

Jesus Criticizes Unjust Leaders

Key Verses: *“Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.”*
—**Matthew 23:1-3**

Selected Scripture:
Matthew 23:1-4, 23-26

JESUS RECOGNIZED THAT

the scribes and Pharisees of his day held the position of religious instructors of the Jews, though he often rebuked them as hypocrites who deceived the people. The Pharisees were the principal teachers and interpreters of the Mosaic Law, while the scribes were the writers, or recorders, of its many details. As such, these two groups were viewed as the primary expositors of God’s commands and instructions. Jesus himself stated that “the scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat.”—Matt. 23:2

As writers, public teachers and expounders of the Mosaic Law, the scribes and Pharisees were required to have knowledge of its many principles and requirements, in order that they might properly fulfill their special responsibilities towards the people. They were, in a sense, to serve as caretakers of the Law and of the Lord’s vineyard, Israel. In his day, Moses had fulfilled the role as the mediator of the covenant between God and Israel. The scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day,

in many ways, were considered in a similar position of privilege and responsibility.

It is important to note from history that honorable positions can be filled by dishonorable individuals. In this case, it was no new thing for those of vile character to be exalted to high positions in Israel. (Ps. 12:8) Among their kings, priests and other leaders in Old Testament times, many were unrighteous and did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, rather than follow the example of meekness and faithfulness demonstrated by Moses. Now Israel's leaders had become so corrupt and degenerate that it was time for another great prophet to arise, like unto Moses, who would begin to set in motion the steps necessary to erect another "seat" to administer God's law in righteousness. This "great prophet" was Christ Jesus, who, at his First Advent, began this all-important work as God's chosen representative.—Deut. 18:15-19; Acts 3:22,23

Jesus had told the Pharisees that the Law was summed up in two commandments: first, to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul and mind, and second, to love their neighbor as themselves. (Matt. 22:37-40; Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18) In the verses of our lesson, Jesus tells the Pharisees they had omitted these "weightier matters of the law." Instead, they were great sticklers for minute details which were, comparatively speaking, of much less importance. As an example of this, Jesus pointed out that they faithfully paid tithes of the smallest of seeds, "of mint and anise and cummin," for an outward show to the people.—Matt. 23:23

As footstep followers of Christ, we must daily seek to put into practice these vital lessons from the Master. Let us remember that supreme love for God and for our "neighbor" is much more important than the giving of tithes. Let us also fully understand that the cleansing of our hearts and minds is a far more essential work than the cleansing of our flesh.—Rom. 2:28,29; Phil. 2:5; 4:8,9■