
Please explain Christ's sayings in Matthew 23:8-10.

Let us read the entire context of Christ's sayings. Christ introduced the topic in reference to the scribes and the Pharisees (verse 2), but His application of His words were obviously much broader. He said, beginning in verse 6:

"They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher [Leader], the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers [better: masters or leaders]; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Many of those commentaries which discuss this passage--and which don't just ignore it--conclude that these passages deny hierarchical government in the church. They conclude that Christ was teaching that all brethren are "equal" in the sense that they can decide for themselves what to do, where to worship, and whom to follow. This is, however, not what Christ was saying. It is very clear, from other passages, that there is a difference in ranks and functions in the Church of God--both in regard to the relationship between ordained ministers, deacons and members, and in regard to ministers among themselves (compare Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Corinthians 12:28-29).

What Christ was addressing, however, was the danger of becoming proud, by accepting lofty and inappropriate religious titles. For instance, the word "Rabbi" means, "my great one" ("The New Bible

Commentary--Revised"). Christ emphasized the fact that even though He bestowed on His ministry certain functions and responsibilities toward "feeding" the flock, the ministers are to understand that they are not in any way "better" than others; in fact, that they are to look at others "better" than themselves [compare Philippians 2:3]; that it is God who has given them such responsibilities; that they don't "deserve" or are "entitled" to such functions, and that they are "nothing" in comparison with God the Father and Jesus Christ.

Far too many ministers, including those in some Church of God organizations, have allowed themselves to become proud and to be filled with self-aggrandizement--whether or not they accept lofty religious titles--and Christ warns that this kind of an attitude will cause their ultimate downfall. Christ specifically said that ministers are not to exercise "lordship" over the flock [Luke 22:24-26; compare 1 Peter 5:3]; and that they must not accept "superior" religious designations and titles which are reserved for God--including titles such as "the Anointed One," "the Lawgiver" "the Prophet," "Doctor of Divinity," "His Holiness," "Father" or even "Holy Father." The title "Reverend" should not be used by God's ministers, either, as the Bible uses this word ONLY in reference to God (compare Psalm 111:9, Authorized Version). The same is true for the term, "Holy Father," which is exclusively used for God (compare John 17:11).

We need to note too, that Christ told His disciples not to BE called "Rabbi" or "Master," but He went a step further and instructed them not to EVEN CALL another human being "our Father."

Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible states the following:

"Christ's ministers must not affect the name of Rabbi or Master... to covet or accept the honour which they have that are in kings' palaces... They must not assume the authority and dominion implied in those names; they must not be magisterial, nor domineer over their brethren, or over God's heritage, as if they had dominion over the faith of Christians: what they received of the

Lord, all must receive from them; but in other things they must not make their opinions and wills a rule and standard to all other people, to be admitted with an implicit obedience... Christ is our Master, our Teacher, our Guide... the great Prophet, whom we must hear, and be ruled and overruled by; whose word must be an oracle and a law to us... And if he only be our Master, then for his ministers to set up for dictators, and to pretend to a supremacy and an infallibility, is a daring usurpation of that honour of Christ which he will not give to another...

"The fathers of our flesh must be called fathers, and as such we must give them [respect]; but God only must be allowed as the Father of our spirits... Our religion must not... depend upon, any man... Paul calls himself a Father to those whose conversion he had been an instrument of [1 Corinthians 4:15; Philemon 1:10] but he uses that [expression] to denote... affection... God is our Father... the Father of all lights [James 1:17], that one Father, from whom are all things, and we in him [Ephesians 4:6]."

Regarding Paul's reference to himself as a "father," we need to understand that he was strictly talking about the fact that GOD used him as an instrument to proclaim the truth and to teach and nourish those who listened. This spiritual "father-child" relationship is also expressed in other passages in Scripture, such as Philippians 2:22; 1 Thessalonians 2:11; and 1 Peter 5:13. As can be easily seen from these passages, the word "father" is used affectionately--and NOT in any way as a religious TITLE of superiority.

Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible adds:

"'And call no man your Father'... This does not, of course, forbid us to apply the term to our real father. Religion requires all proper honor to be shown to [him, Exodus 20:12; Matthew 15:4; Ephesians 6:1-3]. But the word 'father' also denotes 'authority, eminence, superiority...' In this sense it is used here. In this sense it belongs eminently to God, and it is not right to give it to people... Only God has supreme authority... Christ taught them that the source of all life and truth was God, and they ought not to seek or receive a title which

properly belongs to [Him]."

Vincent's Word Studies add the thought that the word "Father" is "Aimed at those who combed the title Abba, or Father. Compare the title Papa - Pope."

In conclusion, we are to be careful what religious titles to use, or to accept. The safest way would be to use those titles which the Bible specifically mentions and applies approvingly to God's ministers and deacons (compare passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:28-29; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Timothy 3:1-2, 8-13; and Titus 2:5-7). Let us not go "beyond what is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6; New International Version), because if we do, including applying and embracing titles which only belong to God, we may "wander beyond the teaching of Christ [and] leave God behind" (2 John 9, Living Bible).

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