

“The Seat of Moses” – The Responsibility of Interpreting the Law in Matthew’s Gospel

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ABSTRACT. The presentation will analyse the possible interpretative solutions proposed by the exegetes to the *crux interpretum* of Matthew 23:2-3. The Saviour’s statement that the scribes and Pharisees “sit on the seat of Moses” is not intended to be an endorsement of their authority to interpret the Law, but, recognizing the reality in which the disciples lived and were to serve, they must fulfil and learn the commandments, they must know what Moses says. The scribes and Pharisees, although they were the keepers of the Torah in the social and religious environment in which these disciples lived, no longer had the authority to teach because it was given to the Church.

Keywords: The Seat of Moses, Gospel of Matthew, Jesus, Law, Scribes, Pharisees

Introduction

Matthew 23:2-3 continues Jesus’ criticism of the scribes¹ and Pharisees² throughout Matthew’s Gospel, revealing their hypocritical attitude toward

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¹ See Edward Andrews’ approach, *Introduction to the Text of the Old Testament: From the Authors and Scribes to the Modern Critical Text* (Cambridge: Christian Publishing House, 2023); Craig Evans, *Of Scribes and Sages: Early Jewish Interpretation and Transmission of Scripture*, vol 2 (London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2004); Eugene Ulrich, John Wright, Philip Davies, Robert Carroll (eds.), *Priests, Prophets and Scribes. Essays on the Formation and Heritage of Second Temple Judaism in Honour of Joseph Blenkinsopp* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992). According to Israel P. Loken (“Scribes”, in *Faithlife Study Bible*, electronic ed.): “the basic duty of scribes in the New Testament period was to make sure that every Israelite was acquainted with the law’s rules and regulations”.

² See the perspective outlined in recent years more and more strongly in the space of the Catholic approach: Franciscus, *Address to teachers and students of the Pontifical Bible Institute and participants in the meeting “Jesus and the Pharisees: An Interdisciplinary Reexamination”*

keeping the law of Moses. The study of this passage involves a detailed analysis of how Jesus expresses His disagreement with the Pharisees. He emphasizes their hypocrisy by pointing out that although they occupy positions of authority and teach the Law of Moses, they do not live according to the teachings they teach. Interpreting this text involves researching the historical and cultural context of the Pharisees and understanding the Law of Moses and associated expectations. We will also examine the entire Gospel message that Jesus delivers to his disciples, focusing on concepts such as integrity, humility, and consistent practice of spiritual teachings. The study will also include various theological approaches, explaining how the passage fits into the general theology of Matthew's Gospel and how Christian teachings influence the moral and spiritual behaviour of believers. The essential aspect will focus on reading issues³ and the interpretation of Matthew 23:2-3, where Jesus tells his disciples that “Ἐπὶ τῆς Μωϋσέως καθέδρας ἐκάθισαν οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι”. Therefore, disciples must do (ποιέω) and keep (τηρέω) everything these religious leaders tell them (λέγω), but disciples need not do (ποιέω) according to the deeds (ἔργα) of these leaders. Because the scribes and Pharisees speak (λέγω) but do not do (ποιέω), burden people whom they do not want to help, and do (ποιέω) all their deeds (ἔργα) to be seen by others.

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(9 May 2019), <https://infosapientia.ro/stiri/papa-francisc/discurs-adresat-profesorilor-si-studentilor-de-la-institutul-pontifical-biblic-si-participantilor-la-intalnirea-isus-si-fariseii-o-reexaminare-interdisciplinara-9-mai-2019/>, accesat 10 noiembrie 2023. See also his approach Michel Remaud, *Creștini în fața lui Israel. Slujitor al lui Dumnezeu* (Târgu Lăpuș: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2018), subchapter “Notă istorică despre Isus și Farisei”, 113-126.

³ For the problem of a superficial reading of this text, see an extensive analysis in its study Mark Allan Powell, “Do and Keep what Moses Says (Matthew 23:2-7),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995): 419-435. He points out that superficial reading considers the passage to state three things. First, by saying that the scribes and Pharisees “sit on the seat of Moses,” Jesus gives them authority to teach. Second, by telling his disciples to do and keep everything the scribes and Pharisees say, Jesus recommends obeying the teaching of these religious leaders. Jesus’ disciples should respect the authority of these teachers and live according to their interpretations of Scripture. Third, by telling His disciples not to do “according to their works,” Jesus indicates that the real problem with these religious leaders is that they are not living according to their own teaching. Thus, following the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus’ disciples will do God’s will to an extent that the scribes and Pharisees themselves do not.

Contextually, we are in Jesus’ fifth and final discourse in Matthew’s Gospel (23:1 – 25:46)⁴. As many exegetes say⁵, the discourses in the *Gospel of Matthew* (5-7; 10; 13; 18 and 23-25) are thematic collections of the evangelist, in which are gathered pericope of Jesus on that theme. Such a statement is easily verified by comparing the Synoptic Gospels. As for this final discourse of Jesus, through the load of “woes,” the content of chapter 23 seems to be the summary of all the elements of condemnation that Jesus uttered throughout His ministry against the Pharisees and scribes. In this chapter, Jesus brings to light and condemns the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, warning of the imminent fire of God’s judgment. He had already pronounced a verdict on them in chapter 13:

καὶ ἀναπληροῦται αὐτοῖς ἡ προφητεία Ἡσαΐου ἢ λέγουσα· Ἀκοῆ ἀκούσετε καὶ οὐ μὴ συνῆτε, καὶ βλέποντες βλέψετε καὶ οὐ μὴ ἴδητε. ἐπαχύνθη γὰρ ἡ καρδία τοῦ λαοῦ τούτου, καὶ τοῖς ὠσὶν βαρέως ἤκουσαν, καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῶν ἐκάμμυσαν· μήποτε ἴδωσιν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς καὶ τοῖς ὠσὶν ἀκούσωσιν καὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ συνῶσιν καὶ ἐπιστρέψωσιν, καὶ ἴασομαι αὐτούς (13:14-15).

As David Hill states⁶, chapter 23 is the introductory part to the last of Matthew’s five discourses (5-7; 10; 13; 18 and 23-25). What is said in this chapter seems to be aimed directly at the scribes and Pharisees. However, considering the first verse, we can say that along with the rest of the discourse (ch. 24-25) it nevertheless constitutes a final attempt to save the disciples and the people from the nets of Pharisaic teaching and authority. “Jesus condemns not only conscious hypocrisy but also the mistakes inherent in the Pharisaic approach to religion, even in its best forms. Even the most scrupulous of Pharisees promoted a system that led people to understand righteousness in terms of increasingly meticulously enforced legal prescriptions and could completely distort what it meant to please God.”⁷

The chapter can be divided into two parts. The first twelve verses are addressed by Jesus to His crowds and His disciples. In the verses 13-36, He turns to the scribes and Pharisees and addresses them with eight “woes,” which

⁴ A pertinent approach see at Patrick Schreiner, *Matthew, Disciple and Scribe. The First Gospel and Its Portrait of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 138.

⁵ See H.N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, trans. by Ray Togtman (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, 1987), 421; R.T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 323; David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 308.

⁶ Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 308.

⁷ France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 323.

resemble the “woes” of the Old Testament prophets⁸ and whereby Jesus not only exposes the futility of Pharisaic righteousness but also announces the approaching punishment of God that will fall upon them. The eight “woes” correspond to the eight “beatitudes” in *the Sermon on the Mount*⁹. If by “beatitudes” Christ’s righteousness is defined, by “woes” is defined as Pharisaic righteousness, a righteousness that serves nothing when it comes to entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

The parallels with *the Sermon on the Mount* are not difficult to see¹⁰, which underlines the summarizing nature of this speech. In a way, given where we are in the unfolding of the gospel, this speech can be considered, says Ridderbos, to be a “farewell speech to the leaders of Israel and also to the people who refused to obey the teaching of Jesus.”¹¹ This is explicitly stated in verse 39: “λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν, οὐ μὴ με ἴδητε ἀπ’ ἄρτι ἕως ἂν εἴπητε· Εὐλογημένος ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἐν ὀνόματι κυρίου”.

The Pharisees and scribes sit on Moses’ chair

Τότε ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐλάλησεν τοῖς ὄχλοις καὶ τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ² λέγων· Ἐπὶ τῆς Μωϋσέως καθέδρας ἐκάθισαν οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι.³ πάντα οὖν ὅσα ἐὰν εἴπωσιν ὑμῖν ποιήσατε καὶ τηρεῖτε, κατὰ δὲ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν μὴ ποιεῖτε, λέγουσιν γὰρ καὶ οὐ ποιοῦσιν.⁴ δεσμεύουσιν δὲ φορτία βάρεια καὶ ἐπιτιθέασιν ἐπὶ τοὺς ὤμους τῶν ἀνθρώπων, αὐτοὶ δὲ τῷ δακτύλῳ αὐτῶν οὐ θέλουσιν κινῆσαι αὐτά.⁵ πάντα δὲ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν ποιοῦσιν πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πλατύνουσι γὰρ τὰ φυλακτήρια αὐτῶν καὶ μεγαλύνουσι τὰ κράσπεδα,⁶ φιλοῦσι δὲ τὴν πρωτοκλισίαν ἐν τοῖς δείπνοις καὶ τὰς πρωτοκαθεδρίας ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς⁷ καὶ τοὺς ἀσπασμοὺς ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς καὶ καλεῖσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων· Ῥαββί. (Matt. 23:1-7).

⁸ On the nature of prophetic oracles and the function of Old Testament “prophetic woes,” see Benjamin Fărăgău, *Nădejde în întineric*, vol. I (Cluj-Napoca: Logos, 1992), 68-72.

⁹ The best manuscripts of *Matthew’s Gospel* seem to lack verse 14 of chapter 23, says R. T. France (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, 327). Nor is this verse included in the Nestle-Aland texts of the Greek New Testament. This is why most exegetes speak of only seven “woes.” However, all these texts mention verse 14 in the footer, because it is found in other textual authorities and cannot simply be neglected.

¹⁰ We can compare, for example, 23:5-7 / 6:1-3; 23:13 / 5:20; 23:16-22 / 5:33-37; 23:23-24 / 5:17-19.

¹¹ Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 421.

Jesus’ speech is very curiously worded. At first, He seems to make a deep reverence for the scribes and Pharisees, acknowledging their authority: “Ἐπὶ τῆς Μωϋσέως καθέδρας ἐκάθισαν οἱ γραμματεῖς καὶ οἱ Φαρισαῖοι” (2). This has implications that need to be seriously considered: “πάντα οὖν ὅσα ἐὰν εἴπωσιν ὑμῖν ποιήσατε καὶ τηρεῖτε” (3).

Immediately afterwards, Jesus surprises His hearers because, although He tells them to do what the Pharisees tell them, He forbids them to do what they do: “κατὰ δὲ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν μὴ ποιεῖτε, λέγουσιν γὰρ καὶ οὐ ποιοῦσιν” (3). The approach resembles Jesus’ answer to those who came to tempt Him with the question of tribute. As then, and now, Jesus respects existing political, social, and religious authority and structures. The manifestation of His kingdom did not need revolutions to change these structures, because it worked mysteriously, from the inside out. It was precisely by the power of self-denial and self-sacrifice – power completely alien to the kingdoms and structures of this age – that the seed had within it the power to overcome the death of the earth, and to transform the dust into thirty, sixty, or a hundred other seeds like itself.

However, this did not prevent Jesus from exposing the rot that was eating away at the entire Pharisaic religious system. If the first level of their guilt is not living according to the precepts they taught others, the second level of guilt must be sought within the scope of their motivations: “⁵πάντα δὲ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν ποιοῦσιν πρὸς τὸ θεαθῆναι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις· πλατύνουσι γὰρ τὰ φυλακτήρια αὐτῶν καὶ μεγαλύνουσι τὰ κράσπεδα, ⁶ φιλοῦσι δὲ τὴν πρωτοκλισίαν ἐν τοῖς δείπνοις καὶ τὰς πρωτοκαθεδρίας ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς ⁷ καὶ τοὺς ἀσπασμοὺς ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς καὶ καλεῖσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων· Ραββί!” (5-7).¹²

Moreover, considering the whole passage, this seemingly commendable introduction – “The scribes and Pharisees sit in the seat of Moses” (23:1) – takes on an entirely different connotation. In the tone of Jesus’ voice one can distinguish anger and irony: – To you, He seems to have said to His peoples and disciples, the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, don’t they? So, listen to them! Do what they tell you if you can! For they bind heavy loads to carry on your shoulders, tasks which they do not move even with their little finger. But take a closer look at their attitude and motivations! In addition to not doing what I tell you to do, even what I do, I do it in plain sight and just to get applause. Look at the wide phylacteries and long tassels at the foot of the garments! Watch them go after the first seats in the banquets and the first seats in the synagogues!

¹² In *the Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus condemned such righteousness (see 5:20; 6:1-7:6), exposing the sins in the hearts of the scribes and Pharisees, the sins hidden in the sphere of motivations and attitudes. In fact, Pharisaic righteousness was spiritual prostitution. Things that rightfully belonged to God, such as almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, were scattered before men to gain their favour and appreciation.

Watch how they beg for people's bows and how they take pride in themselves when people call them "Rabbi"!

Through His sharp statements, Jesus is stripping the scribes and Pharisees of all the authority He seemed to give them by the statement in verse 1. And this was His very intention, because the people were paralyzed by false Pharisaic authority and righteousness, and because of this they could not receive the truth.

We find such an approach in St. John Chrysostom: "I mean, that lest anyone should say, that because my teacher is bad, therefore am I become more remiss, He takes away even this pretext. So much at any rate did He establish their authority, although they were wicked men, as even after so heavy an accusation to say, 'All whatsoever they command you to do, do.' For they speak not their own words, but God's, what He appointed for laws by Moses. And mark how much honour He showed towards Moses, again showing His agreement with the Old Testament; since indeed even by this doth He make them objects of reverence. 'For they sit,' He saith, 'on Moses' seat.' For because He was not able to make them out worthy of credit by their life, He doth it from the grounds that were open to Him, from their seat, and their succession from him. But when thou hearest all, do not understand all the law, as, for instance, the ordinances about meats, those about sacrifices, and the like for how was He to say so of these things, which He had taken away beforehand? but He meant all things that correct the moral principle, and amend the disposition, and agree with the laws of the New Testament, and suffer them not any more to be under the yoke of the law."¹³

Mark Allan Powell's conclusion, however, is much more concrete, going beyond an approach to rhetorical discourse. By saying that the Pharisees and scribes sit on the seat of Moses, Jesus can simply acknowledge the strong social and religious position they occupy in a world where most people are illiterate, and copies of the Torah are not abundant. Since Jesus' disciples do not themselves have copies of the Torah, they will depend on the scribes and Pharisees to know what Moses said on any given subject. Considering such dependence, Jesus advises his disciples to heed the words that the scribes and Pharisees speak when they sit on the chair of Moses, that is, when they transmit the words of the Torah itself. The first activity of the scribes and Pharisees, the one Jesus praises, is not about teaching or interpreting Moses, but simply about quoting Moses¹⁴.

¹³ John Chrysostom, "Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople on the Gospel According to St. Matthew", trans. by George Prevost and M. B. Riddle, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. X (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 436.

¹⁴ Powell, "Do and Keep what Moses Says (Matthew 23:2-7)," 419-435. Powell argues that this apparent contradiction can be resolved by understanding that Jesus did not want his disciples to do literally "everything" that the Pharisees taught. Rather, he meant that they were to *obey*

One may wonder whether such an understanding can be found in the rest of Matthew’s Gospel. For illustration, given the context of our approach to this study, we will limit ourselves to one aspect of the Sermon on the Mount.

A Pharisaic righteousness

The Sermon on the Mount has three large parts. The first sixteen verses (5:1-16) speak of Christian character, verses 5:17-7:6, of Christian conduct, and the conclusion (7:7-29) emphasizes the relationship between them: character determines the conduct or nature of the tree determines the nature of the fruit, while also offering us a solution for fulfilling the extraordinary requirement Jesus faces: “Ask... search... and knock.” Verses 5:17-20 constitute a passage, a link between the first two parts. What Jesus is about to say next (5:21-7:6) was to constitute a harsh condemnation of the so-called kingdom of God that the Pharisees of His time were building. This is why Jesus begins by stating His position on God’s law:

17Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας· οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι¹⁸ ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν, ἕως ἄν παρέλθῃ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ, ἴωτα ἓν ἢ μία κεραία οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου, ἕως ἄν πάντα γένηται.¹⁹ ὃς ἐάν οὖν λύσῃ μίαν τῶν ἐντολῶν τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων καὶ διδάξῃ οὕτως τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ἐλάχιστος κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν ὃς δ’ ἄν ποιήσῃ καὶ διδάξῃ, οὗτος μέγας κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν.²⁰ λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι ἐάν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ὑμῶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη πλεῖον τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρισαίων, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν. (Matt. 5:17-20).

their teachings on the Torah and halakhah in principle, a fact supported by Jesus' own attitude toward oral tradition. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees not because of their halakhah, but because they had abandoned the commandments of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. On one level, the Pharisees really wanted to keep the Law. Through oral tradition, they strove to keep the Torah at the centre of Jewish life and worship. As those who sat in the Seat of Moses, the Pharisees provided the Jewish people with practical answers and specific instructions on how to fulfil the commandments of the Torah. On a deeper level, however, the Pharisees' inner motives often betrayed them, and their zeal for the Torah frequently became interesting. When Jesus rebukes the Pharisees in the section on woes in Matthew 23, He reveals that their erroneous teachings were a manifestation of their wrong motivations. In their hearts, these Pharisees longed for people's praise, but in their minds, they believed they were honouring God. They meticulously paid their tithes of dill and cumin but neglected the more important provisions of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt. 23:23).

Nevertheless, in this text, Jesus does more than state His position on God's Word; He emphasizes that the Kingdom of God can only be built on this Word, understood, and applied correctly, while also emphasizing that the problem of the Pharisees stems precisely from the way they interpret and apply the Law. This is why they came to make a sterile and useless righteousness regarding their entry into the Kingdom of Heaven.

The structure of the text is marked by the connectors in it. Verse 17 contains a statement – “Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι” – which raises a question: Why are the incorruption of the law and its fulfilment so important? The answer comes in the next verse and anchors itself in the eternal nature of the Word: “ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν, ἕως ἂν παρέλθῃ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ, ἰῶτα ἐν ἡ μία κεραία οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου, ἕως ἂν πάντα γένηται” (18). The kingdom of God is built on the Word of God, not on the word of men, and the Word of God once spoken does not pass without being fulfilled. The exact fulfilment of God's Word depends on God's faithfulness.

Matthew the Evangelist told us that Jesus began His ministry by walking through Galilee, “διδάσκων ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς αὐτῶν καὶ κηρῦσσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας” (4:23). He was competing with the Pharisees, scribes, and teachers of the Law because they were also preaching a gospel of the kingdom. Jesus states from the beginning that the dispute between Him and them will be fought in the realm of interpretation of the Law. The true Kingdom of God can only be built on the true Word of God or on the Word of God understood and applied correctly, “ὃς ἐὰν οὖν λύσῃ μίαν τῶν ἐντολῶν τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων καὶ διδάξῃ οὕτως τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ἐλάχιστος κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν· ὃς δ' ἂν ποιήσῃ καὶ διδάξῃ, οὗτος μέγας κληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν” (5:19).

This last verse (19) contains both warning and good news. The warning is that he who breaks even one of these commandments and teaches others will be called the least into the kingdom of heaven. The good news is that the Kingdom of Heaven is not reached based on the accuracy with which the Law is interpreted. Both he who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others so and he who does not, will both be, Jesus says, in the kingdom of God. One will indeed be called small, and another, great. This is in harmony with the doctrine of salvation in 5:3¹⁵. The Kingdom of God is not obtained based on what we have, or what we achieve, but based on what we do not have, based on our poverty in spirit, on the recognition of our total inability to deserve or gain the Kingdom. This is what Jesus said to His disciples frightened

¹⁵ “Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν!” (5:3).

by the statement He made looking at the rich young man who was walking away: "Ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πλούσιος δυσκόλως εἰσελεύσεται εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν· πάλιν δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν, εὐκοπώτερόν ἐστιν κάμηλον διὰ τρυπήματος ῥαφίδος εἰσελθεῖν ἢ πλούσιον εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ" (19,23-24). "Τίς ἄρα δύναται σωθῆναι;" – the disciples asked Him. "ἐμβλέψας δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· Παρὰ ἄνθρωποις τοῦτο ἀδύνατόν ἐστιν, παρὰ δὲ θεῶ πάντα δυνατά" (19,25-26). So, entering God's kingdom is a special work of God, and this work will be done through His Son. So unique is this work of the Son of God that only those who recognize their utter poverty, in other words, their total dependence on the work of the Son, will have the kingdom of God.

However, the verse immediately following – "For I say unto you, unless your righteousness surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, *ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.*" (20) – speaks not of one's position in the Kingdom – small or great in it – but of one's position in it: in it or outside it. At first glance, such a statement would seem to contradict the statement in 5:3: "Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν!" In resolving this apparent contradiction, we must start from what is written. Jesus spoke both verse 19 and verse 20; therefore, when we speak of being or not being in God's kingdom, we must keep both verses in mind. The resolution of this contradiction is found in what we understand from the discourse on the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes are not a list of disparate issues, but a collection of profound truths carefully woven into a coherent theological whole. If the first of the "Beatitudes" contains the "text" of the doctrine of salvation, all the others can be the "commentary" of this text. So, the correct understanding of poverty in spirit is possible only in the light of the other "beatitudes." The truly poor in spirit will prove this by his tears, that is, by the courage to weep over his sins.

But only gentleness, that is, only the courage to get out of the competition of self-affirmation, is confirmation of the veracity of our repentance. In turn, meekness is tested by hunger and thirst for righteousness, not for Pharisaic righteousness, but for true righteousness. The hunger and thirst for such righteousness are not a passive hunger and thirst, but an active hunger and thirst, a seeking, a pursuit of things other than when we were competing for self-affirmation. Here is what Paul says in *Colossians*:

1 Εἰ οὖν συνηγέρθητε τῷ Χριστῷ, τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε, οὗ ὁ Χριστός ἐστιν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ καθημένος·² τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε, μὴ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,³ ἀπεθάνετε γάρ, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐν τῷ θεῷ·⁴ ὅταν ὁ Χριστὸς φανερωθῇ, ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν, τότε καὶ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ. (Col. 3:1-4)

If until now we were chasing after earthly things, from the moment we were comforted by God and received the power to withdraw from the competition of self-affirmation, we begin to yearn for the heavenly things, for that state according to God's will, called justice, in other words, we entered a different competition, we climbed on a different arena: in the arena of affirmation, of glorifying God. What else does Paul's exhortation in 1 Corinthians 10:31 mean: "Εἴτε οὖν ἐσθίετε εἴτε πίνετε εἴτε τι ποιεῖτε, πάντα εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ ποιεῖτε," or what he says in Colossians 3:17: "καὶ πᾶν ὃ τι ἐὰν ποιῆτε ἐν λόγῳ ἢ ἐν ἔργῳ, πάντα ἐν ὀνόματι κυρίου Ἰησοῦ, εὐχαριστοῦντες τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ δι' αὐτοῦ"? However, the proof that we hunger for true righteousness, and not for Pharisaical righteousness, is precisely the power to loosen our fists and give to others what God has given us, the power to treat others as God has treated us. Moreover, if our hearts are not pure, then even our charity is defiled. Furthermore, how do we know that our hearts are pure and that we have seen God? From the fact that our heart began to beat for what God's heart beats: for people. Jesus descended to our planet to save what was lost. He called His disciples to make them fishers of men, and before the Ascension, He sent them into the work of appeasement. But only the price we are willing to pay for the new reality of God's kingdom into which we have entered and tasted will be the measure of our real poverty in spirit.

The circle closes with the eighth "beatitude", whose reward is identical to that of the first "beatitude": "theirs is the Kingdom of heaven" (5:3,10). But this means that the first "beatitude" cannot be separated from the others, just as verse 5:19 cannot be separated from the following verse: "λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι ἐὰν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ὑμῶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη πλεῖον τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρισαίων, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν" (20). What Jesus is saying is that the first "beatitude" checks itself in the others.

In Matthew 5:20, Jesus challenges the entire Pharisaic system, declaring it null and void as to the possibility of one entering the kingdom of heaven. What exactly did this system consist of? What are the principles that govern it? To understand this, we will dwell on a detail from Matthean antitheses.

A misinterpretation of Scripture leads to misapplication

The Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29) is organized around a fundamental principle that governs the reality of God's kingdom: character determines conduct. In the first 12 verses, Jesus placed the Christian character before us, practically making His self-portrait. Verses 13-16 warn us of two great dangers: the first is the danger of contamination with the world, which leads to the loss of the taste of salt, of its power to salt. The second is the danger of isolation, which

ultimately has a similar effect on the world to tasteless salt: a null effect. The warning continues in verses 17–20, where Jesus clearly says: “λέγω γὰρ ὑμῖν ὅτι ἐὰν μὴ περισσεύσῃ ὑμῶν ἡ δικαιοσύνη πλεῖον τῶν γραμματέων καὶ Φαρισαίων, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθητε εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν” (20). But for such a warning to be meaningful, Jesus tells us how such righteousness is born and therefore how it is to be avoided. 5:21-48 confronts the *scribes' misinterpretation of Scripture*. 6:1-7:6 exposes *the misapplication or mispractice of Scripture*. *The Sermon on the Mount* concludes with a series of warnings (7:7-29), which confirm the fundamental principle of the Kingdom: character determines conduct.

As John Stott, text block 5:21-48 states “It consists of six parallel paragraphs (21-26, 27-30, 31-32, 33-37, 38-42, 43-48), which illustrate the principal Jesus has just propounded in verses 17 to 20 of the perpetuity of the moral law, of his coming to fulfil it and of his disciples’ responsibility to obey it more completely than the scribes and Pharisees were doing. Each paragraph contains a contrast or ‘antithesis’ introduced by the same formula (with minor variations): *You have heard that it was said to the men of old ... But I say to you ...* (21, 22).”¹⁶ Through the six contrasts, Jesus corrects the scribes’ interpretation of Scripture in six areas of life: murder (21-26), adultery (27-30), divorce (31-32), vows (33-37), vengeance (38-42), and love of enemies (43-48). In each of these six areas, the interpretation of Scripture is clarified by moving things from the level of deed to the level of words, attitudes, and motivations.

To illustrate these nuances, we will briefly address some aspects of the antithesis of divorce. On the issue of divorce, Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:31-32 are direct and to the point: “Ἐρρέθη δέ· Ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, δότω αὐτῇ ἀποστάσιον. ³² ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ἀπολύων τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ παρεκτός λόγου πορνείας ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχευθῆναι, καὶ ὃς ἐὰν ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσῃ μοιχᾶται” (31-32). But His statement must be judged in the context in which it was said.

The Pharisees had legislated divorce upon request. How was he thinking among them is also apparent from the question they ask Jesus in Matthew 19: “Καὶ προσῆλθον αὐτῷ Φαρισαῖοι πειράζοντες αὐτὸν καὶ λέγοντες· Εἰ ἕξεστιν ἀνθρώπῳ ἀπολύσαι τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν?” (3). Their question was based on the Pharisaical interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Here is what Moses said: “Ἐὰν δὲ τις λάβῃ γυναῖκα καὶ συνουκήσῃ αὐτῇ, καὶ ἔσται ἐὰν μὴ εὖρη χάριν ἐναντίον αὐτοῦ ὅτι εὗρεν ἐν αὐτῇ ἄσχημον πρᾶγμα, καὶ γράψῃ αὐτῇ βιβλίον ἀποστασίου καὶ δώσῃ εἰς τὰς χεῖρας αὐτῆς, καὶ ἔξαποστελεῖ αὐτὴν ἐκ τῆς οἰκίας αὐτοῦ.” (Deut. 24:1).

¹⁶ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Leicester: IVP, 2020), 76.

The condition under which, considering the Law of Moses, a book of separation could be given was that the man had found “something shameful” in the woman he had married, and because of this, she would have no passage before him. Perhaps it was not very clear what that “shameful thing” was, the Pharisees and scribes generalized it to “every cause.”¹⁷ Here, for example, is what we read in the Mishnah about how this text was interpreted:¹⁸ “The House of Shammai say, ‘A man should divorce his wife only because he has found grounds for it in unchastity since it is said *because he has found in her indecency in anything* (Dt. 24:1)’. And the House of Hillel say, ‘Even if she spoiled his dish since it is said *because he has found in her indecency in anything*’. E. R. Aqiba says, ‘Even if he found someone else prettier than she since it is said, and it shall be if she finds no favour in his eyes (Dt. 24:1)’.”¹⁹

Jesus was confronting and condemning positions like those of Hillel’s school and Rabbi Akiba. Jesus expresses His position by emphasizing the seriousness of the implications of divorce – “ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ

¹⁷ In his commentary on *The Book of Deuteronomy*, P. C. Craigie states that “in precise terms, there is only one piece of legislation in this passage (24:1-4), that contained in v. 4a. The first three verses, which form the grammatical protasis, specify exactly the conditions that must apply for the execution of the legislation in v. 4 (the apodosis). Thus, strictly speaking, the legislation relates only to particular cases of remarriage; the protasis contains incidental information about marriage and divorce but does not specifically legislate on those matters. The verses do not institute divorce, but treat it as a practice already known, which may be either a matter of custom or of other legislation no longer known. The procedure for divorce is contained in vv. 1, 3; the statement is so succinct that all the details are no longer clear. The woman does not *find favor* in the eyes of the man; the reason for this lack of favor is because there is *something indecent in her*. *Something indecent* (‘*erwat dābār*’) may have been a technical legal expression; the precise meaning is no longer clear. The same expression is used in 23:14, where it suggests something impure, though the words do not seem to have normal connotations. In this context, the words may indicate some physical deficiency in the woman, though this meaning is uncertain” P.C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids. MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 304-305.

¹⁸ “We know”, affirms John Stott, “that a current controversy about divorce was being conducted between the rival rabbinic schools of Hillel and Shammai. Rabbi Shammai took a rigorist line and taught from Deuteronomy 24:1 that the sole ground for divorce was some grave matrimonial offence, something evidently ‘unseemly’ or ‘indecent’. Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, held a very lax view. If we can trust the Jewish historian, Josephus, this was the common attitude, for he applied the Mosaic provision to a man who ‘desires to be divorced from his wife for any cause whatsoever’ (*Antiquities*, IV. Viii. 23). Similarly, Hillel, arguing that the ground for divorce was something ‘unseemly’, interpreted this term in the widest possible way to include a wife’s most trivial offences. If she proved to be an incompetent cook and burnt her husband’s food, or if he lost interest in her because of her plain looks and because he became enamoured of some other more beautiful woman, these things were ‘unseemly’ and justified him in divorcing her” Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 93.

¹⁹ Jacob Neusner, *Mishnah*, Ghittin, 9.10 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 487.

ἀπολύων τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχευθῆναι, καὶ ὅς ἐάν ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσῃ μοιχᾶται” (Mat. 5,32) – thereby emphasizing the *sanctity of the marriage relationship*. His position is then elaborated in Matthew 19:1-9, where Matthew 5:32 is found almost identically as a conclusion to His speech:

4 ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν Οὐκ ἀνέγνωτε ὅτι ὁ κτίσας ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς 5 καὶ εἶπεν Ἔνεκα τούτου καταλείψει ἄνθρωπος τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὴν μητέρα καὶ κολληθήσεται τῇ γυναικὶ αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἔσονται οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν; 6 ὥστε οὐκέτι εἰσὶν δύο ἀλλὰ σὰρξ μία. ὁ οὖν ὁ θεὸς συνέζευξεν ἄνθρωπος μὴ χωριζέτω. 7 λέγουσιν αὐτῷ· Τί οὖν Μωϋσῆς ἐνετείλατο δοῦναι βιβλίον ἀποστασίου καὶ ἀπολύσαι αὐτήν; 8 λέγει αὐτοῖς ὅτι Μωϋσῆς πρὸς τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν ἐπέτρεψεν ὑμῖν ἀπολύσαι τὰς γυναῖκας ὑμῶν, ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς δὲ οὐ γέγονεν οὕτως. 9 λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν ὅτι ὅς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται καὶ ὁ ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσας μοιχᾶται. (Matt. 19:4-9)

First, Jesus associates Matthew 5:31-32 with verses 27-30 precisely to help His hearers reassess the issue of divorce and consider the guilt of the other party, in our case, considering the man’s guilt. Understanding things should have cured the man of the drive for divorce “for any cause.”

Second, we saw that Jesus does this to point out that even if a man has found “something shameful” in his wife – the cause of fornication – *divorce is not obligatory*. Considering the whole context, Jesus exhorts us to forgiveness and acceptance. And sometime later in *the Sermon on the Mount*, He would say to His hearers: “ἐὰν γὰρ ἀφήτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν, ἀφήσει καὶ ὑμῖν ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος 15 ἐὰν δὲ μὴ ἀφήτε τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, οὐδὲ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ἀφήσει τὰ παραπτώματα ὑμῶν” (Mat. 6:14-15). And such a statement makes divorce not an easy option for one who believes in God and His wrath “Ἀποκαλύπτεται ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ἀσέβειαν καὶ ἀδικίαν ἀνθρώπων τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων” (Rom. 1:18).

Nevertheless, there are situations when, because of hardness of heart, reconciliation is impossible, because one of the parties involved does not want it. When fornication is not resolved by repentance, but continued, God cannot overlook it either. Even He gave Israel a book of separation. However, such action must be considered as *a last resort*.

Jesus stated in *the Sermon on the Mount* that divorce is an occasion for adultery. That is why, although He accepts a legal clause for divorce, namely “the cause of fornication”, He nevertheless tries to convince His hearers that,

through His character and example, God teaches us that forgiveness and acceptance are preferable to divorce. His statements must be understood in the context in which they were said, in which context the man considered himself free and entitled to give his wife a parting card *for any cause*.

For the correct interpretation of Jesus' words, it is important to understand that Matthew 5 and 19 and Deuteronomy 24 are to be considered both the Word of God. No matter why God gave the derogation in Deuteronomy 24, however, this text has authority because of Him who gave it. By stating that the "shameful thing" of which a man can accuse his wife is only "the cause of fornication," nothing else, Jesus takes away from the Pharisees the right to generalize things and thus lower the standards of faithfulness in the marriage relationship.

The statements in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 that he who marries a man commits adultery must be understood in conjunction with Deuteronomy 24:1-4. And such a statement raises, first, a problem for God. Considering His law in Deuteronomy 24, once man fell into sin and thus the relationship between man and God was broken, there was no way God could receive us back. To solve this problem, God gave His own Son to die for us and in our place. Thus, Christ's death became the objective basis for our reconciliation with God and our reconciliation with one another.

The implications of assuming the relationship with God in the Church lead to the strengthening of this relationship, not to its weakening because the one who has been forgiven much is also obliged to forgive accordingly.

Here is how John Stott summarizes Matthew 5:31-32: "The Pharisees were preoccupied with the grounds for divorce; Jesus with the institution of marriage... The Pharisees called Moses' provision for divorce a command; Jesus called it a concession to the hardness of human hearts... The Pharisees regarded divorce lightly; Jesus took it so seriously that, with only one exception, he called all remarriage²⁰ after divorce adultery". So, he concludes: "Speaking personally as a Christian pastor, whenever somebody asks to speak with me about divorce, I have now for some years steadfastly refused to do so. I have made the rule never to speak with anybody about divorce until I have first spoken with him (or her) about two other subjects, namely marriage and reconciliation. Sometimes a discussion on these topics makes a discussion of the other unnecessary. At the very least, it is only when a person has understood and accepted God's view of marriage and God's call to reconciliation that a possible context has been created within which one may regretfully go on to talk about divorce. This principle of pastoral priorities is, I believe, consistent with the teaching of Jesus."²¹

²⁰ This is, we believe, about returning to the wife whom the man divorced, because otherwise Jesus would have blatantly contradicted the text of Deuteronomy 24:1-4.

²¹ Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 94-98.

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