

Matthew 23:5

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-23/matthew-235/>

Jesus teaches that Bad Religion is a performance to be noticed by men. He illustrates that the scribes and Pharisees display their (fake) righteousness with what they wear. Their morality is merely a show.

A parallel account of this teaching is found in Mark 12:38.

The first example Jesus gave about the Bad Religion practices of the scribes and Pharisees 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” (Matthew 23:4). Religion to them was a moral contest of who could follow the rules the best—and there were winners and losers. The scribes and Pharisees made the rules and changed the rules to rig the contest in *their* favor all while being unwilling to lift a finger on behalf of the people, who to them, were *their* opponents. The result was that the Pharisees boasted in their moral superiority as *they* squashed the people that *they* were in a position to serve.

The second example Jesus gave about the Bad Religion practices of the scribes and Pharisees was *they do all their deeds to be noticed by men*.

They did not have true righteousness, which is aligning our behavior with God’s wisdom. True righteousness is to our benefit. It helps us to thrive because we are living life according to God’s moral cause-effect world. *They* had righteousness that aligned with a standard of their own making. Because their religion was a moral contest of who could best follow their rules, everything was for show. Since their moral standard actually came from themselves, it made sense that their desire was for the approval of other people.

When *they* acted kindly it was because *they* wanted people to think of them as kind. When *they* were generous it was because *they* wanted others to think of them as generous. When *they* prayed to God or fasted it was because *they* wanted other people to think of them as spiritual. *Their* entire reason for doing *their* good *deeds* was so that *men* would see it and admire them for *their* actions.

Their Bad Religion revolved around the opinions of *men*, whom they sought to control and manipulate. *Their* status and influence—*their* winning and losing—was dependent upon how others perceived them.

Jesus warned His disciples against this in His Sermon on the Mount.

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.”
(Matthew 6:1)

If we do our righteous *deeds to be noticed by men*, Jesus warned, “you will have your reward in full” (Matthew 6:2, 6:5, 6:16). And we will miss out or lose our reward from our Father in heaven (Matthew 6:4, 6:6, 6:18). The religious leaders had replaced the righteousness of God gained through faith with a righteousness of rules (Romans 9:30-32).

To be sure, the scribes and Pharisees were playing moral games and seeking the lesser reward of *men* rather than from God. But *their* hearts and actions went far beyond being unwise investors. *They* were downright wicked and corrupt. The only thing *they* cared about was that *men* perceived them as righteous. And this was because as long as *men* perceived them as righteous, *they* could easily exploit and abuse anyone who was less important than themselves.

Later in His “Eight Woes” Jesus described the oppressive ways that the scribes and Pharisees deceived *men* so that *they* could abuse the people *they* claimed to serve in God’s name.

This abuse included:

- “devouring widows houses” (Matthew 23:14);
- lying (Matthew 23:16);
- ignoring justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23); and
- murder (Matthew 23:31).

This is Bad Religion at its worst. In making their list of rules, they directly violated the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:13,16).

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus outed such men as “hypocrites”—righteous pretenders. Jesus presented three ways in that sermon of how these hypocrites displayed their fake righteousness for others to see. These were giving to the poor, praying, and fasting.

“So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men.”
(Matthew 6:2a)

“When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men.”
(Matthew 6:5a)

“Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting.”
(Matthew 6:16a)

Here Jesus told His disciples and the listening crowd two ways the scribes and Pharisees dressed in order to draw attention to their (fake) righteousness.

1. *They broaden their phylacteries*
2. *and lengthen the tassels of their garments.*

The scribes and Pharisees wore religious garments and accessories to make themselves easily identifiable as religious figures. There is nothing inherently wrong with doing this. Note how Jesus does not chastise the Pharisees for wearing *phylacteries* or having *tassels*. In fact, it is likely that Jesus wore similar garments; we see this when the woman touched the tassels of his garment (Matthew 9:20, where “fringe” translates the same work here rendered “tassel”).

He called them out because of their purpose in wearing the garments: they wore them *to be noticed by men*.

Phylacteries were small boxes or containers with a tiny scroll of scripture inside. They were attached to a leather band and worn on the left arm or forehead. *Phylacteries* came from a literal interpretation of Moses’s exhortations to live and teach God’s commands (Exodus 13:9, 13:16; Deuteronomy 6:8).

“You shall therefore impress these words of mine on your heart and on your soul; and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontals on your forehead.” (Deuteronomy 11:18)

The core concern of these commands pertains to the heart. The heart is what God cares most about, not our appearance (1 Samuel 16:7). The reason Moses said to bind His words on your hand and as frontals on your forehead was so that it would be an ever-present reminder “AS A SIGN” for your heart (Deuteronomy 11:18). But the Pharisees *broadened their phylacteries* and made them bigger as a sign to make themselves look more impressive in the eyes of the people.

There was a galling irony in how the Pharisees applied this scripture. *They* were outwardly making a production of how well *they* followed God’s commands even as *they* made a mockery of them. *They* were virtue signaling in order to mask and facilitate their abusive behavior. *They* were twisting God’s command about reminding our hearts to love God and love others into a sign for others to see the Pharisees’ “righteousness,” for the purpose of exploiting these people.

The scribes and the Pharisees also did the same thing with *the tassels of their garments*, lengthening them *to be noticed by men*. Religious authorities often wore shawls with *tassels* on them. And they made much fuss over *their tassels*. The longer the *tassels* the more righteous a teacher appeared to be. *Tassels* were supposedly an exterior display of a person’s righteousness. Some Jews even believed a rabbi’s *tassels* had special power because they were literally a person’s righteousness (Matthew 9:20-21).

Their broadened phylacteries and lengthened tassels were outward displays of their inflated moral egos. Bad Religion inflates the ego and makes everything “about me.” It leads to pride, which causes us to adopt a false perspective, which leads to self-harm. Good Religion properly orients the ego. It yields to God and seeks the good of others. This allows us to see reality as it is, which is the essence of humility. Seeing reality as it is allows us to see that setting aside self and serving others is actually the path that leads to our true self-interest.

Biblical Text

⁵ But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments.