Confronting Our Hypocrisy
Matthew 23:1-12[1]
XXV. Jesus Deals with Us

Throughout our studies of how "Jesus deals with us" we have seen him deal directly, at times confrontationally, with sin and unbelief (eg. Nicodemus, Samaritan woman, Rich Young Ruler, Simon the Pharisee, Peter). Yet He always did so graciously, patiently, kindly. However, an entirely different tone is evident in Jesus' final conflict with the religious leadership in Judea.

Tensions with the religious authorities (scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees) intensified after the "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem on "Palm Sunday."[2] Jesus dared to "cleanse" the temple. He taught several parables against the authorities, and they knew it (21:45). Their conflict reached its peak in Matthew 23. Righteous indignation characterizes the entire discourse as Jesus confronts and exposes the religious hierarchy of His day, culminating in the concentrated denunciations recorded only in Matthew, sometimes known as the "Seven Woes" (Mt 23:13-36).[3]

Only Matthew records the "sustained denunciation" of the scribes and Pharisees, as Leon Morris calls the contents of Matthew 23.[4] Mark and Luke record some criticisms of the Pharisees in this same context (Mark 12:38-40; Luke 20:45-47). However, these criticisms are nothing like the length or

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[1] See also Luke 11:43-45; 20:45-46.

[2] See also Lk 20:45-47 (as recorded in Mt 21:23-22:46; Mk 11:27-12:44; Lk 19:45-21:4).

[3] This conflict included several parables aimed at the authorities: the "Two Sons" (Mt 21:28-32), "Tenants" (Mt 21:33-46), "Wedding Feast" (Mt 22:1-14), as well as the questions about Caesar and taxes (Mt 22:15-22), the resurrection (Mt 22:23-33), the greatest commandment (Mt 22:34-40), and David's son (Mt 22:41-46). No one dared question Him again.

[4] Morris, *Matthew*, 569.

intensity found in Matthew 23. We find in Matthew 23 the strongest language, the harshest denunciations, the most scathing criticisms to be found in the gospels. We note that this language is reserved for the churchgoing crowd, the most religious people of His day. This itself is noteworthy. As we have seen, this is not the way that Jesus speaks to the tax-collector Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), the promiscuous Samaritan woman (John 4), or the woman caught in adultery (John 8), and other overt "sinners." Among the accusations leveled against Jesus by the religious community was that Jesus was a "friend" of tax collectors and sinners (Mt 11:19; Lk 7:34). No, this harsh language is reserved for one particular sin: religious hypocrisy. The basic problem with the scribes and Pharisees is that they were pretending to be something they weren't. Their religion had become external, a matter of religious form, of correct ritual and ceremony. Their service of God flowed from a divided heart. A gap had developed between what they said and what they did. Their religion was poisoned by self-serving motives, spiritual pride, and religious ambition. Their "faith" was disconnected from love for God and love of neighbor.

Hypocrisy is always the temptation for a religious community, for those who (in the words of a friend) "take their religion *very seriously*." Note the audience in verse 1.

> *Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples.*
> (Matthew 23:1)

The denunciations of the scribes and Pharisees begin with warnings to the largely sympathetic "crowds" (21:46) and the core of committed "disciples," lest they should fall into the same errors. That is, His interest in vv1-12 is not so much criticizing Pharisees (as in vv13-39) as "drawing his hearers' attention to the kind of lives they should be living," says Morris. "He is warning them not to adopt the superficial and hypocritical approach that was unfortunately so characteristic of

the Pharisees," he adds.[5] R. T. France says even beyond verse 12 "The true target of the whole discourse is the crowds and disciples who were to break free from Pharisaic legalism."[6]

How does Jesus deal with religious hypocrisy? He warns. He warns us in the strongest terms. His warnings are for His contemporaries as well as for the church-going community today. Beware, He says. Be alert. Here are areas in which the church community is vulnerable to the sin of hypocrisy.

Inconsistency

Jesus first warns us of the hypocrisy of *inconsistency.* Beware of the problem of those who "preach, but do not practice" (v3). Be consistent, He warns us.

> *[1]Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, [2] "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat*
> (Matthew 23:1,2)

The scribes were legal experts, drawn from among the priesthood as well as from among the Pharisees. They were Israel's theologians and biblical scholars. They were among the social elite in Israel, enjoying both power and privilege. "Beware of them," He says in Luke's parallel passage, warning the people about the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees (Lk 20:45, 12:1).

The Pharisees are not necessarily teachers but people who took great pains to keep all the requirements of the law as understood by the Pharisaic tradition. They were the most devout religious practitioners of their day. They kept all the rules. They tithed every penny. They were in church for every service. They kept a strict Sabbath. They studied the Bible carefully (Jn 5:39).

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[5] Morris, *Matthew*, 571.
[6] France, *Matthew*, 323.

They were evangelistic zealots, crossing sea and land to make a single convert (Mt 23:15). A church full of Pharisees would appear to be the greatest church on earth. It would have one hundred percent attendance and no financial problems. Pastors wouldn't need to beg members to give or study their Bibles or evangelize their neighbors or head to the mission field.

Yet such a church would be vulnerable to the dangers that Jesus points out in our passage. Jesus says of the scribes and Pharisees together that they "sit on Moses' seat" or "chair" (NASB). This "chair" refers not to a piece of furniture but to the teaching office, as is the case when we speak of the "chair of the history department," or the *chair*man.[7] Those who "sit on Moses' seat" are responsible to teach, interpret, and apply biblical law. This position extended from Moses through the prophets to Ezra to the present.[8] Jesus continues,

> [3] *so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.* (Matthew 23:3)

Verse 3 so surprises some commentators that they interpret verse 3a as a piece of sarcastic irony. The tone is "tongue-in-cheek," says France. He offers this paraphrase: "Of course you may do what they *say,* if you like, but don't do what they *do.*"[9] Others (e.g. Morris, Barclay, Henry) understand the "so" or "therefore" (*oun*) of verse 3 as a conclusion drawn from verse 2 which limits the meaning of "whatever" or "all" (NASB). The

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[7] Morris: "the teaching office . . . as carried on from generation to generation" (*Matthew*, 572); France: "the teaching authority" as in our professorial "chair" (*Matthew*, 324).

[8] Morris: To seat themselves in Moses' chair means "that they have taken it on themselves to teach authoritatively in the tradition of Moses (as they saw it)" (*Matthew*, 572); France: They were "officially responsible for interpreting and applying the laws of Moses" (*Matthew*, 324).

[9] France, *Matthew*, 324.

meaning is, “all that they tell you from the chair of Moses.” That is, when the scribes and Pharisees expound Moses they must be heard.

Jesus is clarifying that He is neither attacking the law of God *per se* nor those who rightly teach it (as He also clarified in Mt 5:17-19). When they speak from His chair faithfully and accurately, they must be obeyed. However, He does not mean “their traditions, superstitions, and corrupt glosses upon true law,” as John Trapp explains, “but whatsoever they teach that is agreeable to truth.” Jesus regularly denounces the scribes and Pharisees when they distort or go beyond Moses (e.g. Matthew 5:20-48; 19:3-9; 12:1-14; 16:6-12; 15:12-14). “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees,” He warns (Mt 16:6, 11).[10] Yet there was nothing wrong with their commitment to the detailed study of the law of Moses and their careful obedience. “So as long as they sit close to Moses’ chair, and keep it warm, as it were,” Trapp continues, “hearken to them.”[11] “He is commending their upholding of what Moses taught,” Morris agrees.[12] While D. A. Carson, and Jeremias and France interpret “do and observe” as irony, Morris rightly (it seems to us) points out that it is “more likely that Jesus is differentiating between the words of the Pharisees and their deeds.”[13] Words

[10] Mk 8:15; Lk 12:1.
[11] Trapp, *Commentary*, V:238.
[12] Morris, *Matthew*, 573.
[13] Morris, *Matthew*, 573; Henry adds: “We must not think the worse of good truths for their being preached by bad ministers; nor of good laws for their being executed by bad magistrates. Though it is most desirable to have our food brought by angels, yet, if God send it to us by ravens, if it be good and wholesome, we must take it, and thank God for it” (*Exposition*, V:373).Trapp adds similarly: “A deformed painter may draw a godly picture: a stinking breath sound a mighty blast; and he that hath but a bad voice, show cunning in descant. A blind man may bear a torch in a dark night, and a harp make music to others, which itself is not sensible of. Posts set for direction of passengers by the highway side do point out the way which themselves go not: and signposts tell the traveler there is wholesome diet or

versus deeds is the point. "Do and observe" their words, Jesus says, "but not the works they do" or "do not do according to their deeds" (NASB). Why not? "For they preach but do not practice." They were not false teachers. They were orthodox. The problem was not their teaching *per se* but their attitude and behavior. They were inconsistent. They misrepresented themselves. They talked as if they were one thing but lived another. They pretended. They said *this* and did *that*. We might think of the scandals of recent years, indeed of every era, typically financial or sexual, of those whose teaching was sound but their lives were train wrecks. The classic authors warn us not to reject good truths because they are taught by bad men. A blind man can hold a torch on a dark night that he cannot see. A street sign can point the way which it does not go. Yet at the same time Jesus urges, in Matthew Poole's words, "Let not the law of God lose its authority with you because of these wicked men."[14]

How do we avoid this form of hypocrisy? By doing what we say. By walking our talk. By practicing what we preach. If we are going to claim the name "Christian," then we must act like one. Matthew Henry describes preachers who,

> . . . when in the pulpit, preaching so well that it is a pity they should ever come out; but, when out of the pulpit, living so ill that it is a pity they should ever come in.

He laments that some "pull down in their practice what they build up in their preaching."[15] Parents, don't disillusion your

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warm lodging within, when themselves remain in the storms without. Leud preachers are like spire-steeples, or high pinnacles, which point up to heaven, but press down to the centre" (*Commentary*, V:238).

[14] Poole, *Commentary*, III:108.

[15] Henry, *Exposition*, V:329.

children by behaving one way on Sunday and contradicting it Monday to Saturday. Young people, don't disillusion your peers by playing Christian in church but being unkind or even cruel at school or in the neighborhood throughout the week. Members, don't disillusion your fellow members by extending warm greetings when face-to-face combined with back-stabbing gossip when apart. If we are to avoid this form of hypocrisy, deeds must match words, walk must match talk.[16]

If I am a Christian, I avoid profanity; I control my temper; I practice moderation; I dress modestly; I live morally; I refuse gossip; my words edify; I care for the lowly and outcast; I have a sanctifying impact upon others. I do these things not perfectly but characteristically. Granted, only by the power of the Holy Spirit can we believe and obey God, become holy, imitate Christ, and be characterized by the fruit of the Holy Spirit. However, the fact of our dependence upon grace doesn't nullify the need for consistency or eliminate the destructive effects of the hypocrisy of inconsistency. The same grace of God that saves us also instructs us "to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age" (Titus 2:11,12). What does Jesus expect of us? Consistency. He expects our walk to match our talk.

Double standards

Second, Jesus warns of the hypocrisy of *double standards.*

> *4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear,[a] and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.*
> (Matthew 23:4)

The phrase "tie up heavy burdens" is language borrowed from the realm of transport in the ancient world. Loads were tied up

[16] Again Henry: "Those are of all sinners most inexcusable that allow themselves in the sins they condemn in others" (*Exposition*, V:373).

or secured on the backs of beasts of burden. This is how the Pharisees applied the law. The scribes and Pharisees had multiplied and elaborated and so extended the application of the law that fifty volumes of rabbinic commentary were required to contain the thousands and thousands of regulations that detailed their requirements. Normal people, tradesmen and laborers could not know or do it all. J. B. Green points out again, "The law is not presented as the culprit; rather, scribal elaboration of the law comes in for criticism."[17] This elaboration of theirs was positively motivated. They built a hedge around each commandment in order to prevent inadvertent violations. The effect, however, was to load the people of God with "burdens" that were "hard to bear." Morris provides an example of the kind of regulations then current in first-century Judaism:

> On the sabbath, they taught, a man may not carry a burden 'in his right hand or in his left hand, in his bosom or on his shoulder.' But he may carry it 'on the back of his hand, or with his foot or with his mouth or with his elbow, or in his ear or in his hair or in his wallet (carried) mouth downwards, or between his wallet and his shirt, or in the hem of his shirt, or in his shoe or in his sandal' (*Shabbath* 10:3).[18]

This was just one of hundreds and hundreds of such rules governing all aspects of life. Moreover, Jewish interpretive documents maintained that it was more important to observe the scribal interpretations than the law itself, since the scribes made clear what was obscure in the law.[19] However, rather than clarifying and helping people, they overwhelmed them. Anyone who was serious about keeping the law as understood by the religious teachers faced a formidable challenge. His situation

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[17] Green, *Luke*, 474.
[18] Morris, *Luke*, 205, 206.
[19] See Morris, *Luke*, 205.

was not unlike ours today as we face the tax code. He needed a capable lawyer just to know what was required. Then he needed remarkable personal resolve to get it all done correctly. The whole system was oppressively burdensome. So it was that the experts both deprived the people of God of their liberties and imposed obligations which God never required of them.

The extra-biblical requirements of the scribes and Pharisees were "heavy burdens." Yet they would not lift a "finger" to bear the burden themselves or to help those so burdened. A "finger" represents the least effort a person could make. David Brown explains that Jesus objects "not so much to the irksomeness of the legal rites, though they were irksome enough (Acts 15:10)," but rather "to the heartless rigour with which they were enforced, and *by men of shameless inconsistency*."[20] Instead of lifting the load themselves, they mitigated the requirements and evaded compliance. In other words, the Pharisees knew the loopholes. The legal experts granted themselves exemptions. The rules were made to apply to everyone else. They were the exceptions.[21] They were stringent with others and lenient with themselves. This is often the way it is in the cults. The leaders have "special needs" or "unique circumstances." Moral laws, tithing requirements, and Sabbath rules are suspended for them. *Again, the scribes and Pharisees didn't practice what they preached*.[22] Instead, they "used their skill in casuistry to invent endless loopholes and escape clauses to avoid carrying those

[20] Brown, *Four Gospels*, 108-109 (emphasis added).
[21] They were skilled "in giving the impression of keeping (the rules) while avoiding their minute demands" (Marshall, *Luke*, 500).
[22] "So complicated were these rules and regulations that one would have needed to be a highly qualified lawyer oneself to know whether one was breaking the law or not; and a serious attempt to keep the rules turned moral and religious duty into an intolerable burden" (Gooding, *Luke*, 234).

same burdens themselves," says Gooding.[23] The lawyers were "experts in evasion," notes William Barclay.[24]

This is hypocrisy at its worst. We all sin, someone might point out. No one is perfect. Yet, as J. C. Ryle points out, "We have a right to expect some agreement between a man's words and a man's works,—between his teaching and his doing,—between his preaching and his practice."[25] Neither would they lighten the load by repealing some of their rules or dispensing with them altogether. They did nothing to mitigate the severity of their legislation.

What does Jesus expect of us? One standard, no exemptions. Christian leaders are to be "examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:3). They lead by doing. They demonstrate in their own lives what needs to be done.

How does Jesus deal with us?

1. *He simplifies religious life*. Christianity is simple: love God and love your neighbor. Augustine essentially said, "Love and do what you will."[26] The whole rest of the Bible is an elaboration of one command of love, which is expanded to two, then to the Ten, and then to the whole biblical revelation. Behind every verse is God's love for us, the call for us to love Him, and for us to love our neighbor. The other biblical exhortations and commandments help us to understand the specifics of what it means to love God and love neighbor, but the basic requirements are simple. The Christian life is not complicated. Love God. Keep the Golden Rule.

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[23] Gooding, *Luke*, 234.
[24] Barclay, *Luke*, 161.
[25] Ryle, *Luke*, II:51-2.
[26] Augustine, from his sermons on 1 John (4:4-12).

2. *He lifts our burdens.* The life commanded by Christ lifts our burdens. He places His yoke and burden on us. However, the "yoke is easy," and the "burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). Christ's "commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). Christ's truth is liberating. It sets free (John 8:32). "The way of transgressors is hard," the Proverbs say (Proverbs 13:15, KJV).[27] The murderer, who won't keep the 6th commandment, the adulterer who won't keep the 7th commandment, the thief who won't keep the 8th commandment, the liar who won't keep the 9th commandment, the covetous who won't keep the 10th commandment all have difficult lives. The hypocrite has the problem of having to keep up appearances. Life in the fast lane is rough.

Religious self-promotion

Third, Jesus exposes the hypocrisy of *self-serving religious motives*.

> [5] *They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.* (Matthew 23:5)

Jesus' criticism is that the scribes and Pharisees practice religion as a show "to be seen by others." The world today thinks religion is a waste of time. One's reputation is not enhanced by visible religiosity, indeed the opposite. However, there are religious communities, in our case churches, in which one is respected according to how much one knows, what official positions one occupies, if one is a teacher or preacher, one's level of participation, and so on. One is respected and rewarded accordingly *in that* community. Because this is the case, one's motivations can be distorted. The basic motivation Jesus identifies behind all their religious activities was self. "They do *all* their deeds" for this reason. Chrysostom speaks of

[27] "treacherous" (NASB, ESV); "faithless" (NIV).

clergy who "always acts with the spectator in mind."[28] Religion was all show. All they did was for the sake of ego and appearances. He cites as an example the use of the phylactery, called tefillin today, which "was a little box containing verses from Scripture (Exodus 13:1-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21)," explains Morris.[29] To broaden may refer to increasing the size of the straps by which the phylactery was attached to the forehead or upper arm, making the box more prominent and noticeable. Jesus also mentions their "fringes" or "tassels" (NASB). Jesus actually appears to have worn these (Matthew 9:20). They were attached to the outer garment in obedience to Numbers 15:37-41 and Deuteronomy 22:12, and were worn as reminders of the commandments of God. These were made "broad" or "lengthen(ed)" (NASB), heightening their visibility, making them (and the piety of the wearers) more noticeable. They were drawing attention to themselves. They were more concerned with being seen than with pleasing God.

One of the most memorable characters of early television was the neatly groomed Eddie Haskell of the "Leave it to Beaver" show.[30] He was the characteristic bad boy with a smart mouth except when adults were around. If an adult walked into a room of boys, he was immediately transformed from a mean-spirited, scheming adolescent to a perfectly polite young man: "That's a lovely dress you're wearing, Mrs. Cleaver." He would make a kind remark about her youngest son *Theodore*, whom everyone else called Beaver, or his older brother "Wallace," that is Wally. His politeness was insincere. He was a fake, a phony. His respect for adult authority was by way of overdone good manners, of "eye-service," as a "people pleaser" as the apostle Paul calls it, not from "a sincere heart" (Eph 6:5-6). Jesus is

[28] Cited in *ACCS*, *NT*, Ib:166.
[29] Morris, *Matthew*, 574.
[30] Played by Ken Osmond. In 1999, *TV Guide* named Haskell number 20 on its "50 Greatest TV Characters of All Time" list.

warning us not to draw attention to ourselves, or advertise our piety, or attempt to impress people with our spirituality. How does Jesus deal with us? He warns us not to "sound the trumpet" when we give or "stand on street corners" when we pray (Matthew 6:1-6). Practice a hidden piety that is exercised for the sake of pleasing God and receiving His hidden reward.

Love of preeminence

Fourth, Jesus warns of the hypocrisy of *pursuing pre-eminence*. Jesus mentions three main public arenas in which the religious leaders were eagerly pursuing recognition: the marketplaces, the feasts, and the synagogues.

> [6] *and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues.* (Matthew 23:6)

They "love the place of honor at feasts," He says. Tables at banquets were arranged in a U shape, the bottom of the U being the honored seat. The scribes and Pharisees sought the prestige position. They wanted to be thought important. "Best seats in the synagogues" probably refers to the seats up front, behind the officiants, facing the congregation. This was where the leaders of the synagogue sat. There, one could be seen by all.

> [7] *and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.* (Matthew 23:7)

Moreover, they love "greetings in the marketplace." This refers not to normal greetings but to "respectful greetings" (NASV) with salutation and titles that indicated that the greeted person was someone of great importance. "They were tickled with high titles," says Trapp.[31] They also loved to be called "rabbi." This term had a broader meaning than just teacher. It could be used of a master by a slave, or a prince by a subject, and even of

[31] Trapp, *Commentary*, V:239.

royalty. It indicates greatness. A "rabbi," in the more narrow sense, would be an outstanding teacher of the law. They sought, in summary, what Morris calls "ostentatious marks of eminence."[32]

Brown refers to the "itch for ecclesiastical superiority which has been the bane and the scandal of Christ's ministers in every age."[33] In the Christian community, things are to be different.

> *"But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers."* (Matthew 23:8)

Jesus prohibits the titles of "rabbi," "teacher," and "leader" for His disciples in the verses that follow (8-10). These prohibitions should be understood as hyperbole rather than absolute. He is not prohibiting the *office* or the *function*, both of which the rest of the New Testament recognizes. We have pastors[34] and teachers[35] and elders and deacons.[36] What He warns against are the *titles* and *honors* that go with the function and office.

Jesus is not abolishing the office of teacher or denying the necessity of teaching (e.g. Ephesians 4:11). What He prohibits is the honorary title that sets one apart from the rest. In that respect there is but one leader.

> *9 And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.* (Matthew 23:9)

Jesus is not prohibiting the use of this title in the family. Elsewhere, He insists that fathers be honored (Matthew 15:4; 19:19). The context here is teaching. Teachers among the

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[32] Morris, *Luke*, 294.
[33] Brown, *Four Gospels*, 109.
[34] Eph 4:11 (*poimeu*, shepherds, pastors).
[35] 1 Cor 12:28-29; Eph 4:11; Jas 3:1 (*didaskalos*, teacher, master, the New Testament equivalent of rabbi).
[36] 1 Tm 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Pt 5:1-5.

disciples of Christ are not to be given the title "father." The New Testament community is a family of brothers and sisters and One Father, who is in heaven. One can speak of Christians being spiritual fathers to others (e.g. 1 Corinthians 4:15; 1 Timothy 1:2, cf. Gal. 4:19; Phil 2:22). Yet in these cases, as Morris points out, "The term is not used as a title, nor is to be employed in any spirit of superiority."[37]

> [10]*Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.* (Matthew 23:10)

Jesus is not saying something new in this verse, but repeating the meaning of verse 8.[38] "Instructor" (*kathēgētēs*) is used only here in the New Testament and has a range of meaning from "guide" to "instructor" to "teacher" to "leader." Christ is our one instructor, our teacher, our guide. Here again, this is hyperbole. New Testament leaders are called "leaders" (*hēgéŏmai*) (e.g. Hebrews 13:7,17). The apostle Paul calls himself a "teacher of the Gentiles" (1 Tm 2:7; 2 Tm 1:11). Jesus' primary concern (we repeat) is not with functions and offices but with titles and honors. What He forbids, says Poole, is "an affectation of such titles, and hunting after them."[39]

It was probably never wise to begin calling ministers "Reverend" and "the very Reverend" and the "most very Reverend." They should not have been given the title "father," or "Pope" (from the Latin for "Poppa"), or "Domine," as among the Dutch, or "parson" (because he was *the person*) as in England. The use of these titles has not been wise. Our bulletin lists the preacher as simply "Mr." I think it's acceptable to use a more formal ministerial title like "Reverend" when

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[37] Morris, *Matthew*, 577.
[38] Morris: The verse does no more than "underline and emphasize the teaching given in the earlier verse" (*Matthew*, 577).
[39] Poole, *Commentary*, III:108.

differentiating between the ordained and un-ordained, or on any occasion when it may be important to clarify that those leading are properly credentialed (i.e. have been biblically, theologically and morally examined and approved to lead or teach). Otherwise, our leaders' primary identification should be that which unites them with the congregation, not that which separates them.

Against the propensity to seek titles and honors, Jesus says,

> *[11] The greatest among you shall be your servant. [12] Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*
> (Matthew 23:11-12)

What is the greatest among us in the church? A servant, *diakonos* no more. Verses 11 and 12 repeat previously given exhortations (Matthew 20:26-27 and Matthew 18:4).[40] Jesus is not teaching something new. He is repeating what we need to know over and over again: humility and service are the way forward in the Christian church. Trapp cites Augustine:

> God is on high, and yet the higher you lift up yourself, the farther you are from Him; the lower you humble yourself, the nearer He draws to you.[41]

There is a way of doing ministry that draws people to oneself as well as to Christ, or even instead of to Christ. He may use personal charm, or wit, or intellect, or personal favors to promote loyalty to him personally. He can be "cute," or sophisticated, or winsome, or smart depending on what is required. He may compete with other religious leaders for reputation, for status, for popularity. He may be turf-conscious

[40] See also Lk 14:11 and 18:14.
[41] Trapp, *Commentary*, V:240.

rather than kingdom-conscious, resenting anyone whose ministry is a threat to his own. In the end, it's about him: his honors, his recognition, his following, his status. In this way, the most idealistic, the most zealous, the most altruistic servants of God may be corrupted. This is how we've ended up with celebrity pastors and what can even be considered a religious "cult of personality." "Are you seeking great things for yourself?" God asks us all. "Seek them not" (Jer 45:5).

Beware of those who seek leadership in the church because of a desire to be honored or recognized. What are our motives? Are we merely feeding our egos? Don't seek pre-eminence like Diotrephes of old (3 John 9). Take the humble path, the servant's place.

How does Jesus deal with us? Verses 1-12 constitute the first salvo in Jesus' counter-offensive against the religious establishment of Israel. Yet His warnings are to us also. He has exposed hypocrisy for what it is. Let us then flee it. Avoid it. Abhor it. Our motives and actions must match our words. There must be integrity, consistency about our words and motives, our walk and our talk, the internal and external. Can we do it? Only by the grace of God. Yet the need of grace doesn't alter the goal. May the grace of Christ transform us and give us new hearts, and enable and strengthen us so that we become people of religious integrity.