

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 73”

Matthew 23:1-12

As we come to this new chapter in Matthew’s story of Jesus’ life and teaching, we find Jesus still teaching in the Temple courts. (He doesn’t leave until the start of the next chapter as noted in 24:1.) Remember, this is the week leading up to the Passover, so Jerusalem is full of crowds of observant and nationalistic Jews, looking forward to the Festival, but also, as always, looking out for the Messiah, whom they hope will appear during the Passover time. It’s also the last week before Jesus’ execution on the cross. A couple of days ago, he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey to the acclaim of the crowds and since then all that Matthew has recorded has taken place in the Temple.

Jesus went through the outer courts of the Temple overturning the stalls of the traders and moneychangers and warning people that they needed to take God a bit more seriously. He stood up to the Temple authorities as they tried to find out what he was doing. He has told three stories in response to their challenge to his authority and faced three testing questions which relate to life in the new Kingdom of God. And last time we saw him offer a challenge to the Pharisees as to whom they thought the Messiah was. *Chapter 22* ended with Matthew’s comment that “*no-one dared ask him any more questions*” (22:46).

But Jesus isn’t finished yet. And it’s “no more Mr Nice Guy” now. Jesus launches into a coruscating attack on the leaders of the people – the “*teachers of the law and the Pharisees*”. This is worse than letters to *The Lichfield Mercury* for vehemence and vitriol! Admittedly, Jesus has had a hard time from them throughout his ministry and particularly so in these last few days – and there’s more to come, of course – but here he is warning the crowds against them and, no doubt, trying to get his disciples to see that what they see in the leaders of the Jewish people is not to be taken as a model for their own leadership in the future.

The “*teachers of the law*” – or “*scribes*” as some versions have it – were the people who occupied themselves with interpreting the Law of Moses – the Torah – and all the many other rules and regulations that had clustered around it like barnacles over the past centuries. To give them their due, they were trying to make the Law of Moses easier to understand and trying to make it fit the everyday lives of the people. Unfortunately, it seemed as if they were just adding to the burden of keeping the Law with their hundreds of extra rules.

The Pharisees were the upholders of the religious and cultural traditions (which amounts to the same thing, really). They wanted to try and keep the people of Israel pure and to ensure that the pronouncements of the Teachers of the law were properly put into practice. Their main focus was

keeping Israel holy, but they'd kind of lost sight of why they were doing it, really, so they came over as just rather heavy-handed policemen, very narrow in their focus and very severe in their judgement.

But, despite their obvious failings, they weren't all bad. Both groups were basically trying hard to do what they thought God wanted and they did have the excuse that they had the interests of the people at heart – even if it wasn't always apparent. It was just that they ended up doing stuff – and trying to get others to do stuff – that wasn't quite what God wanted, and so they had really come into conflict with Jesus, whom they were unable to recognise as the Messiah, the one whom God had sent to inaugurate his Kingdom, his sovereign rule over all creation – the Kingdom in which so many of the things the Pharisees really wanted would eventually find a place. So when Jesus pours such scorn on the Pharisees and teachers of the law, he is lumping them all together as we would today when we say things like “Politicians are corrupt” or “Televangelists are just after your money”. Yes, some of them are – but they're just the ones that make the headlines.

And Jesus lays into them pretty hard. (It gets worse in the next bit!) It's the climax of the preceding confrontations with these leaders of the people, and whole chapter, as we shall see, is couched in the language of divine warning, much like that of the very prophets who foretold the coming of Jesus, the Kingly Messiah. What Jesus is saying all seems very negative. What he describes seems to be the very antithesis of the values of this Kingdom which he is proclaiming. So let's have a look at what he's warning against.

These leaders, says Jesus, “*sit in Moses' seat*”. In other words, they are the kind of successors of Moses, the greatest of Israel's leaders and the one who passed on their laws to them. Some people have suggested that this means they sat in a special chair at the synagogue, which was known as Moses' Seat. However, there's no such evidence of there being a “Moses' seat” in synagogues until much later than this time. This is using “seat” in a figurative way, as we'd talk about a “professorial chair” or “being on the throne”. In other words, they have a kind of authority handed down from Moses. Now, it's a shame we don't have any record of Jesus' tone of voice here when he says “*You must obey them and do everything they tell you.*” Some commentators suggest that Jesus is being ironic here and saying this rather sarcastically, but I think we can probably take it at face value. Jesus is saying that these leaders have an authority amongst the people, so “you're supposed to do what they tell you.”

Fair enough: that's the idea – but don't do what they do, because they don't practise what they preach. Once again, we come back to some notorious televangelists in past years who have preached one message while clearly living out another one. Or think of the mediaeval popes and their various escapades. I've got a friend who plays in a punky rock band which proclaims a very anti-capitalist, anarchist message.

My friend is a property developer. These Teachers of the law and Pharisees were very good at telling you what rules to follow, but, because they'd forgotten why they were supposed to keep them, they'd lost their way in terms of true worship, piety and holiness. It was a kind of soulless religion-by-numbers – like painting by numbers in the sense that you could just about tell what the picture was supposed to be, but it had no real power.

In v4 Jesus goes on to say that their take on religion is that it's a whole heap of rules to follow. In a sense that's true – there are things that you need to get right if you want to keep close to God – but, although these leaders could tell you, in great detail, what these rules were – and point out which ones you'd forgotten or weren't getting right, they didn't offer much help in doing them. They'd tell you **what** to do, but give you no assistance in **how** to do it, nor explain **why** it was necessary anyway. There's a good few Christian leaders like that and we've probably all been there at some time or other. I remember someone at my last church saying exactly that to me – “You're always telling us what we should be doing, but you never tell us why.” Religion likes that becomes very burdensome indeed. As William Barclay put it: *“here is a test of any presentation of religion. Does it make wings to lift a man up or a deadweight to drag him down? Is a man helped by his religion or haunted by it?”* I wonder what your take on that is.

You see, as we said just now, this is the very antithesis of the message of the Kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim. Do you remember what he said back in chapter 11? At the end of that chapter he says:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Jesus is saying that, yes, there's stuff to do, but Jesus is there to help: his Holy Spirit gives us the direction and energy we need to live as he wants us to.

But it's not just the leaders' enthusiasm for rules and regulations. After all, what's the point of setting up all this stuff if people can't see you doing it? And with knobs on! These men really wanted people to notice them. It's all about, as the heading to this section in Eugene Peterson's *The Message* puts it, *“Religious Fashion Shows”*. But this is far more than religion that's on show here – it's all about image. This is where we start to be able to identify with all this teaching. We live in a culture that is about as image-obsessed as you could get. In a society as enthusiastic for the visual as ours is, where the main methods of communication involve pictures, videos and selfies, all being sent all over the place by social media, we certainly know what image is all about.

Look at these Pharisees. They have great big phylacteries so that everyone can see how pious they are. Phylacteries are little leather boxes that were strapped to the forehead and wrists when you went to

prayers. In the boxes were tiny scrolls with excerpts from the Law of Moses written on them. It's based on a part of Moses' teaching about keeping the Law close to your heart and mind – so they took it literally and made sure people could see their phylacteries, the Torah physically attached to them. And they made sure people could see their long prayer tassels as well. The shawl they wore when praying had fringes on and the longer the fringes the more spiritual you were thought to be. Of course, we don't do such things now – we just carry bigger Bibles and keep our Christian festival wristbands on a bit longer than other people do.

These Pharisees always had to be seen to be in the posh seats – right down the front in the synagogue; up next to the host at the dinner parties. It was a need to be visible, so that people would know they were important. I don't think they do it now, but there used to be rows of seats on the stage at Christian conventions for the great and the good to sit up just behind the speaker. Indeed, the deacons and elders in some churches would always sit on the stage at Sunday worship – the origin of these fine chairs up here: not just for communion originally.

And, of course, you had to address them correctly. You couldn't just wave and call them by their name if you saw them in the street. A title was needed – “*Master*”, “*Rabbi*”, “*Teacher*”. It was a way of distinguishing themselves from the common herd and making sure people showed them due deference. You may remember Alan Sugar throwing a hissy fit when someone addressed him as Alan, rather than Lord Sugar. It's that kind of thing. Of course, we don't concern ourselves with that, do we? But I bet it's not far into your first conversation with someone that you ask what they do, so that you can start to rank them in your mind as to whether it's worth cultivating a friendship with them or not!

Now, as you can imagine, this cuts no ice at all with Jesus. All this kind of stuff – image, overbearing regulation to try and get right with God, ranking, pomposity – it is completely at odds with the values of his Kingdom. What Jesus is saying here, he is saying to emphasise by contrast once again what the Kingdom of God is about. The Kingdom of God – this sovereign rule of God which will mean the restoration of all that he first intended for creation before sin and evil got in and distorted and damaged it – is a Kingdom where everyone will be at peace, will be at one with God and with each other, and there will be absolutely no need for ostentatious displays of wealth, privilege, superiority and self-promotion. Don't bother with titles, says Jesus, because when it comes down to it, “*those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*”

We've already noticed that on the way through this Gospel, haven't we? Look at what Jesus says in 19:30: “*But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first*” – in 20:16: “*So the last will be first, and the first will be last*” – in 20:26: “*Whoever wants to become great among you must be*

your servant” – in 20:28 where he is the example: “*the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*”. He’s told his followers that they are to become like little children, people with no status and no voice. The Kingdom is a kingdom of service and humility, where all the stuff that the world around us seems to think is important is just not needed.

Now that’s a challenge for many of us isn’t it? We love that emphasis on titles and awards, on qualifications, on keeping up with trends – all that kind of thing. It seems to give us a bit of meaning, of identity, but it’s often all about image. We are encouraged to spend the first couple of decades of our lives getting good qualifications, and the rest of our lives gathering around us as much as we can of all those things our culture tells us are absolutely indispensable for a fulfilled life – and so that we can compare ourselves with each other. And that’s the same in church as on our Monday to Saturday frontline. But it’s not the way of the Kingdom.

And that is the amazing encouragement in all this. There are no entrance requirements for this Kingdom. Anyone can be part of it without the need to struggle and strive. It’s a place where everyone has the same advantages, everyone starts from the same base – the base of knowing that all we need is to acknowledge the saving power of Jesus. He has shown the way – the way of the servant, the way taken by someone who gave up the ultimate in glory and power and majesty and splendour to come into our world and live like one of us. As Paul writes to the Philippians:

*“And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!”*

This is the Jesus whom we quoted just now as saying, “*the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” – for you, for me, for everyone. Jesus’ way is one of grace not grandiosity, of peace not pomposity, of contentment not consumerism.

But the great thing is that Jesus didn’t just *show* us the way: he *made* the way. Jesus humbled himself to come into our world – even dying for us. And because of that he was exalted. So Paul goes on in *Philippians 2*:

*“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name.”*

Because of all that, we can reach out to Jesus. We can ask him to help us and give us a place in his Kingdom. It doesn’t matter what we’re like now. It doesn’t matter what we’ve done. It doesn’t matter whether we’ve got titles before or letters after our names, whether we wear the latest clothes or drive the shiniest car, whether we go to every prayer meeting and house group on offer each week or struggle to get here on time once a fortnight. It doesn’t matter what you feel like here, nor how people treat you: in God’s Kingdom everyone can feel like a king. God loves you and Jesus died for you – never, ever forget

that. If you don't need to strive to earn God's love, you don't need to strive for anything. May God grant us all grace to believe that – and believing it, to live like it.

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Jesus is warning the crowds about their leaders and telling his disciples that what they see in the leaders of the Jewish people is not to be taken as a model for their own leadership in the future.

The "*teachers of the law*" (or "*scribes*") were the people who occupied themselves with interpreting the Law of Moses and all the many other rules and regulations that had clustered around it over the past centuries. The Pharisees were the upholders of the religious and cultural traditions. They wanted to try and keep the people of Israel pure and to ensure that the pronouncements of the Teachers of the law were properly put into practice. Their main focus was keeping Israel holy, but they'd lost sight of why they were doing it.

These leaders, says Jesus, "*sit in Moses' seat*". In other words, they are the successors of Moses, the greatest of Israel's leaders and the one who passed on their laws to them. These Teachers of the law and Pharisees were very good at telling you what rules to follow, but, because they'd forgotten why they were supposed to keep them, they'd lost their way in terms of true worship, piety and holiness. And although these leaders could tell you, in great detail, what these rules were – and point out which ones you'd forgotten or weren't getting right – they didn't offer much help in doing them. They'd tell you **what** to do, but give you no assistance in **how** to do it, nor explain **why** it was necessary anyway. This is the very antithesis of the message of the Kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim. Look at *Matthew 11:28-30*.

But it's not just the leaders' enthusiasm for rules and regulations. It's all about image. (Phylacteries are little leather boxes that were strapped to the forehead and wrists when you went to prayers. In the boxes were tiny scrolls with excerpts from the Law of Moses written on them. The shawl they wore when praying had fringes on and the longer the fringes the more spiritual you were thought to be.) These Pharisees always had to be seen to be in the posh seats. And, of course, you had to address them correctly.

All this kind of stuff – image, overbearing regulation to try and get right with God, ranking, pomposity – it is completely at odds with the values of the Kingdom. What Jesus is saying here, he is saying to emphasise by contrast once again what the Kingdom of God is about. "*Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*" Look also at *19:30; 20:16; 20:26; 20:28* The Kingdom is a kingdom of service and humility, where all the stuff that the world around us seems to think is important is just not needed.

Now that's a challenge. But it is also an encouragement. There are no entrance requirements for this Kingdom. Anyone can be part of it without the need to struggle and strive. Jesus' way is one of grace not grandiosity, of peace not pomposity, of contentment not consumerism. But the great thing is that Jesus didn't just **show** us the way: he **made** the way. Jesus humbled himself to come into our world – even dying for us. And because of that he was exalted. Look at *Philippians 2:5-11*.

Questions for discussion

1. Jesus' attack on the leaders is hard-hitting and indiscriminate (he tars them all with the same brush). Is it justified? Should we follow his example when criticising others? Why/why not?
2. Obviously we need to keep to certain "rules" if we are to be good followers of Jesus. How can we tell when we're concentrating too much on the rules?
3. Why do you think we are so obsessed with image in our culture? Is it worse than at other times in history?

4. Should we not bother with titles? Why/why not? What is the difference between deference and respect?
5. What one thing stands out for you in the passage? What are you going to do about it?