

“Greatest in the Kingdom, Part 1”
(Matthew 23:1-12)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

This morning, we going to consider

Another characteristic/quality

The Lord is looking for in us –

That catches His eye,

That makes us “pop”

When He looks at us.

This one is so important,

Jesus tells us if we have it –

At least in its highest degree –

God will exalt us to the highest position in His kingdom:

That quality is humility.

If keeping the commandments

And encouraging others to do so

Is important because it will make you great;

This one is even more important

Because it will make you the greatest.

B. Preview.

I thought a good way to go about this topic

Would be to look at a negative example this morning –

That of the Jewish leaders –

And a positive example this evening –

In our Lord Jesus Himself –

To better understand what it is.

This morning, we'll look at two things:

What Jesus says the Jewish leaders were doing that we should avoid.

And second, what Jesus says we should do instead.

II. Sermon.

A. First, let's consider these Jewish leaders.

1. Jesus had a lot to say about them that wasn't good.

Let's back up in this Gospel a bit

To get a running start at their problem.

Here was their condition:

a. Jesus went into the Temple

After He entered Jerusalem,

And there He found the Jews

Buying and selling, and changing money –

With the blessing of their leaders.

They were supposed to be honoring His Father,

But they had become a bunch of self-centered,

Money grabbing thieves,

And so He drove them all out.

b. In the morning, He came to a fig tree

Hoping for food,

But He found nothing on it,

So He cursed the fig tree and it withered.

Israel had become a barren tree in the Lord's orchard,

And so the Lord would cursed them and they would wither.

c. Jesus spoke about two sons

Their father had asked to work in his vineyard.

One said he wouldn't, but later repented and went.

The other said he would, but never went.

Israel was like the first son –

Always saying yes, but never doing what the Father commanded –

But the tax gatherers and harlots

Who at first refused to obey,

Repented, believed, and did His will.

They would enter the kingdom first,

While Israel would be left outside.

d. He spoke about a Vineyard

A man planted and rented out to vine growers.

Every time He tried to get the profits from them

They would either mistreat or kill his servants.

Finally they killed His Son

That they might have that vineyard.

The Jewish leaders had refused to do His will,

Had mistreated His prophets

And were about to kill His Son.

And so God was about to destroy them

And give His vineyard to another people

That would obey and honor Him.

e. The Jews were the first to be invited

To the great Wedding Feast of God's Son,

But they refused to come.

And so God was going to destroy them

Set their city of fire,

And invite others to take their seats at the table.

f. Now when they heard these things

They understood that Jesus was speaking against them

And so they tried to turn the tables

By asking Him some difficult questions:

Whether it was lawful to pay taxes,

Whether marriage could continue in heaven,

Which commandment was the greatest.

He answered them all.

g. He also asked them a question

That finally silenced them:

Why David called his own son, Lord.

They refused to answer

Because the answer would force them

To submit to Him.

2. What was their problem?

Why did they refuse to believe

And receive Jesus as their Messiah?

Our text tells us.

We should listen carefully to this.

Where we find these things in our own lives –

And we will to some extent,

Though not entirely in the same way,

Since we have something they don't:

Grace to repent –

Where we find these things

We need to repent of them

Because they will quench God's Spirit.

a. First, they were hypocrites (vv. 1-4).

They were superficial “believers.”

Everything they did was merely a show.

They wanted to appear as godly

But they really had no interest in honoring God.

What were they doing?

As the teachers of the Law,

They were telling the people to do one thing

While they did another.

Jesus told His disciples

That they should accept their authority –

Because they were in the seat of Moses –

They were expounding God’s Law.

Notice Jesus said they put themselves there –

God didn’t appoint them,

Though He allowed it –

But the disciples needed to submit to them

When they declared God’s will.

They were, though, not to do as they do –

They say one thing,

But do another.

They tell you what’s right,

But do what's wrong.

They also made obedience

Much more difficult through their traditions.

They laid heavy burdens on the shoulders of their disciples,

But they didn't keep them.

This is what happens when sin gets in the picture:

They say the right thing, but do the wrong.

On the one hand, they make the commandments easier to keep –

As we saw last week in the Sermon on the Mount

Jesus had to lift them back up to where God intended –

And on the other hand,

They make them more difficult through their traditions.

In your own obedience,

And encouraging others to keep the commandments,

Make sure the standard you're using is God's.

Don't make the commandments looser than they are,

And don't make them stricter.

Make sure you're also first living by that standard

Before you try to get others to follow you.

The reason Jesus rebuked them as He did

And was going to bring these judgments on them

Was first of all because of their hypocrisy.

b. But they had another problem,

And that was pride.

They loved this authority;

They loved to exercise it –

Which is one of the reasons

They wanted to do away with Jesus –

He threatened it by His popularity –

Not only did the people like Him,

If the Romans noticed this,

They could come and take away their position (John 11:48).

Secondly, everything they did,

They did to be noticed by others.

They wore phylacteries (v. 5) –

Which were leather boxes

They tied to their foreheads,

And they wore tassels on the edge of their robes –

Which were both to remind them

To keep the commandments.

But they made their phylacteries wider,

And their tassels longer,

So that everyone would see
And know just how zealous they were for the Law.

At banquets, they would take the seats of honor.

When they went to the synagogues,

They took the best seats (v. 6) –

Which, as we saw recently,

Would be in the front, facing the congregation.

Everyone who came to worship

Would have to look directly at them.

They also enjoyed being greeted

With titles of respect (v. 7).

They sound like the people we see today –

Both in the church and without –

Who so much want to be recognized by others –

Who want to be the celebrities, the stars,

The leaders of the mega churches.

B. What does Jesus say about all this?

Did He approve?

Is this what He wants you to seek after? No.

1. He says you shouldn't seek titles of respect –

To be called teacher, father, or leader;
Or doctor, lawyer, president.
That's just another way
Of seeking honor for yourself.
Don't try to stand out as better than anyone else.

2. Secondly, He says that you should

See each other as equals.

We have one teacher, Jesus,

And we are all brothers (v. 8).

We all have one Father,

And we are all His children (v. 9).

We have one leader, Jesus Christ,

We are all His followers (v. 10).

3. Finally, if you really want to be better than your brother or sister,

Then you should try to be better servants than they are.

This is what will make you greater in God's eyes –

This will make you pop –

When you humble yourself to serve others.

Jesus says, "The greatest among you shall be your servant" (v. 11).

God hates pride.

He hates it when we try to make ourselves out

To be better than others.

Solomon tells us, “Pride goes before destruction, and haughty spirit before stumbling” (Prov. 16:18).

God is opposed to the proud (James 4:6).

Jesus says, “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled (v. 12).

On the other hand,

God loves humility.

He gives grace to the humble (James 4:6).

Jesus says, “Whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (v. 12).

How high will He exalt you?

Just as high as you are willing to go low –

As far as you’re willing to humble yourself.

So who is the greatest in God’s kingdom?

The one who humbles himself the most

To serve others.

Do you want to be great?

You won’t find it

On the road of the proud.

Whatever they think they’ve gained,

They will lose in the end.

The only way you can gain it

Is by humbling yourself.

You first need humbly to admit your sins

Repent of them,

And turn to Christ.

And then you need humbly

To seek to serve God and others.

To the degree you are willing to do this,

To that degree God will exalt you,

To that degree, you will “pop”

When the Lord looks at you.

This evening,

We’ll see the perfect example of this

In our Lord Jesus. Amen.

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