

Lesson 83 – THE BURDEN OF LEGALISM Matthew 23:1-12

(Matt. 23:1-2) – Christ now speaks *“TO THE MULTITUDE, AND TO HIS DISCIPLES”* concerning their religious leaders, *“THE SCRIBES AND THE PHARISEES.”* As we have seen, these were self-righteous, religious unbelievers who judged themselves to be righteous by their works and taught the people to seek salvation and righteousness by deeds of the law (Luke 18:9-12; Rom. 9:31 – 10:3). They were legalists who despised Jesus of Nazareth and the Gospel of God’s grace based on His righteousness imputed alone (John 3:19-20; 15:18 – 16:3). A legalist is one who believes salvation is in some way conditioned on his own works and/or will, and who judges righteousness on a sliding scale, comparing and contrasting himself with other men (Luke 18:11). Legalism breeds and thrives in unregenerate hearts. These false religionists had already decided to rid themselves of this man, Jesus, because He exposed their hypocrisy and false hope.

It is said here that they *“SIT IN MOSES’ SEAT.”* This was evidently an expression used to refer to the seat at which the most prominent Pharisee or scribe would sit in the meetings in the synagogue. They claimed to be followers of Moses, i.e. the law, and they claimed to teach what Moses taught in the law. But Christ had already exposed them to be perverters of the law of Moses (John 5:39-47; Matt. 5:17-20).

(Matt. 23:3) – *“ALL THEREFORE WHATSOEVER THEY BID YOU OBSERVE, THAT OBSERVE AND DO”* – The Lord tells the people here that they are to follow these men but only as they themselves follow God’s Word given by Moses. The Mosaic Law was to be followed by Israel, but it was never given to teach people salvation and righteousness by their keeping the law. It was given to show them their utter sinfulness and to make them realize the impossibility of salvation by their works. It was given to show them their need of salvation and righteousness by God’s grace in and by the promised Messiah (Rom. 5:20-21; Gal. 3:19). *“BUT DO NOT YE AFTER THEIR WORKS: FOR THEY SAY, AND DO NOT”* – They claimed that they kept the whole law, but they did not. They claimed that they were righteous, but they were not. Not only did they fail to keep the law, they added other laws that changed the law to fit their false claims. They were hypocrites.

(Matt. 23:4) – Legalism puts sinners under *“HEAVY BURDENS”* of trying to do the impossible (Rom. 3:19-20; Gal. 3:10-12). It provides no real lasting ease or peace for a sinner. It always places sinners under a legal, guilty conscience. Only Christ can cleanse the heart and conscience of a sinner (Heb. 10:1-4, 19-22). *“BUT THEY THEMSELVES WILL NOT MOVE THEM WITH ONE OF THEIR FINGERS”* – Legalists never lift a finger to ease the burden of guilt because this guilt keeps people dependent upon them. There is no rest for the wicked (Isa. 57:20-21); there is only rest in Christ (Matt. 11:28-30; Heb. 4:9-16).

(Matt. 23:5) – Christ warned us not to do our works *“TO BE SEEN OF MEN”* (Matt. 6:1-18), i.e. to gain the favorable opinions of men as to our standing and state before God. The acceptable good works of a child of God are to be done for HIS glory in Christ. God’s testimony is our foundation for assurance of our salvation, not the opinions of men who cannot know or recognize the truth (1 Cor. 2:14; 1 John 3:1). *“PHYLACTERIES”* were the things they put on their foreheads with verses of Scripture written in little boxes. They would *“ENLARGE THE BORDERS OF THEIR GARMENTS,”* so they could embroider Scriptures and religious sayings that all could see.

(Matt. 23:6-7) – All of this indicates that they desired to show off their religion so that people could see them and judge them to be teachers of the law – *“RABBI, RABBI.”* They desired that the people would be honored by their presence.

(Matt. 23:8-10) – *“RABBI”* means “master” or “great one.” Christ alone is our Master, and He alone is the Great One. We are His sheep, His children, and we are equally *“BRETHREN”* in the family of God. We all follow, trust, serve, and worship Christ as the Lord our Righteousness. *“AND CALL NO MAN YOUR FATHER UPON THE EARTH: FOR ONE IS YOUR FATHER, WHICH IS IN HEAVEN”* – This does not forbid us to call our earthly fathers “father,” but we are not to call any man “father” in the sense that we know, recognize, and worship God alone as our heavenly Father, the Source and Originator of our salvation and of all spiritual and eternal blessings. Those who, for example, call the pope of Rome “Holy Father” are guilty of idolatry because there is *“One God and Father of all, Who is above all, and through all, and in you all”* (Eph. 4:6).

(Matt. 23:11-12) – The Lord then repeats a much needed spiritual lesson concerning true humility among His people. We are sinners saved by God’s grace and all based upon the glorious Person and finished work of redemption accomplished for us by the Lord Jesus Christ as our Surety, Substitute, Redeemer, Life-Giver, Protector, and Preserver. Christ has all the preeminence in our salvation, and He humbles us to submit to Him as our Master, Guide, and our God. It is by Him that we see the glory of the Triune Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) (Col. 2:9). Salvation is of the Lord, and it is the greatest contradiction for us to seek to exalt ourselves as if we have earned or deserved any part of this great salvation. So those whom God has humbled are truly the greatest among us and shall be exalted to the glory of eternal life by God’s grace based on the righteousness of Christ freely imputed. And those who exalt themselves in pride and self-righteousness will be brought down as they have no righteousness, and there is no true grace ruling and guiding their hearts.