

Matthew 23:6-7

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-23/matthew-236-7/>

Jesus teaches that the heart of Bad Religion craves honor from men and power to lord over others. This is what motivates the scribes and Pharisees to act as they do. (Do not be like them).

The parallel Gospel accounts of this teaching are Mark 12:38-39 and Luke 11:43.

Jesus's first two examples of how the scribes and Pharisees practiced Bad Religion were:

- they oppress others with moral rules and are unwilling to show pity (Matthew 23:4);
- and they do all their deeds to be noticed by men (Matthew 23:5).

They did these things because their religion was a moral contest of who can best follow their rules. The scribes and Pharisees rigged this contest to always beat everyone else by making up and changing the rules. It was a contest of moral superiority. And as long as they ensured that everyone else failed, they would win. Meanwhile, they justified themselves as being righteous while violating the core principles of the law, which focuses on benefitting others.

Their prize was *honor at banquets, chief seats in the synagogues, respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men.*

The obsessive seeking of these prizes of prestige is the third characteristic and example that Jesus gave of how the scribes and Pharisees practiced Bad Religion. Jesus said *they love* these prizes.

The Greek word translated as *love* in this passage is “phileo.” “Phileo” describes a fondness, or approval, or affection toward something. It is sometimes understood as friendship. There is a sense of mutual companionship that is associated with phileo-love. This means that relationships are based on how well each party mutually lives up to the expectations of the other parties.

Phileo-love is not evil. We are called to be friendly (Romans 12:10). It is great to have affection for things that are good. But phileo-love is different than the agape-love that Christ gave us and calls us to give to others. Agape-love is based on choices and values. When based on biblical values it does not depend on earthly circumstances and seeks lasting spiritual profit (1 Corinthians 13:3). When agape-love is based on worldly values it leads to fleeting pleasures of the world (1 John 2:15-17).

Phileo-love is conditional on circumstances. For instance, if my friend becomes my enemy I lose my affection for them. In the context of the religious and moral games that the scribes and Pharisees waged, it meant that their winning, their victory, their position was never secure. It was dependent upon how they were perceived relative to everyone else at a given moment. This likely induced insecurity and fostered an outlook that perceived those around them as an opponent rather than seeing them as a neighbor they were to love (Matthew 22:37-40).

The scribes and Pharisees could not agape-love God nor agape-love their neighbor as themselves, because *they* phileo-loved the prizes of *men*. They served these idols of Bad Religion and therefore had no capacity to follow Christ and the abundant life that flows from Good Religion (Matthew 6:24). They could not seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, because they were worried about all these worldly things (Matthew 6:33).

The scribes and Pharisees practiced their Bad Religion and put down others. All their actions, *all their deeds* were done *to be noticed by men* because of what *they love*. And *they* loved:

1. *the place of honor at banquets*
2. *the chief seats in the synagogues*
3. *respectful greetings in the market places*
4. *being called Rabbi by men.*

The scribes and Pharisees loved *the place of honor at banquets*.

The ancient world as well as the present held celebrations and social events commemorating their achievements. *Banquets* were held to *honor men* for their legacy and accomplishments.

The phrase, *place of honor at banquets*, refers to the primary seating at the central table, often next to host. It is where the person who is being honored at the banquet sits. The closer a person is to where the host sits, the more important they seem—and the more “honored” they feel.

Jesus applied this imagery in Matthew 8:5-13 when he stated that there would be faithful Gentiles (like the Roman centurion in the story) who would be seated at the table of honor along with Jewish honorees Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, while “sons of the kingdom” will be excluded from the honor banquet altogether. Exclusion from the banquet is described as being in “outer darkness,” completely away from the light of the banquet tent. The excluded “sons of the kingdom” are believing Jews, based on Jesus’s description of the term in Matthew 13:38, where He described them as the good seeds in the parable of the tares. Jesus used the seating of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to make clear He was speaking of the table of honor. This is where the Pharisees sought to be, but they sought to be seen by men, rather than to be seated at a place of honor by Jesus in His coming kingdom.

The scribes and Pharisees actively sought out *the place of honor* when they attended events. And when *they* were invited to *banquets* or weddings, *they* would instinctively sit near the host at the head of the table. They sought to sit beside the popular, cool, and influential people. They desired to perceive themselves as important.

In His “Parable of the Guests” Jesus taught His disciples to not seek *honor* from men, but from God (Luke 14:7-10). The point of His parable was: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11). Jesus was not merely teaching table manners. He was demonstrating how seeking earthly honor will bring humiliation in the kingdom, while seeking kingdom values, which entails humility will bring immense honor when the Lord of Hosts invites you to sit next to Him in His coming kingdom.

Honor from men is the prize of Bad Religion. Jesus instructed His disciples to practice Good Religion. Good Religion seeks the highest *honor* possible—*honor* from God. And the way to attain the highest *honor* is by serving others in love (Matthew 20:26-27; 23:11-12).

The scribes and Pharisees loved *the chief seats in the synagogues*.

The chief seats in the synagogues were positions of power. Today we often talk about a politician's power in similar ways with expressions like "a Senate Seat" or "a Seat on the Supreme Court." Technically speaking, *synagogues* were not legislative or judicial houses, but they wielded much social influence in Jewish culture. The *men* who held *the chief seats in the synagogues* had the authority to socially elevate or ostracize people in their communities.

The scribes and Pharisees behaved like the Gentile rulers who abused *their seats* of power to lord it over those they ruled (Matthew 20:25). Once again, abusing authority to impose a false moral superiority to exploit others is one of the worst effects of Bad Religion. The kingdom principles of Good Religion that Jesus taught commanded those in positions of power to serve and seek the welfare of others. Scripture teaches that in pursuing the best interest for others (agape-love) we are also pursuing our own self-interest.

The scribes and Pharisees loved receiving *respectful greetings in the market places*.

The market places was the center not only of economic activity within a community, it was the center of social life as well. It was where people gathered. *Market places* flourished with communal activity and conversation.

Whenever a person went to *market places* they expected to see other people—including those they personally knew. Naturally, whenever people encountered friends and acquaintances, they greeted them. If they saw someone important or worthy of respect, they gave that person *respectful greetings*.

All people *love* being treated with respect. It affirms that they are valued by others and/or that their opinion matters to them. God created people in His own image. Treating someone with dignity and respect is a way of recognizing their God-given value. It is natural to seek respect. And part of loving your neighbor as yourself is through giving them the respect that any human made in the image of God deserves.

But the scribes and Pharisees were not living *respectfully*. They acted shamefully and did *all their deeds* of (fake) righteousness only *to be noticed by men*. Their concern was not living in a respectful way or respecting the divine dignity of others. Their concern was that others thought of them and showed them respect. Bad Religion seeks only what "myself" can get out of an exchange. It never considers or seeks to also benefit others. It is an attitude of "I win, when you lose" rather than seeking a "win-win" circumstance.

The scribes and Pharisees loved *being called Rabbi by men*.

Rabbi was a title of great respect. It means “teacher.” A *Rabbi* was a teacher of God’s law. Rabbis had followers who learned under their authority. Jesus was a *Rabbi* and His disciples were His followers.

To be a *Rabbi* meant that other people were so interested in what you had to teach, that they would pause their career and apprentice themselves to follow and learn from you. The scribes and Pharisees loved *being called Rabbi by men*, because it gave them great power. It stroked their ego.

But the prizes of honor and power among men are the best trophies Bad Religion offers. They come at a steep price of applying maximum effort to keep the charade going at all costs. They come at the even steeper price of crushing the lives and spirits of others. And these prizes never last.

“What does it profit a man if he gains the world and loses His soul?” Jesus often asked (Matthew 16:26; Mark 8:36; Luke 9:25). The word “soul” in Matthew 16:26 is a translation of the Greek word “*psuche*” which refers to the essence of who we are as a being. It could be rephrased as “How have you benefitted if you gain great possessions and lose yourself in the process?”

The prize of pleasing God, being crowned with lasting and legitimate authority, true community with others, and lasting satisfaction are the trophies of Good Religion. They too come at a steep price, including rejection by the world (as Jesus will soon experience). But as the apostle Paul stated, this price is nothing compared to the surpassing riches of God’s reward for those who trust and follow Him (Romans 8:18). Bad Religion teases us to chase worldly benefits that cost us our selves, while setting aside self allows us to gain great and lasting riches (Revelation 3:21). The everlasting rewards of Good Religion require one to forfeit the game of Bad Religion entirely. Only by losing your soul for Christ’s sake can you save it (Matthew 10:39). Only by following Jesus’s example of surrendering to God can we win at life.

Biblical Text

⁶They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, ⁷ and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men.