

Matthew 23:4

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-23/matthew-234/>

Jesus teaches that Bad Religion puts others down in a moral game. He exposes how the Pharisees impose suffocating rules upon people to watch them suffer and bask in their own moral superiority without showing an ounce of pity.

The parallel account of this teaching is found in Luke 11:46.

Jesus then described examples of the scribes and Pharisees' Bad Religion.

The first example of their Bad Religion was *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.*

Jesus used *heavy burdens* as a metaphor for "strict rules." A burden is something that is carried, typically on the *shoulders*. They require extra energy to bear. *Burdens* often restrict or limit what a person is able to accomplish. The Pharisees' rules were not life giving. They were not boundaries for the protection of the unwise. They were not principles that would lead to life. Rather they were soul-crushing *burdens*. Their rules would not lead to fostering harmony with God and others. They were not intended to lead to self-governance, and communities of love and service. They were not leading people to love their neighbors. Rather, they were designed to give power to the rulers so the rulers could exploit those beneath them. They were instruments of self-justification for exploitative authorities.

Anyone who did not keep the Pharisees' rules were shamed. They could even be cast out of the synagogues and religious community if they did not measure up and meet their approval (John 9:22). Their standards were impossibly high, and their legalistic set of rules was void of mercy. The pitiless Pharisees who placed the *burdens* upon *men's shoulders* were *unwilling to move them with so much as a finger*. They imposed the rules, but they did not keep the rules themselves. This means they were practicing the exact opposite of the second greatest commandment, which is to love others as they love themselves. In disobeying the second greatest command, they violated the first (Matthew 22:37-40). It could be that Matthew placed this speech of Jesus here in order to provide a "what not to do" example following Jesus's proclamation of the greatest commands in the previous chapter.

Their religion was bad. It was a game of who could follow the moral rules the best—with the scribes and the Pharisees making and changing the rules and keeping score. They were the moral referees and contestants. And they changed the rules (or their interpretation of them) whenever they made a mistake so that they'd never lose. But when someone else made a mistake, they were *unwilling to move them with so much as a finger*.

To win their moral contest, the Pharisees and scribes put everyone else down and exulted in their own moral superiority, all the while they broke their own rules, and violated the actual command they pretended to advocate. This was the first example of Bad Religion.

Many of the people beneath them wished to please God with their lives, but they were being crushed by their spiritual leaders. These spiritually-oppressed people were weary and heavy-laden. And their only apparent options were to keep pressing on beneath the unbearable weight or accept their rejection and live as a social outcasts among the sinners and Gentiles.

Earlier in His ministry, Jesus contrasted Himself with this practice of Bad Religion from the ruling religious authorities, when He invited “all who were weary and heavy-laden” to “Come to Me... 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” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Jesus’s example was Good Religion. Good religion is life-giving. It leads to wisdom, which is a skill to live well and thrive regardless of circumstances. Bad Religion is oppressive and soul-crushing. Good Religion is liberating and life-giving.

Biblical Text

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.