

International Bible Lessons Commentary
Matthew 23:2-12 & Mark 12:38-44

New International Version

International Bible Lessons
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The **International Bible Lesson** (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, December 27, 2015**, is from **Matthew 23:2-12 & Mark 12:38-44**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** discusses *Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further* to help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the **International Bible Lessons Commentary** website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. If you are a Bible student or teacher, you can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the **International Bible Lesson Forum**.

International Bible Lesson Commentary

Matthew 23:2-12

(Matthew 23:2) “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat.

Jesus declared that the scribes and Pharisees who sat in Moses’ seat had been given the place of rightful authority over God’s people as their rulers. Those who sat in Moses’ seat were the rulers of the synagogue or Sanhedrin. They maintained a religious government as they interpreted and applied the Jewish laws (the Law of Moses) over the Jews. Jesus did not teach His disciples to disregard or disrespect established human government, authority, or rulers. Jesus was not anti-government (whether religious or political); but as the Messiah, Jesus represented the Kingdom of God, God’s rightful government, authority, and rule over all (including over all human governments).

(Matthew 23:3) So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

The dictionary definition of irony is: “the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning.” Jesus may have been using irony and perhaps smiling to convey that irony when He said, “So you must be careful to do everything they tell you.” If Jesus had not said what He said in those words, He could have been arrested for treason and for advocating disobedience to the Law of Moses, which He came to fulfill. The context and the totality of Jesus’ teaching and practice must help us understand that Jesus would never tell anyone to disobey God just because a government or religious leader told them to do so. Jesus opposed

lawlessness, but Jesus did not teach His disciples and the people to blindly obey whatever their leaders taught, because sometimes they did not truly teach the Law of Moses. When they truly taught the Law of Moses, they were to be obeyed by the Jews, but Jesus said these rulers did not obey their own rules or the Law of Moses. Jesus warned against following the bad example of those who accurately declare the Law of God but do not obey the Law of God. To fully understand how Jesus was mainly condemning the hypocrisy of some leaders, we must consider Jesus' practices and discussions with the Pharisees. Jesus would never want someone to disobey God or the Word of God to do what someone else wanted – even a religious or political leader. Jesus did not obey the human traditions of the scribes and Pharisees, especially when these traditions set aside the Law of God. Jesus taught, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28). As the Messiah, who was the ruler over those who sat in Moses' seat, Jesus taught, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23). Furthermore, the disciples did not obey those who sat in Moses' seat when the Sanhedrin ordered them to disobey Jesus; with respect for their authority, Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:29).

(Matthew 23:4) They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

The heavy, cumbersome burdens included their interpretations of the Law of Moses that made it more and more difficult for people to live or follow God rightly. They did not make their rules easy to obey, but hard to obey, which gave them more authority over others. They took unjust advantage of those under their authority. They did not teach those they ruled over how to bear the burdens of their laws and rules or provide the means to bear their burdensome requirements. They did not teach people how to have the spiritual power to obey God. They used their religious authority to demonstrate that they were superior to others (or so they thought), rather than help people obey God. “Not willing to lift a finger” indicates that these religious leaders were unwilling to do anything to help anyone. They ruled solely for their own selfish benefit, which is not an example that anyone should follow.

(Matthew 23:5) “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long;

Those who sat in Moses’ seat were high priests, Sanhedrin leaders, and leaders of the synagogues. These men sought these leadership positions not because they wanted to serve God and others and make the spiritual lives of others better or easier. Rather than do what they did to honor and please God in loving obedience, they wanted others to see them and honor them for their position and outward displays of religion — expressed by the articles they wore and not by the expression of their true character.

(Matthew 23:6) they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues;

With their religious ornamentation, these religious leaders wanted people to look up to them as respectable religious authorities worthy of absolute obedience. They wanted everyone to see how important they were whether they were walking down the street, in the marketplace, at a party, or in the synagogue. They wanted the focus of attention to be on them. They did nothing to turn people's attention to the true God.

(Matthew 23:7) they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others.

These religious leaders wore large phylacteries (which were boxes with the Law of Moses written down inside the box) on their foreheads, because they wanted people to see how important they were from a distance as they walked among the crowds. They did not wear their phylacteries to help them keep the Law of God in mind because they loved God, but to show how important they thought they were. "Rabbi" means "teacher," but no one in the Old Testament took that title upon themselves to convince others that they were important. The ecclesiastical title was probably invented by those who wanted others to revere them as teachers of the Law of Moses and rulers over them.

(Matthew 23:8) “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers.

Jesus was speaking to both His disciples and the crowds. His disciples were not to aspire to the title of Teacher or Rabbi in order to be superior over others; better not to use the titles at all. Jesus wanted His disciples to point people to Him as the Teacher, because He spoke God’s word and He taught by a perfect example (unlike the rabbis they knew). His disciples were to declare the truth about Jesus and be His witnesses; they were not to try to “invent new ideas or teachings” as so-called rabbis. They were not to teach anything contrary to or more than what Jesus Christ taught and revealed as the Son of God. The disciples were students of Jesus Christ who on the Day of Pentecost were indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit. They were to see one another as spiritual brothers and students of Jesus Christ. None of them was to seek supremacy over the others, and the crowds needed to know these truths about what to expect as Jesus’ followers and from Jesus’ followers in the Church He was building.

(Matthew 23:9) And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven.

Apart from genetic manipulations by experimenters, a father and mother are necessary and responsible for everyone’s’ physical birth. Our Father in heaven is necessary and responsible for our spiritual birth. A true believer in Jesus Christ may lead someone else to saving

faith in Jesus Christ and help them live the true Christian life as a follower of Jesus Christ. We have sometimes called these people our spiritual mothers and spiritual fathers. Still, only our heavenly Father, the Holy Spirit, and the truth of Jesus Christ give believers their spiritual new birth and bestow on them eternal life. Believers are never to give the credit to a human being for their new birth in Christ Jesus. In this sense, we are not to call anyone on earth father; however, this does not mean we cannot call our human parents father and mother. Quite often, Christian mothers and fathers help lead their children to love God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, but believers only have one Father in heaven.

(Matthew 23:10) Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah.

An instructor teaches practical life lessons or guides people in doing something as they learn something new or gain expertise. Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit is our Instructor. No one is to try to take the place of Jesus Christ as our Instructor. Jesus the Messiah as revealed in the Scriptures must be our Instructor if we are going to be His followers. He shows and gives detailed directions on how to live from the Bible and the Holy Spirit guides believers in the interpretation of the Bible. Jesus gives clear directions that as the Messiah He is greater than those who sit in Moses seat and He is to be obeyed as Messiah, Teacher, and Instructor. True believers are to point people to Jesus, and not to themselves or others, as the true, infallible, spiritual and religious authority over the whole

of human life. For convenience, we do call people teacher, father, and instructor, but we do not (or should not) put them in the place of God our heavenly Father or of Jesus Christ or of God's will and word for our lives.

Unfortunately, some teachers, fathers, and instructors put themselves in the place of God and abuse or mislead many with their teaching.

(Matthew 23:11) The greatest among you will be your servant.

The greatest among them was the Lord Jesus Christ himself. In His humility, He did not say directly to them, "I am the greatest among you and I will be your servant."

Compare this verse to Luke 22:27 — "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." Jesus also said that those who serve Him must follow Him and His Father will honor the ones who serve Him. See John 12:26 — "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me."

(Matthew 23:12) For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

History has illustrated the truth of Jesus' teaching or prophecy in this verse. Some in the Herod family who reigned and exalted themselves before and after Jesus' birth and resurrection were humbled and died sinfully in disgrace. A similar sad end came upon many who ruled

Rome, who claimed to be sons of a god (therefore, gods themselves). The religious leaders who exalted themselves in Jesus' day are only remembered by name as "famous" because in the Bible they were proud persecutors of Jesus the Messiah (and His followers after Jesus rose from the dead). Even in our own lifetimes, some of those who have exalted themselves have been humbled for their disobedience to God. Jesus and His disciples, along with the apostle Paul and others, humbled themselves. Over the past two thousand years, millions have exalted Jesus as Lord and Savior; they have read what His followers wrote in the Bible, and these facts prove the accuracy of Jesus' prediction, for He is truly Lord over all.

Mark 12:38-44

(Mark 12:38-39) As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. (See Matthew 23:5-7 for a parallel passage)

Jesus probably had the opportunity to give this warning many times (see also Luke 20:45-21:4, a parallel passage). The warning Jesus gave His followers included this idea: "In your practice of your faith in me, do not become like some religious leaders who practice their faith to be seen and praised by others. In your public service of me, do not be motivated by self-interest instead of God's interests." Furthermore, a teacher who walks about to be noticed and

treated with respect will not always teach the truth: they will not want to teach the full truth if they think they will lose the respect of those who hear them speak. They will often be crowd-pleasers instead of God-pleasers.

(Mark 12:40) They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely."

Jesus described men who, after winning public approval for their religiosity and appearing to be exceptionally righteous, easily deceived and defrauded widows. Perhaps after a husband died, these men went to a widow and offered her help only to devour her inheritance and home. With a crafty knowledge of the law, they defrauded widows in court. They made long prayers to impress others with their eloquence rather than to please God and truly intercede for the needs of others or for guidance to help the needy themselves. While they prayed, they may have plotted how they would make widows homeless: such was the depth of their evil nature, which Jesus said would lead to severe punishment.

(Mark 12:41) Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts.

Jesus may have chosen this place to illustrate His teaching. Offerings were put into containers in the Court of the Women in the temple. Women could go no further

into the temple than this court. Eleven containers in the court were for voluntary offerings. Two containers in the court were for the temple tax, which was less than a shekel. Beyond paying their temple tax, many rich people voluntarily put large amounts of money into the voluntary offering containers. The Bible does not say how they became rich; some (but not all) may have stolen their money from widows and made them homeless: the reader is not told. Mark did not record, or Jesus did not comment on, the motivation of those giving their voluntary offerings or paying the required temple tax.

(Mark 12:42) But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

Some have argued that Jesus felt angry and condemned the rich for putting in stolen money, but the Bible does not report that. Some say that Jesus did not commend the widow who gave, because He did not offer any words of commendation or remark about her motive for her giving. These ideas are “Arguments from Silence” and therefore invalid. The Bible only reports a few things about this incident, which does open the door for much speculation. Mark simply does not tell us whether Jesus said any words of commendation or condemnation in the Court of the Women. We are told that financially the rich gave large amounts and the poor widow gave a small amount.

(Mark 12:43) Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.

From the merely human point of view and materialistic measurements, the rich gave more than the poor widow. Jesus spoke from a divine and spiritual point of view that He wanted His followers to adopt. God considers what we have to give and our motivation for giving what we have to give. God does not penalize us if we do not have more to give financially or otherwise than possible for us to give. Notice: Jesus was speaking of voluntary giving; Jesus was not speaking about the compulsory tax that by law must be paid. Jesus paid His taxes. No Jew was compelled to put more money into the temple treasury than the temple tax required by law. The offerings that the rich men and the poor widow gave were voluntarily gifts; not something they paid.

(Mark 12:44) They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

Some love the Lord and give generously out of their wealth. Some love the Lord and give generously out of their poverty. In my opinion, this poor widow would not have given all she had out of her poverty if she had not had great love for God and great trust in God. If she gave all she had to live on out of her great love for God, that is commendable. Mark did not record her motivation, but from the way Jesus spoke about her (at least all that Mark reported about the situation), He must have thought that what she did was commendable. When Jesus came, He came and gave out of His great wealth. Jesus gave all He had of himself, because He loved God and those He came to save. Whether rich or poor, giving to the Lord from love

and trust is commended by God. Using religion to steal from others will lead to punishment from God.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. How did Jesus describe those who sat in Moses' seat?
2. Why did Jesus say His disciples and followers should not be called "rabbi"?
3. What do you think Jesus meant when He said we should not call anyone on earth "father"?
4. Why did Jesus say His disciples and followers should not be called "instructors"?
5. What are some lessons you learned about giving from the incident in the Court of the Women?

Begin or close your class by reading the short weekly *International Bible Lesson*.

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