

Matthew 23:2-3

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Jesus tells His disciples to listen to and obey what the scribes and Pharisees say, because they sit in the seat of Moses. But He warns them not to emulate their behavior and lived example. They practice Bad Religion.

There are no apparent parallel accounts for this teaching in the Gospels.

Jesus began His address to the crowds with an observation. *The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses.*

The scribes and Pharisees were important religious authorities of Jesus's day. *They* were seen as the champions of God's law and the defenders of Jewish culture from the pagan influences of Rome. *They* promoted their ideals in the local synagogues scattered throughout Judea.

The scribes and Pharisees were enemies of Jesus. *They* opposed Him because He represented a threat to their political power and position among the people. His kingdom values of love and serving were the opposite of their lived values of lording over and selfishness. *They* practiced what might be described as "Bad Religion." Bad Religion is an abuse of religious authority to justify exploitation or self-destructive behavior (sin). It attempts to manipulate God's rules to pressure others into giving us what we want. It justifies sin as something good. But Bad Religion is evil. It does not bring harmony. Its product is sin and death. Jesus was against Bad Religion and its practices.

Therefore, He opposed *the scribes and Pharisees*, and warned His disciples and the crowds to *not do according to their deeds. Do not* be like them. *Do not* practice Bad Religion.

Jesus said *they have seated themselves in the chair of Moses*. The phrase *the chair of Moses* was a symbolic allusion to having moral or prophetic authority over God's people. Archeologists found a stone chair in a synagogue in Chorazin in the 1920s which is known as the Seat of *Moses*, presumably from where the local rabbi would read from the Torah. *Moses* was God's prophet who famously led Israel out of bondage (Exodus 3:10) and he was a divine law giver (John 1:17). It is interesting how Jesus remarked how *the Pharisees and scribes* came into their position or *chair* of authority. *They* were not called by God as *Moses* was. *They have seated themselves*. That is *they* grabbed this power for *themselves*.

Nevertheless, because *they are in the chair of Moses*, Jesus bids His disciples to *do and observe all that they tell you*. This would indicate that *the Pharisees* did read the scripture and exhort people to follow its teachings. The word of the Lord never returns void. It can benefit us even when it is voiced by someone who neither believes nor follows the scripture. Paul stated this of competing missionaries who mainly cared about money (Philippians 1:15-18). God used Caiaphas the high priest to prophesy of Jesus's sacrificial death to save humans from the

poisonous venom of sin, and he was the very man leading the plot to crucify Jesus (John 3:14-15; 11:49-51). Even donkeys can tell us God's truth (Numbers 22:27-30).

Just as Paul and Peter bid their Christian audience to obey the political authorities of the Roman government (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17), so too does Jesus here bid His disciples to follow the religious authorities of the Temple and Synagogues. The religious leaders have authority by virtue of being *in Moses's chair* even if their motive or acquisition of their authority is suspect. The principle is to not allow corrupt authority to corrupt your own morality. Moreover, *they* apparently are at least speaking things that are true, righteous, and good to *do*.

In Romans 13, the Apostle Paul exhorts the believers in Rome to obey the governing authority of Rome because it is appointed by God to punish evil and reward good (Romans 13:3-5). It is well documented that the Roman government was full of corruption, yet Paul exhorts his followers not to use that as an excuse, but rather to follow the law, even if the governing authorities themselves do not. Paul appealed to the Roman governing authority to save him from unjust judgement by the Jews when he appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:11).

Paul will ultimately be executed by Caesar for preaching the gospel, which also tells us that he followed a hierarchy of authority, and ultimately obeyed God's authority even above that of human government. Peter and John did something similar when they told the Jewish religious authorities that they would have to obey God rather than man when they were ordered to stop preaching the gospel, and therefore defied their order (Acts 5:29-32). Notwithstanding the exceptions of adhering to God's authority above human authority, in no case is there an excuse to "do what I want to do" because of the failings of the human authority.

Even though, *the scribes and Pharisees* seem to have a "Rules-for-Thee-but-Not-for-Me!" attitude, Jesus did not want His disciples to follow their bad example. Jesus warned, *but do not do according to their deeds*. He pointed out, *they themselves, do not do the things they tell others to do*. These religious leaders *do not* follow their own good rules. Even as *they* read and teach God's commandments in the scriptures, *they do not do* what God commands. They were the epitome of "Bad Religion." This was why Jesus warned His disciples to not imitate *their* bad example, and not use their corruption as an excuse for their own.

We are never to follow leaders who live an ungodly lifestyle. We are to examine their works and see how their deeds align with God's word. This is what Jesus meant in Matthew 7:15-17 when He taught, "You will know them [teachers] by their fruits... every good tree [good teacher] bears good fruit [good deeds], but the bad tree [bad teachers] bears bad fruit [bad deeds]." *The scribes and Pharisees* were bad trees. Therefore they should not be followed. It is noteworthy that judging teachers is an exception to the general rule to avoid judging others (Matthew 7:1-2). Teachers are not supposed to judge their pupils, but the pupils are to judge their teachers, and follow those who have good fruit. We should listen to the people we want to be like.

Biblical Text

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.