

Jesus and the disciples

Part #: Their relationships

[Matthew 23:8-10]

“But as for you, don’t allow yourselves to be called “Rabbi” because you have only one teacher. You are all one another’s brothers. Furthermore don’t call any one among yourselves on earth “Father” because you share one father, your Heavenly Father. And don’t allow yourselves to be called “Guide” because you have only one guide, the Messiah.”

This little saying from Jesus comes almost as an add-on to a violent attack on the Scribes and Pharisees. Essentially he is saying: “The Scribes and Pharisees are like this, but you must be different”. He was addressing the crowds and his disciples. Jesus did not go round Galilee and Judea founding churches in the sense of groups of followers, but this is one of a number of passages where he speaks of how his followers are to behave towards each other.

So let us first look at the criticisms Jesus had of the Scribes and Pharisees.

First he describes the fact: “The Scribes and Pharisees have sat themselves down in Moses’ seat.” Moses received the law from God and taught it to the people of his day. Now the Scribes and Pharisees have taken upon themselves the role of teaching the law. The Mishnah was written from the point of view of the Rabbis and puts it this way: “Moses received the law from Sinai and handed it on to Joshua. Joshua handed it on to the elders and the elders to the prophets. The prophets handed it on to the men of the Great Synagogue.” The Mishnah then goes on to list a succession of Rabbis up to the time it was written. This list includes the great Jewish teachers Hillel and Shammai, who were alive when Jesus was young, and Hillel’s grandson Gamaliel, who was the apostle Paul’s teacher and who also appeared in the trial of the apostles in Acts 5:33-40.

The way Jesus describes the Scribes and Pharisees as having sat down in Moses’ seat opens up the possibility that he regards them as usurpers of that role. He does not say as they claim in the Mishnah that the law was handed down to them. Nevertheless Jesus goes on to tell his listeners, who were of course Jews, to “do or keep whatever they tell you”. It appears that in spite of certain specific criticisms of their teaching, such as that regarding the Sabbath, Jesus accepted that they were maintaining correct Jewish teaching. However he goes on to say: “but don’t do what they do, because they teach things which they then do not put into practice themselves”.

Jesus then continues with his criticism: “They tie up heavy loads and place them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves won’t even exercise a finger to shift a load!” The picture is taken from the typical Middle Eastern market place. Loads are tied up into bundles, usually with rope made from palm leaves. Perhaps the contents were wrapped in cheap cloth. There were no cartons or boxes of merchandise! To carry a heavy load a man would bend down from the waist and place the load across the back of his shoulders and neck. He may need two fellow porters to lift it up onto his shoulders. I have seen sacks of grain, bales of cotton and even a fridge carried in this way. A Rabbi would not lift his purchases in the market place. He was far too important for that, entering the market in his fine robes. He would not even move a small finger-sized load with his finger! He would call a porter.

Jesus was not only talking about loads in the markets of Jerusalem! He was criticising the Scribes and Pharisees for the way they burdened people with burdensome legal requirements while they themselves would not even keep the less onerous ones. What they did in the market place was reflected in their religious teaching and behaviour.

“Everything they do is done to be observed by their fellow men”. The best commentary on this is perhaps Jesus’ own words in the Sermon on the Mount (See Matthew 6:1-18). They wanted their religious behaviour to be seen. They would not do it privately. It had to be announced to the world.

They even wore distinctive clothes so that their religious position could be seen by everyone. “They have extra wide phylacteries and extra large tassels on their robes”. Phylacteries were small leather packets containing verses from the law written on parchment inside. They were worn on the forehead or on the hand. The idea came from Exodus 13:9 and Deuteronomy 6:8-9, but they appear not to date much further back than the time of Christ. Tassels on the robes come from Numbers 15:38-40 and Deuteronomy 22:12. The point is that they wanted their distinctive religious position and leadership to be recognised. In days now when clergy are mostly held in ridicule by the mass of the population one wonders to what advantage they wear distinctive clothing.

Jesus continues his attack with: “They love the top places at feasts and the front seats in the synagogues”. The top places would be the places nearest to the host. They would be given to the most honoured guests. The Scribes and Pharisees loved to be those honoured guests at feasts. In the synagogues they liked the front seats. These seats may in some cases have been separate from the ordinary seats in the synagogue. Honour, respect, praise - that is what they wanted.

I remember to this day an incident at a special service in a church in support of overseas missions. There were about six hundred people present. When it was time to go forward for communion everyone started going forward in an orderly fashion from the front row on the right of the aisle. There were no stewards. When those about two thirds of the way back started going forwards someone suddenly appeared from the back of the church and went forward. He was followed by people from all over the place. The orderly system was broken. I was told that the person concerned was the local archdeacon. He was within his right according to the Church of England Prayer Book which states: “Then shall the Minister first receive the Communion in both kinds himself, and then proceed to deliver the same to the Bishops, Priests, and Deacons in like manner, (if any be present,) and after that to the people and also in order, into their hands, all meekly kneeling.” So the Prayer Book enshrines and institutionalises the right of precedence given to church leaders which Jesus specifically criticised in Jewish leaders! And look at the way they so often have special seats at the front even if they are not involved in the service! How far removed this all is from the way of Christ!

Jesus continued: “[they love] the greetings they receive in the market places and to be addressed by people as ‘Rabbi’.” The word “Rabbi” was originally a Hebrew word meaning “My Lord”. It was a title of great respect. It came into use as a form of address for Jewish religious teachers. Once again what the teachers wanted was honour, respect and praise from their fellow men.

Jesus then went on to state the sort of relationships he wanted and what he did not want in the religious community he had started to form.

“But as for you, don’t allow yourselves to be called “Rabbi” because you have only one teacher. You are all one another’s brothers.” The title “Rabbi” was prohibited to Christians. What would Jesus have to say about such titles as “Reverend”, “Venerable”, “His Holiness” and so on if they had been current in his day? We find it easy to accept Jesus’ prohibition of the title “Rabbi” because we don’t use it, but Christian leaders have invented for themselves titles to which the same objections could be made! Also the onus is on the leaders not to be called by these titles. Jesus said: “Do not be called ‘Rabbi’”. He did not say: “Do not call someone ‘Rabbi’”. That is implied, but the responsibility for

preventing use of such harmful titles is here placed on those they are addressed to - the leaders, not the led.

Many things have to be learnt from a teacher. How could we learn Geography, History, Mathematics and so on without a teacher? In the study of the Jewish law according to a sect such as the Pharisees, teachers were required. How else could the teachings of the sect be passed on? But the Christian community was to be different. Every member has the Holy Spirit to teach him. He, the Holy Spirit, is the teacher. John put it this way: "I have written these things to you about the people who are leading you astray. But as for you, the anointing which you received from him remains in you, so you do not need anyone to teach you. As his anointing teaches you about everything, and is truthful and not a liar, remain in him as he has taught you." [1 John 2:28-27]. Christian teaching is about God and living with him in fellowship with other Christians. So what better teacher is there than God himself? And God has in fact given us the Holy Spirit to teach us. So what more do we need? The picture of a Rabbi surrounded by his pupils was one Jesus rejected for the Christian community. Yet this is the picture most commonly seen in churches today. There is a pulpit into which the one teacher climbs while the rest of the congregation sit and listen passively to his words. Do they not have the Holy Spirit to teach them also?

Relationships in the Christian community were to be like relationships between brothers. These are essentially relationships of equals. A teaching process becomes more of a mutual-learning process with the Holy Spirit as the teacher.

Of course there will be those in the Christian community who have a greater knowledge of the history and background to Christianity and so on. But how important is this? Is its importance not over emphasised? Does it not become the means by which "teachers" obtain and retain their exalted position? Surely the learning that God wants most of all is related to how we should live our lives and what we should be doing as churches to take his gospel to those who have never heard it? This is the sort of thing the Holy Spirit teaches, and in this area we are all equals and all brothers. Did you know that there are no sermons preached in churches in the New Testament? The nearest to that is a talk by a visiting missionary (Paul) in Troas. The preaching was all outside the church to those who had not heard the gospel. These days there is much preaching inside the churches and little preaching outside!

Next Jesus turns to the title "father". He said: "You are all one another's brothers. So don't call any one among yourselves on earth "Father" because you share one father, your Heavenly Father." The picture of relationships Jesus lays down for the Christian community is clear. We are all brothers (or sisters) of each other. The head of the family, the father, is God himself. If we are all brothers (and sisters) with God as our father, how can we call one or more of ourselves "father". We can't. And Jesus forbids it. To call someone "father" is to place them in the position which should be enjoyed by God alone.

For so many who love to call their human Christian leaders "father" it is an escape from the responsibility of a direct relationship with God himself. The human spiritual "father" places fewer important demands on them. He is not with them all the time. Sadly for them he will not be at the "gates of heaven" to open the door to them and let them in. He will not be able to argue in their own favour that they "did what the minister asked of them".

The Christian leader who sees himself as a "father" or calls himself "father" is at great risk of usurping the position of God himself in the Christian community. Such people often treat members of their congregations as their "children". They look upon them as spiritual inferiors in need of "fatherly" guidance. They fail to treat them seriously or as adults, whatever their spiritual or worldly standing. When disputes arise among the "children" the "father" tries to behave like a human father towards his children. He feels

insulted and aggrieved if he is not respected as the “father” of the Christian family. He appeals to his “authority” to subdue the disobedient “child”. Jesus tells him to see himself as a brother, which means settling disputes in a “brotherly” manner, but that he cannot understand. He suffers and everyone suffers. Responsible adults will not be happy with and generally will not enter such a community. So they stay away from such churches. These churches become the happy home of insecure people who lack the courage to rely on and work with a heavenly father. They want an earthly “father” to rely on. They ignore Christ’s teaching in favour of the earthly “father’s” teaching. Such congregations are generally elderly. Their culture predates the second world war. Those brought up after the educational changes of the nineteen sixties are rarely found in such places.

The title “father” like the title “Rabbi” was known to the Jews. Jesus was not imagining a title which might occur in the future. A whole section of the Mishnah is called “The Fathers”. It contains sayings of the Rabbis who predated the collection of the Mishnah. The earliest Rabbi to be given the title of “Father” in the Mishnah is Father Saul, who was active in the second century A.D., although this was after the time of Christ. It is a fair assumption from what Jesus said that the title was also used to address religious leaders in his day.

Today of course in the Roman Catholic Church the title “Father” is fully entrenched for the “priests” who lead it. This is a specific violation of Christ’s teaching. The same title is used in some parts of the Church of England with many of the harmful consequences I have described above. There are many churches which would never dream of using such a title and where its use is even preached against. Yet in many cases their ministers behave in exactly the same way as if they were fathers! The heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.

From “father” Jesus goes on to the third title to which he objects. “And don’t allow yourselves to be called “Guide” because you have only one guide, the Messiah.” Some translate the word as “Teacher”. They then say it is a repetition of verse 8! However the word is quite different. It is true that the word was used of teachers, but it also means in general a “Guide”. When it is used of teachers it is looking upon them in their role as guides.

The modern equivalent may well be the “Spiritual Directors” and the burgeoning industry of “Spiritual Counsellors”. They presumably aim to guide their “clients” through short-term or long-term difficulties. In the context in which Jesus is speaking the question which must be asked about these “counsellors” is whether they point to Christ (the Messiah) as the true Counsellor or Guide, or whether they seek to come in between and guide their “clients” themselves. Do they see the people they seek to help as Christian brothers and sisters or do they see them as inferiors in need of their superior wisdom?

The section in which Christ deals with these abuses of power continues with a warning and a threat: “The great ones among you will become your servants because all those who raise themselves up will be brought low but those who humble themselves will be raised up.”

The passage in Matthew continues with further attacks on the Jewish religious leaders. Further abuses of their position. For Christians the important issue is that Jesus did not want his community to be like that in Israel. He wanted his followers to treat each other as equals, brothers and sisters. This is not what we see in churches today.

Some detailed notes:

For my comments on the Mishnah see the introduction to my book. The quotation is from the Section called Aboth, which means “Fathers”, chapter 1 verse 1. The list of succession follows

that verse to the end of the chapter. The elders are those referred to in Joshua 24:31. In the Jewish bible the books Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are called the “Early Prophets” and the books we regard as the prophets, Isaiah to Malachai, but excluding Lamentations and Daniel, are called the “Later Prophets”. Hence for the Jews there is a succession of prophets from the “elders” referred to in Joshua. The Great Synagogue was a body of 120 elders who returned from exile with Ezra (Danby page 446). The Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day were the pupils of the Rabbis in the succession listed in the Mishnah, or pupils of pupils and so on. Paul claimed to have been a direct pupil of the great Rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3).

For the history of phylacteries, consult a bible dictionary. Many strict Jews still wear them. Also desert Arabs often wear similar leather pouches containing verses of the Quran as protection against evil. They are usually worn around the arm or neck. It is possible that the Arabs adopted the custom from Jews living in Arabia.

The word I have translated as “top places” at the feasts really means the “top beds”. In a poor house in the Middle East there is no separate dining room with tables and chairs. A room in the house would have beds in it, made of wood with a rope base, and a table. The beds are used for sleeping on at night or in the heat of the afternoon. They are also used for sitting on while eating at the table.

The title “father” was also used in the bible of what we call the “Patriarchs”, that is Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were “fathers” in a very different sense. They were the physical forefathers or ancestors of the Jewish people.

Paul called himself “father” to Timothy in Philippians 2:22 and called Timothy his “son” in 1 Timothy 1:2 and 2 Timothy 1:2. He is sailing rather close to the wind there! In the first passage he is describing their working relationship in their missionary work. He, Paul, is the master missionary while Timothy is like an apprentice to his father. In 1 Timothy 5:1, Paul urges Timothy to respect those elder than himself as he would respect his father or mother. That is in spite of the teaching role Timothy had! Others he is to treat as brothers or sisters.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:11 Paul wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica saying that while he was with them he treated them as a father would his children. Perhaps he saw himself as having that right in his position as the one who had led them to faith in Christ. It is also interesting to note that the only place in which a New Testament writer tells us to obey our “leaders” is where those leaders are defined as “those who first spoke the message about Christ to you” (Hebrews 13:7 & 17). The word used there for leaders is quite different from that used of church elders.

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