

“Religious Titles”

MATTHEW 23:1-12

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Over the past several months, two people have asked for a lesson on the subject of religious titles – how do we refer to those who are leaders in the church? Specifically, there were questions about the terms “Reverend” and “Father.” And to me, it is interesting that these requests have come from one of our oldest members and also from one of the children of the congregation. So, this morning we will consider the question of titles in the religious world, and as we study, I would like for us to look together at a paragraph of scripture in Matthew 23 (p. 1542). As I was doing the research for our study this morning, I ran into a number of very good lessons that addressed this concern in a topical way (“5 Reasons Why it is Wrong to use the Term Reverend,” and so on), and we certainly could have gone in that direction; but instead, I would like for us to look at 12 verses directly from the Lord himself. And as we study, I believe we will have a very clear picture of what the Lord wants us to know on this subject. In other words, instead of me making up some kind of an outline, instead of me copying some other guy’s made-up outline, I want us to let God provide not only the outline, but also all of the supporting material. There is tremendous value to looking directly at the word of God. That is why we are here this morning.

If you will, then, please look with me at the opening verses of Matthew 23. The Lord was arguing with the religious leaders, and the arguments were devastating. Notice the last verse of the previous chapter, ***“No one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question.”*** And with that, we come to Matthew 23:1-12,

¹ Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, ² saying: “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; ³ therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. ⁵ But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. ⁶ They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, ⁷ and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. ⁸ But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. ¹⁰ Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader,

that is, Christ.¹¹ But the greatest among you shall be your servant.¹² Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.

As we look at these twelve verses, I would like for us to consider three very basic ideas that apply to the question of religious titles.

- I. **One of the first ideas we find in this paragraph is that we are to USE GOD'S WORD (NOT MAN-MADE RULES AND TRADITIONS) AS OUR STANDARD IN ALL RELIGIOUS MATTERS (verses 1-4).**

Notice in verse 2, the Lord says that the scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the ***"chair of Moses."*** As I understand it, the chair of Moses was one of those traditions that had been developed over time by the religious leaders. It goes back to a passing reference in Exodus 18:13, where we read that, ***"...Moses sat [down] to judge the people."*** In context, you might remember that the people would bring their legal disputes to Moses, and Moses would have to sort it out and apply the word of God to their particular situation (almost like the Supreme Court does in our nation today). Of course, in Exodus 18, the task became too great. At this point, Moses was dealing with 2-3 million people. Moses was overwhelmed with the cases from sunup to sundown, and finally his father-in-law had to step in and tell Moses to delegate some of this responsibility, which he did. Over time, though, especially during the time between the Old Testament and the New Testament, as the synagogue system was being developed (local places of study and worship), the religious leaders on a local level would actually put a ***"seat of Moses"*** in each synagogue, and whenever they needed to make a ruling concerning how to apply God's Law to a particular situation, they would take a seat right there in the ***"seat of Moses."*** In their minds, this gave them some level of authority. The picture on the wall up here is of the ***"seat of Moses"*** from the Jewish synagogue in Chorazin. Several years ago, I attended a public lecture on the UW campus, and the lecturer was an archaeologist who had done a lot of excavating at ancient Jewish synagogues. She had some very interesting information on the seats like this (and some of the other rather strange items) that have been found in synagogues all over the Mediterranean world. Her name is "Jodi Magness," she has done a lot of writing, and I am sure that you can find a lot of her material online. It is interesting, though, to have some actual physical confirmation of what the Lord was talking about here, the ***"chair of Moses."*** It was an actual chair where the Jewish leaders would sit when they made rulings on God's law.

We think of the Roman Catholic Church today. My understanding is that they trace the pope's authority back to this practice. In their view, just as there was a ***"seat of Moses"*** in the Old Testament, so also there is a "seat of Peter" today, and whoever sits in the seat of Peter has the ability to speak on God's behalf. Some of you might know, in fact, that the word "cathedral" goes back to the Latin word for "chair." And so a "cathedral" is a place where someone in a position of authority can sit. Of course, one problem is: The chair or seat of Moses is not actually mentioned anywhere in God's word. Yes, Moses sat down to judge the people, but nowhere in the scriptures do we read about any kind of a system where if you sit in some kind of chair you can speak on God's behalf.

Notice, though, what the Lord says here. Notice the observation. The condemnation based on the Lord's observation, is that these men have ***"seated themselves in the chair of Moses"*** and that they were forcing people to do things that they themselves were unwilling to do. The problem was hypocrisy. The Lord, then, is telling the people to be extremely careful. He was saying: For the most part, you can listen to what these people say, but ***"do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them"*** (verse 3). So, the truth is, if we use other people as our standard, we will be disappointed. The word of God, however, will not let us down. So, we are to use the word, not people, as our standard of authority.

II. **There is a second basic principle in this passage, and that is: WE ARE TO AVOID SHOWING OFF (verses 5-10).**

The Lord is about to outline several very dangerous practices, but as he leads up to it, he tells us the problem at the beginning of verse 5, ***“But they all do their deeds to be noticed by men.”*** In other words, these people were showing off. And then the Lord tells us what they were doing: They were broadening their phylacteries, lengthening the tassels on their garments, taking the seats of honor at banquets, taking the chief seats in the synagogues, and they were loving the respectful greetings. Earlier in Matthew (in the Sermon on the Mount), the Lord had warned about long prayers. He warned about making a big public deal out of fasting and giving, so we have some similarities, but here the list is a little bit different.

I have put a picture of a modern phylactery up here on the wall. A phylactery is a small box containing scripture, and they are attached to the head and the left arm using long leather straps. I remember reading several years ago about a flight being delayed because several passengers were strapping on their phylacteries in the airport before they got on the plane. There are specific times of prayer when Jewish men are supposed to strap these on, and you can imagine in a post 9-11 world how some people would react to olive-skinned men wrapping their arms in leather that looks like black electrical tape and strapping on black boxes before boarding a plane!

The practice goes back to a passage from Deuteronomy where God told the Jewish people to keep the word of God before them. Well, they took that literally, and started strapping on little pieces of God’s word “before them.” Over time, though, some men started making theirs bigger. So the idea is: My phylactery is bigger than yours; therefore, I am more righteous! And you can see how that would have a way of getting out of control. Some guys started really souping up their phylacteries, and in no time at all, they had completely missed the point and were actually using little pieces of scripture to violate the scripture! A box tied to their head came to replace the word of God in their hearts [Edwin Jones]. They were setting themselves apart for the purpose of impressing people. They were making a statement that they were religious and others were not. And that really made the Lord angry.

I’m thinking of some of the special robes and collars and the other paraphernalia that are worn by some religious leaders even today. As I see it, all of this fits into the same category – wearing something unusual to make yourself seem religious. My practice as a minister has been to do the best I can to fit in with the rest of the congregation. As I see it, when somebody comes to one of our assemblies for the first time, they should not be able to say, “Oooh, there’s the holy man!” Instead, as Christians there is to be nothing about our clothing that sets us apart as being more religious than anybody else. Our clothing is to be modest (covering what needs to be covered), but that is about it. For this reason, I will not be wearing a golden crucifix on a huge chain around my neck, I will not be wearing a robe, I will not have my collar on backwards, I will not be wearing any custom-made red leather shoes, I will not be walking in with a huge walking stick with a cross on top, I will not preside over anything with a pointy hat on my head, but I will plan on preaching with the most comfortable and the most normal-looking clothes that our local Goodwill can provide.

So, the religious leaders were abusing the phylacteries. In a similar way, they were twisting and abusing the practice of wearing tassels. In the Old Testament (in Numbers 15), the people were told to put tassels on the edges of their garments to remind them that they were God’s people. I find it interesting that Jesus wore tassels. He followed the Law of Moses, and we know this, because when the woman with the hemorrhage was healed, she was healed (in Matthew 9:20) by touching one of the tassels on the Lord’s robe. So, there is nothing about having a tassel that is evil, but once again, the religious leaders had abused it. Some were

making theirs extra long. So, they would basically go out in public, “My tassel is bigger than your tassel,” and they would brag about the length of their tassel. The Lord obviously condemns this as an abuse of the original intent of God’s law.

And then, in verses 6-7, we have these men clamoring for praise and honor. They loved sitting up front. They loved being called Rabbi and Father and Leader. They loved being set apart. And this is where we get to the use of religious titles.

As we think about the questions that led to this morning’s lesson, and as we think about the widespread use of titles in the religious world these days, it seems as if there is much ignorance concerning what the Bible actually teaches. And for the most part, the people I run into have good intentions. Often, I will preach a funeral, and the obituary in the newspaper will refer to me as “Reverend Exum.” That even happens with our own people sometimes. The funeral home, meaning well, not wanting to accidentally offend, will use the term “Reverend” when I am doing a funeral for one of our members.

Several days ago, I had to get in touch with someone from the city after they charged us for some TV’s that were dumped outside our building, and when he followed up with an email, he addressed it to “Reverend Exum.” Now, I never said, “Please address me as Reverend,” and yet it was something that he added, thinking that he was doing the right thing. In those cases, there is not too much I can do. I hate to insult somebody by making it an issue, and yet when given the opportunity (especially when somebody asks about it), I will gladly offer an explanation.

I remember getting called in for jury duty several years ago. The twelve of us made it into the jury box, and then the prosecutor started asking some questions. A woman had been accused of forging a check at Woodman’s. As I remember it, one of the first jurors was asked about his occupation, and he said, “I work security at Woodmans.” The judge asked, “Can you be fair and impartial in this trial?” And the man said, “No.” He was dismissed. When he came to me, the prosecutor asked about my occupation. I told him that I was a minister. He then asked if he should address me as “Reverend Exum,” and I said, “No, that’s not necessary at all.” He then said, “Then how should I address you?” And I said that “Baxter” would be just fine. He seemed a little offended at that, so I explained that in the Lord’s church (using the Bible as our guide) we do not ordain clergy, and that in fact, in the Bible there is no such thing as clergy. I explained that we are all on the same level spiritually speaking, that we are all just brothers and sisters, and that I just happen to work full time preaching for the Four Lakes congregation. He got this confused look on his face, he asked a few more questions about the church, and then he dismissed me (he didn’t know that I would have been a prosecutor’s best friend). But to him, he had no idea what the word “Reverend” actually means. He had no clue concerning how to address me. And he certainly had no idea that it was truly as simple as using my name, just like anybody else. The point is: Most people mean well, we don’t want to beat people down for using the wrong term, but we do explain when we have an opportunity. Many people call the church phone line and ask for the Pastor, “Is the pastor in?” I usually say, “This is Baxter, I’m the minister here, how can I help you?” Most people do not need a sermon at that point. Most don’t even think about it, and we get on with the conversation.

By the way, since it’s Father’s Day, I should point out that one of the greatest titles I’ve ever had came when I used to eat lunch with my daughter at her elementary school – especially on a day when packets of ketchup were involved. I remember sitting down and being swarmed by 15-20 kids, “Mr. Tabitha’s Dad, can you open this for me?” To those kids, that was my title. To them, I was “Tabitha’s Dad,” and that was just fine with me.

Before we leave this point, since several have asked about it, I would give just a brief summary of some of the titles that are commonly used today and try to sort it out just a little bit. As I mentioned earlier, one of the most common religious titles is “Reverend.” This word (in English) is used only one time in the entire Bible, and in that one passage, the word is used to refer to God. The passage is Psalm 111:9, and “Reverend” is only used in the King James Version (and perhaps some of the other older translations). Referring to God, this is what the verse says, **“He sent redemption unto his people: he hath commanded his covenant for ever: holy and reverend is his name.”** That’s it – the only time this word is used in the Bible. The Hebrew word behind it is used a number of times in other passages, but the word means “mighty and dreadful, something to be feared.” There are some people who may fear the preacher, but I would suggest that the fear or nervousness that we may have around a preacher can in no way compare to the respect that we have for God – as the NASB says, **“holy and awesome is His name.”** As God, his name is awesome; as a preacher, my name is not awesome, and I dare not take that title for myself.

And yet as if Reverend isn’t strong enough, we see some religious leaders around us taking it even to a higher level. We read about the “Right Reverend” so and so, or even the “Most Right Reverend,” and it keeps on getting worse. Somebody gets the title “Reverend,” and then the guy down the street needs to add something on his title to edge out the other guy just a little bit. To me, it sounds a lot like making larger phylacteries and lengthening the tassels on a robe.

Several years ago, Kevin (who used to be a member here and who used to work in the state capitol building) sent me a message he found in his files. In his position, he had to interact with a lot of religious leaders, and there was a protocol he had to follow. He sent me a copy of a message and told me to feel free to use it. Apparently, for the leader in this particular denomination, the letter had to be addressed to the “Most Reverend” so and so. And then, as if that were not enough, the letter had to begin in this way, “Dear Your Excellency.” Very interesting and very sad at the same time!

The other title we hear a lot of today is **“Father,”** and we find that the Lord addresses it here (along with several others). The main thrust of the passage is that we are not to use **“Father”** as a religious title. Yes, I can still refer to my own dad as my father, and yes it is true that Paul referred to Timothy as his **“true child in the faith,”** but in that context it is a description – it is not a title that Paul demanded, but it is a description of Paul’s relationship with Timothy. Titus is described in a similar way; but again, **“Father”** is not a title Paul demanded, but Timothy and Titus were his spiritual children in the sense that Paul is the one who helped develop their faith in the Lord. In other words, “Father Paul” is not something that he ever would have put on his business card. By the way, earlier this morning I looked up this verse in my copy of the Catholic Bible. Their Bible is printed with the imprimatur (the seal) of the Pope on the title page. I turned to this passage in their Bible, and it said the same thing, **“Do not call anyone on earth your father. Only one is your father, the One in heaven.”**

While we are on this subject, I should point out that there are three parallel terms that are often misunderstood by those in the denominational world, and it goes back to the misunderstanding that a preacher is the pastor. There are three main terms used to describe the office of elder – shepherd, overseer, and elder. **“Pastor”** comes from the Latin word for shepherd, so those two are identical. It’s like the abortion debate where we hear the word “fetus.” Apparently it sounds much better to talk about destroying a “fetus,” and yet “fetus” is simply the Latin word for “baby.” In the same way, “pastor” and “shepherd” are also the same. The second term is normally translated **“overseer,”** it is a word that refers to a manager. Some older translations translate the word as **“bishop,”** so overseer and bishop are the same. Today, when we hear the word “bishop,” we normally think of someone over a number of congregations. But no! There is no concept

like this in the Bible. The word refers to the fact that elders are responsible for managing the congregation – literally, making sure that the things that are done are done correctly. And then there is the word **“elder.”** This one ultimately goes back to a root word referring to somebody who has a gray beard – it is the idea of being older.

What is interesting is that these three terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament. All three terms refer to the same office. In fact, there are two passages where all three terms are used interchangeably in the same passage. The first is in Acts 20. Paul was passing through the area, when he arrives he calls for the **“elders”** of the church to meet him, and when he actually meets them on the beach, he says that the Holy Spirit had made them **“overseers”** so that they could **“shepherd”** the flock of God. So, in that passage, all three terms are used when referring to the same group of men. These men were the leaders of the church. We have a similar situation in 1 Peter 5. Peter has a message for the **“elders,”** he tells them to **“shepherd”** God’s flock, and then he tells them to **“exercise oversight”** with the proper attitude. So again, we have the idea that the elders, shepherds, and overseers are the same.

Often, though, many people in the denominational world have the idea that the “pastor” is in charge, and when they say that, they are actually referring to the preacher. In the Bible, however, we never read about a church with only one shepherd or elder or pastor. Instead, these three terms are always plural when it comes to those who lead the congregation. God designed the church to be led by a plurality of men who meet some very specific qualifications (they must be free from the love of money, they must be hospitable, peaceable and self-controlled, they must have a good reputation with those outside the church, and so on). So, I would point out (for those who may be from a denominational background), that I am not the pastor of this congregation. Here at this congregation, we do not have shepherds yet. We are working on it, we are praying about it, it is crucial that we do it so that this congregation can be **“set in order”** (Titus 1:5), but for now it is still out there somewhere on the horizon.

This leads me to a final little group of words, and these words also refer to the same role or position in the church, the role of minister, preacher, or evangelist. A minister is someone who serves (which preachers do). A preacher is someone who proclaims something. The Greek word was originally used to refer to the town crier, the guy who would go out in the middle of the night and cry out, “It’s two in the morning and all’s well!” He didn’t have permission to just go make up his own message, he couldn’t go out there blabbing his own opinion; instead, he only had permission to speak for the king. The word **“evangelist”** is a little more specific and refers to someone who proclaims the good news, or the gospel, but the idea is basically the same.

By the way, Timothy and Titus are never referred to as being pastors. In the denominational world, the books of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are referred to as being the “Pastoral Epistles,” but that is not accurate. The Bible never calls them that. We know that Timothy was young – he was not qualified to be an elder. We might say that Timothy’s beard was not gray. That, though, did not stop him from being a preacher, and as the preacher, Timothy’s authority did not come from holding some kind of office; instead, his authority came directly from the word of God. His job was not to manage the church, his job was not to shepherd the church, his job was not to be the wise older man in the church; instead, his job was to preach. In other words, when Timothy said, “You need to repent and be baptized,” his authority came not from his vast experience in life, but from the inspired word of God.

What makes this interesting is that preachers (if they meet the qualifications) can serve as elders. There are certainly parts of both roles that overlap. In fact, the Bible refers to elders who work hard at teaching and preaching and says that they are worthy of **“double honor”** (1 Timothy 5). So, there is no problem with an

elder who preaches or a preacher (if he is qualified) who also serves as an elder. The apostle Peter and the apostle John were both preachers and elders.

Years ago, when we first moved to Wisconsin, we worked at a Bible camp. There were a lot of kids there who had no background with the Lord's church, and early on I remember getting to know one of the kids in my cabin who was about 8-years old. His name was Chad, and I remember him so well because he ate a burnt marshmallow on the first night of camp and then did not brush his teeth for about a week. So whenever we looked at him he had these huge black chunks, and he just wouldn't brush! But he found out I was a minister, he was curious about what he should call me. He came from a denominational background, so I basically went through this outline with him. I explained that I am not a Reverend, I am not a Father, I am not an elder, or a shepherd or an overseer. But then I explained that I am a minister, a preacher and an evangelist. I gave him the definition of those Greek words, and then his eyes got really big, and he said, "Wow, are we lucky to have you here!" And every time I think about that, I just laugh. But it is nice to know how all of these terms are used in the Bible.

We could go on and discuss all kinds of other titles that are misused today: Mother (as in Mother Theresa), Cardinal, Pope (which actually means father), Archbishop, and so on. However, our time is short. When it comes to religious titles, we are not to show off. And just as we are not to be interested in huge phylacteries and long tassels, so neither should we applying titles in the church that do not apply. In terms of rank, we are all brothers and sisters. As I was preparing this lesson, I ran across a passing reference to the Pentagon and the fact that the central courtyard has been designated a "salute-free zone." I guess a lot of people go out there to eat lunch, and the author explained that if the usual military rules for saluting were followed, a soldier would hardly be able to take a bite from a sandwich without having to stop and salute another officer passing by. The author made the point that the church is like that. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we are in a salute-free zone – we are all equal at the foot of the cross.

III. As we close, let's look at those last two verses and think about the Lord's main point in this whole passage: Instead of the hypocrisy, instead of the oversized boxes and tassels, instead of the complicated religious titles, we find here at the end that WE ARE TO DEVELOP THE HEART OF A SERVANT.

Servants are often looked down on. Very few children long to grow up to be a servant. Being a servant can give other people the impression that they are better than we are. Most of us would rather be served than to serve. But here in this passage, the Lord tells us that in the church the worldly way of thinking has been turned upside down. In God's family, being a servant is a good thing. In fact, being a servant makes us just like Jesus. We remember what the Lord himself said in Mark 10:45, "***For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.***" The Lord sees us on the inside, and he will reward a humble spirit.

Conclusion:

Here at this congregation, we are looking for people who want to serve God. We are born into God's family when we turn away from sin, when we publicly confess that Jesus is God's Son, and when we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. At that point, our sins are forgiven. If you have any questions, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song...

To comment on this lesson: foullakeschurch@gmail.com