

## A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 23:1-12

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Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,  
    "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat.  
Therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it;  
    but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear,  
    and lay them on the shoulders of others;  
    but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.  
They do all their deeds to be seen by others;  
    for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long;  
    they love to have the place of honor at banquets  
    and the best seats in the synagogues,  
    and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,  
    and to have people call them rabbi.

But you are not to be called rabbi,  
    for you have one teacher, and you are all students.  
And call no one your father on earth,  
    for you have one Father—the one in heaven.  
Nor are you to be called instructors,  
    for you have one instructor, the Messiah.

The greatest among you will be your servant.  
All who exalt themselves will be humbled,  
    and all who humble themselves will be exalted.  
    they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The verbal thread in episode three is the one place where there are verbal connections to help memory which makes that episode easy.

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The last episode is the typical Jesus reversal ab/ba: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." The most difficult part to remember in this story is the sequence of Jesus' accusations of the Pharisees in the

second episode. "They do all their deeds to be seen by others," then phylacteries, places of honor, best seats, greeted with respect, and called rabbi.

The spirit of this story is the spirit of examination of spiritual integrity. Jesus is a Jew who is criticizing other Jews who were adamant about the need to observe the law but did not always do what they taught, which is, of course, typical of all religious people then and now. This needs not to be pronounced or thought of as something that is unique to Jews in the 1<sup>st</sup> century or Pharisees. This is typical of Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, you name it, we all do it. Jesus' first critique about heavy burdens refers specifically to the dietary laws that created major work, especially for women. Maintaining a kosher kitchen was a full time job.

The other critique is in relation to the traditions of honor that religious leaders then and now value. I notice that PhD types like myself love their robes and their stoles and other symbols of their academic stature. That's exactly what was going on with phylacteries and fringes. To have places of honor at tables, at worship and public occasions is like faculties now who regularly process into the first seats and love to be addressed as doctor or professor.

I learned about the difference Jesus' teaching makes from some of the faculty at Earlham College who were Quakers. These faculty discouraged us from calling them "doctor." I remember my organ instructor, Larry Apgar, saying, "My name is Larry Apgar. You call me Larry Apgar. It's not Larry, it's not Dr. Apgar, it's Larry Apgar, that's my name and simply call me that." The problem of titles is that they create a hierarchical system. Jesus' teaching discouraged hierarchy. He taught the value of humility. He said people who exalt themselves will in the future be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted in the future. Respect follows humility, not the other way around.

The first issue in the performance of this story is tone or attitude. Jesus' tone here is certainly critical, but not hostile. Nor is it the tone of mockery. Jesus as a Jew is talking to his Jewish disciples about other Jews. It is directly analogous to the conversations I regularly hear, for example, among liberal Methodists about conservatives and conservative Methodists about liberals, or among Presbyterians about Southern Baptists and vice versa. We are all familiar with those kinds of critique.

In telling this story, you are presenting Jesus; and as Jesus you are addressing your audience as Jesus' disciples. Matthew's audiences were predominantly Jewish and a significant number of them were sympathetic to the scribes and Pharisees they knew. There also were probably many in Matthew's audience who agreed with Jesus' critique of the scribes and Pharisees.

This address of Jesus is an invitation to his disciples, and therefore to us, to think about our own patterns of relationship and our own attitudes. To what degree do we seek positions of privilege, honorific titles, and treatment as superiors? While the forms of hierarchical status change in different groups, the dynamics of hierarchical relationship

are present everywhere. They are as present among Catholics and Protestants as they were among scribes and Pharisees. So I have noticed people who really enjoy being called whatever title they have been given and the privileges that go along with their position. Others hold those titles and privileges lightly and in actuality use them as a symbol of service. Jesus invites us all to hold our positions in a spirit of humility and with a ready willingness to serve others.