thing as hypocrisy in a case like that.

It's when you are concealing your true nature, your true depravity, and cloaking it with an outward garb of religiosity when you're around other people. That's when you are like the Pharisees, and that's what they did. Now, Jesus continues, and he doesn't get any lighter on them.

If anything, he gets heavier on them. He says of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23, beginning at verse 6, They loved the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men Rabbi, Rabbi. In other words, they loved the title Rabbi.

Do you know what Rabbi means? In Aramaic, the actual meaning of the word Rabbi means My Great One. Although its actual meaning in usage has the meaning of something like teacher. My Great One is the literal meaning of the word Rabbi.

So, can you imagine, of course I'm sure you can, having some kind of a position in society where when people meet you on the street, they call you My Great One, My Great One. Now, of course, as I said, the word Rabbi, although it etymologically means My Great One, and it really functioned in ordinary usage as almost a synonym for a teacher. But you see, a man can say I'm a schoolteacher without it being a boast.

It's just a description of what he does. At the same time, in some religious settings, the teachers are the ones who are the most respected, the masters, the rabbis. And because they are respected, simply to call oneself teacher or to be called teacher sort of strokes the ego a bit because that word teacher carries with it a certain air of authority and of honor and respect that one appreciates people showing them.

Now, the fact is, the Pharisees loved it when people called them Rabbi, Rabbi. They also loved other visible honors in society. They liked to have the best places at the feasts and the best seats in the synagogues.

Now, apparently, the synagogues had, you know, status seats, I guess, sort of like the box seats or something at a sporting event or something like that. But the idea is the very best, most prestigious seats, they were there. Now, they might be the seats on the platform because there is, of course, a certain prestige.

When you go to church, you have all the pews facing one way, and then there's a few seats on the platform facing the crowd. Those who sit in these seats, the crowd looks at them the whole time. Now, a lot of people would be self-conscious about having everyone look at them all the time.

But some men just love that, and women too. Some people just thrive on having people notice them and pay attention to them. And to sit on the platform is very important to them.

Now, I'm not saying everybody who sits on a platform has pride about it. They don't necessarily. But I have known of cases, for example, where an evangelistic crusade was coming to a town, and a decision had to be made by the planners as to who, what local ministers and local leaders would sit on the platform with the evangelist.

And to sit on the platform with the evangelist meant you get to sit up in front of thousands and thousands of people. And to sit on the platform means that someone recognizes you as important in the religious community. Now, by the way, religious professionals, professional religious leaders, are not any more, or I should say, are not any less prone to egotism than professionals in any field.

People like to be recognized as good at what they do. People like to be recognized as, you know, professionals. And so when an evangelistic crusade comes to town, you know, the planners have to really kind of be sensitive.

Well, how many seats do we have on the platform here? How many pastors are there in town? Which leaders in this town should we honor by putting on the platform? And which ones, you know, are we not obligated to put up there? Which ones will be offended if we don't put them up there? Now, there are actually men I have heard of who were actually offended because they were not invited to sit on the platform when the evangelist came to town or whatever. These are just like the Pharisees. They loved the best seats in the synagogues.

What about this, you know, the best seats at the feasts? Well, in feasts, there were seats of honor as well. Honored guests were invited to feasts as well as ordinary guests. And the Pharisees tended, and in fact the Jews in general, tended to really want to be in those better seats.

Again, it was a way of holding and showing what status you hold. Jesus spoke about this tendency to want the best seats in the feasts. In Luke chapter 14, he talked about it also.

It says in Luke 14, let me see where the best place to start is. It happened as he went into the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees, verse 1, to eat bread on the Sabbath that they watched him closely. And then a little further down, got to go a little further down.

He was at this feast. And he says, now when one of those who sat at the table with him, let me think here. There's so much here, but there's one particular parable.

Let me just, we'll go here. He said in verse 7, he told a parable to those who were invited when he noted that they chose the best places, meaning the best seats at the feast. He

said to them, when you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honorable than you be invited by him.

And he who invited you and him come and say to you, give place to this man. And then you begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes, he might say to you, friend, go up higher.

Then you will have glory in the presence of those who sit at the table with you. For whoever exalts himself will be abased, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. So here Jesus observes as he's at a feast that the Jewish leaders, this is at a ruler of the Pharisees, so it was largely a Pharisee crowd, that they were jealous over the best seats, and if possible they would take the best seats possible for themselves.

Even though, as Jesus pointed out, this might result in them being put to shame in front of everyone if they're really someone more honorable than showed up and there weren't enough of the best seats, they might have to be told to sit down and get down lower, and that would be much more humiliating than putting yourself in the lower seat in the first place. Well, this is how the Pharisees were. I'm sure that we can think of many applications to our own times and our own lives, wanting attention, wanting people to recognize us, wanting people to honor us with titles, calling Rabbi, Rabbi.

But Jesus went on and said this in verse 8, But you do not be called Rabbi, for one is your teacher, the Christ, and you are all simply brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father, for one is your father, he who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers, for one is your teacher, the Christ.

Now Jesus said the Pharisees love it when people call them Rabbi, but you, and I think he means his disciples, don't let yourself be called Rabbi, and he says don't call anyone father, and don't be called teacher. Now one could easily take these instructions beyond the point that I think Jesus wants them to go. A person could refuse to call his own earthly father, father, because Jesus said don't call anyone on earth your father.

This certainly is not what he has in mind. When the scripture says honor your father and your mother, it's talking about an earthly father and there's nothing wrong about referring to that earthly father as a father. The Bible itself refers to him as such.

What Jesus is saying of course is you should not confer titles of religious superiority on people. When he says call no one on earth your father, he doesn't mean your earthly father, don't call your earthly father, father. There's certainly nothing wrong with doing so, but what he means is don't confer the name father upon a religious leader as a term of reverence.

Now this is done. This was done in biblical times. The older rabbis were referred to as

father, and of course it happens in certain church circles, especially in the Roman Catholic Church it's very common practice to refer to the priests as father.

And now that is the very thing Jesus said not to do. He did not mean that you cannot call your real father, father, but he's talking about religious titles in this context. He's saying don't call anyone father.

Now how it is that the priests of the Roman Catholic Church allow themselves to be called father without objecting on the basis of this particular teaching of Christ is beyond me, but it is nonetheless a case of actual violation of what Jesus said to do. Now I therefore do not think it's a sin to use the word father with reference to a man. I don't think Jesus intended for us to take it that way, but he does not want us to be conferring religious honors and titles on each other.

Why? He says because we're all brethren. When he said don't call anyone teacher because you have one teacher, the Christ, does this mean that for a man to actually be called teacher is a wrong thing? No, it's as I was saying earlier that to call someone teacher in our society may not carry the same connotation of reverence as it did there. If someone says what do you do and you happen to be a schoolteacher and you say well I'm a teacher, there's nothing wrong with them saying oh okay, or for little kids to speak to their teacher and say teacher.

That is not a sin. What he's referring to is the title teacher like the title rabbi as a term of reverence for somebody's spiritual status. It's even possible for someone to be a teacher in the church and not necessarily have that reverential connotation to it because Paul said that God gave some apostles and some prophets and some evangelists and some pastors and teachers.

It's possible to use the word teacher or father, either of these terms, not so much as terms of reverence or of special honor to persons in the church who hold superior positions over us, but rather it's possible to use them simply as descriptive of who they are. This man's my father, meaning my real father. He is.

He fathered me. He's my biological father and there's nothing wrong with saying so. Jesus is not speaking against that.

Likewise, if someone teaches and someone says, what do you do? And you say, well, I'm a teacher. And they say, oh, okay, teacher. That doesn't mean that there's a violation here.

What Jesus is talking about is the common titles that people take on themselves or that people confer on others in order to show that they are a cut above the others, that the one who is addressed as father is clearly the superior to the one who is calling him that. The one who says teacher, teacher or rabbi, rabbi is someone who is in many cases,

certainly in that society, speaking of someone who is a superior spiritually to them and noting that by appeal to a title. Now, let me just say this.

In the kingdom of God, there certainly are those who are superior to others. Jesus said, he that teaches men to observe the law and who observes himself will be called the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And he that does not obey the law and teaches others not to do so will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven.

There certainly are those who are greater and those who are less. There are some who are more mature and some who are less mature. It is not wrong for that to exist.

I mean, everyone's at a different point in their maturity and in their spirituality, and it simply is not wrong to acknowledge that somebody may be a stronger Christian, somebody may be an older Christian, somebody may be a wiser or more spiritual Christian than you. But the problem here, the context is that the Pharisees loved it when people called them by these titles and no doubt were offended if people would not call them by the title of respect that they felt they deserved. It's not a matter of the words themselves.

It is a matter of the spirit and the attitude conveyed in the words by those who take those titles upon themselves. And Jesus therefore tells us, don't call anyone father and don't be called teacher and don't let anyone call you rabbi, rabbi. It's not so much literally that it's wrong for my children to call me father.

It's rather in the context that he's talking about, it is wrong for us to seek and to exult in religious titles of deference offered to us. That is what he's saying. I saw a tremendous violation of this teaching once from an evangelical teacher who was on the radio.

He had a talk show and he had several earned degrees. If I'm not mistaken, I think he had seven or eight earned college degrees, mostly, of course, graduate degrees. And he's quite a respected scholar.

Obviously, some of his degrees were PhDs. And he at one time had a radio talk show and people would call in. And I remember once, let us say his last name was Smith.

It was not, but we're just going to use that word. He was not really, this is not his real name. But a caller once called in when I was listening and said, oh, Brother Smith.

And the man said, that's Dr. Smith. He says, I worked very hard for these degrees and I have every right to be called Dr. Smith. Again, Smith was not the right name.

But the point is, the man was just the kind of person that the scribes and Pharisees were, insisting that he be deferred to and called by respectful titles. This is absolutely the wrong spirit. And Jesus taught against it altogether.

In fact, the apostles, who truly were men of spiritual authority and rank in the church and still are and forever will be, they did not take upon themselves such titles of respect. They could have called themselves by, you know, higher titles than they did. But when they wrote their epistles, what did they call themselves? They referred to themselves as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sometimes Paul especially would refer to him as an apostle, but he'd also refer to himself as a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. He did not wish that his title as apostle be taken as something that was an ego boost to him. Now, I've known people today who would like to be called apostles, and they do call themselves apostles.

I don't know that that's, I mean, I can't judge what's in their heart when they do that. I mean, if a man really were an apostle, as Paul, for example, was, there's nothing intrinsically wrong with him mentioning that fact, especially if his apostolic authority is so essential to his message that, you know, people need to know that he's not just an ordinary guy. He's an apostle of Christ given these instructions.

I can see times when there'd be a need for Paul or others to mention their apostleship. But there's many people I've run into who call themselves apostles, and there doesn't seem to be any reason in the world for them to appeal to this or use this title. As a matter of fact, there doesn't seem to be any reason for me to believe they are apostles in most cases.

But the whole idea is there is this danger of egotism, even in the heart of the believer. Religion, as well as certain other vocations, can really cater to the pride in man. And those who will become religious leaders, leaders in the church, need to be very careful of this tendency.

And it is very easy to do when people comment about how much good you're doing them and how much they respect you and what a great sermon that was and how intelligent they perceive you to be and all of that kind of stuff. It's very hard, in many cases, to fight off that tendency to congratulate yourself and flatter yourself and to even sort of exalt in titles and statements of deference and respect from people. This we need to be aware of because God is watching, and God is not impressed with us.

He's impressed with himself, and we need to make sure that we don't become impressed with ourselves or encourage others to be overly so.