

The following sermon was preached by Chris Hume in 2018. What follows is the full sermon manuscript, edited for readability and flow.

Sermon Title: Be Not Ye Called Rabbi

Scripture Text: Matthew 23:8

Let's begin by reading our text from Matthew 23:8-10: "But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ."

With these few words, Jesus completely dismantled the religious system of the day, which relied heavily upon the religious leaders to "guide" and "protect" the people.

Our natural tendency is to assume that if we had lived during the time of the Pharisees, we would not have liked them. We imagine that had we been born, say, thirty years before Jesus, we would have recognized their wickedness right away. But remember, the Pharisees were the religious leaders—the overseers or pastors, if you will. They held great favor with the people, especially among women. They were not viewed as wicked individuals who needed confrontation. In fact, the religious system itself was not seen as something in need of reform.

Jesus came and boldly questioned the status quo. Christians, of all people, should welcome the questioning of the status quo—the way things are currently being done. Jesus didn't just denounce a group of people, the religious leaders; he challenged an entire system of thought and a religious or spiritual worldview that was deeply precious to the people. Keep in mind that the Pharisees wielded tremendous influence over the masses—they even persuaded the crowds to demand the release of Barabbas and the destruction of Jesus, as we read in Matthew 27:20: "Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and destroy Jesus." The Pharisees were not despised by the people in the way that Romans or tax collectors were. To draw a modern parallel, imagine a man arriving on the scene today and questioning the current religious system in America—not calling out political figures like Obama or Trump, but the pastors of the land, and not just the obvious ones like Benny Hinn or Joel Osteen, but even the conservative ones.

Jesus is profoundly wise; he possesses both knowledge and wisdom. Many religious leaders may have knowledge, but they lack wisdom. Jesus applied truth to real situations and circumstances, to systems and practices, to traditions and structures.

As I reflected on these matters, I began to grasp more clearly why the religious leaders opposed Jesus so vehemently. There existed a entrenched system of religion in the land that assigned great importance to the teachers, the overseers, and the instructors of God's Word. The people had embraced a worldview that positioned the rabbis as essential guides who handled the "hard work" of understanding Scripture. These religious leaders had established schools, titles, and degrees, viewing their roles as critically important for the people of God. Then Jesus came along and questioned their entire system. They felt threatened. They thought, "Jesus will lead the people astray!" In their minds, everything must go through proper channels and respect the current system. A similar dynamic unfolded when Paul abandoned that religious system in favor of Christ's way. Paul took the Jewish Scriptures and expounded them far and wide, outside those proper channels, and he taught others to do the same—men who hadn't attended the Pharisees' schools or abided by their system.

Now, I'd like to do something a bit different today and dive into application before we examine the text itself. This isn't my usual approach. However, it's often the case that a person's fruit is experienced before their beliefs are fully exposed. A tree's fruit is frequently the first thing we encounter, long before we scientifically analyze its vast network of roots, branches, and leaves. Similarly, with many Bible doctrines, people first encounter them rather unwittingly—not in the library of their minds, but in the theater of their senses. They experience the fruit of the doctrine before they fully grasp its content. This isn't to suggest that the mind is subservient to experiences; we must test all experiences by the Word of God. But God seems to have designed it so that we find great satisfaction in experiencing the fruit of truth. As Jesus said in John 7:17, "If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority." If you follow God's will and experience the fruit of obedience to His Word, you will know experientially that it is true. So, let's briefly consider the outcome of this doctrine being applied throughout history. Then, I'll step back and provide a sound definition of the doctrine, which I've already introduced briefly.

What happens when men embrace the truth of Jesus' words here in Matthew 23:8-10? At its essence, kernel, core, and heart, what unfolds when men and women no longer look to the approved or official religious leaders of their day? What occurs when boys and girls are taught to study the Word for themselves and to depend on no man—for this, after all, is maturity? What transpires when men realize they need not wait for the approval and "blessing" of the religious masters, instructors, and guides of the day in order to teach others and advance the kingdom? Let's consider that.

The work that Jesus began was carried on by Peter, John, Paul, and Timothy—men from all backgrounds and statuses, serving the church in word and deed. Many of them met no other qualifications than the biblical ones. With a message so vital, don't you think God would have chosen the official religious schools and system to ensure its purity? But He didn't. He chose the lowly. He chose those whom, as we'll see, the religious leaders viewed as uneducated. In Acts 4:13, we read: "Now when they [the rulers and elders and scribes] saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus." What does "uneducated" mean here? It's not what we might assume. Peter and John weren't illiterate peasants; they were likely bilingual, able to read and write in multiple languages and think deeply. The Mishnah even suggests that Jews taught girls to read Greek, despite the religious leaders' disapproval. To those religious leaders, "uneducated" meant these men hadn't received the approved training. They hadn't gone to the seminaries or earned their M.Divs. They just started teaching without the necessary preparation! What a dangerous thing—and one that threatened the religious leaders' positions and system. Peter and John hadn't received the "special training" required to provide spiritual leadership to God's people in Israel. For the safety of the people, of course, they had to be stopped. Peter and John led the way in applying Matthew 23:8-10 to real life. The result was that the gospel spread far and wide, parents taught their children, and children studied the Scriptures, gaining the ability to become true Christian leaders through holiness and knowledge of God's Word. Can you imagine what the spread of Christianity would have looked like if it had been entrusted to the religious leaders of the day? Instead, it was given to a band of "uneducated" men.

That was the first century. The rapid spread of Christianity was enabled by many factors, not least of which was the rejection of the prevailing religious system in favor of one that urged Christians not to be called instructors or rabbis, nor to build systems around such titles and positions, but rather to simply live out the Word and teach as equals. One more example: the Reformation, especially in England. In 1560, the Geneva Bible was published. While other English translations existed, this was the first Bible accessible to common people in English; previous ones were reserved for clergy only. The same motivations that drove the Pharisees to oppose Jesus' new system led the religious leaders, pastors, and overseers in England to resist a system that would emerge if the truth of Matthew 23:8-10 were embraced. This is why some parents were executed for teaching their children the Lord's Prayer in English. As Marshall Foster put it, "It is no exaggeration to say that the Geneva Bible was the most significant catalyst of the transformation of England, Scotland, and America from slavish feudalism to the heights of Christian civilization." Why? Not because it enabled religious leaders to better lead and protect the people, but because it

brought the Word of God into the homes and hearts of "ordinary" men and women. These individuals could read for themselves passages like Matthew 23:8-10 and see the truth.

Every Pilgrim family possessed a Geneva Bible, and it became the center of their family life. The Bible began to be read at dinner tables in homes throughout England and Scotland. Young men were taught the sacred writings from an early age, just as Timothy was. The great revivals in England and Scotland were fueled by families who instructed their children to study God's Word for themselves and modeled the practice of questioning the status quo, including the accepted spiritual or political leaders of the day. The Pilgrims who came to America grew up as boys and girls taught to read the Bible independently, despite a system designed to "protect" them and provide "spiritual" guidance. William Bradford, for instance, grew up reading the Geneva Bible and Foxe's Book of Martyrs. As a young boy, he attended a church not accepted by the status quo, as it questioned the practices and systems of the Church of England.

Imagine if evangelicalism—not the liberals who claim Christ, but those who assert orthodoxy and the Word of God—encountered today what Jesus faced in the first century. Suppose a man with great influence, wit, charm, charisma, kindness, love, and meekness arrived and declared that the entire system established by these religious leaders—the seminaries, the "lead pastor" role touted as the paramount spiritual leader of the people, the requirement for men to attend seminary and study under "approved" teachers to be qualified—was a broken system. This system, which fosters dependence on the pastor for wisdom and insight, is not working. How would the heads of seminaries, involved in millions of dollars of business, react? Some might say it's absurd to think money plays a role; these are godly men serving Christ. That may be true, but the people in Jesus' day thought the same of the Pharisees. They admired them and didn't recognize the trap they were in. The same occurred in pre-Reformation Europe: the masses didn't despise the Pope and religious leaders as long as they believed they needed their spiritual guidance and protection. Once the Reformers began to pull back that veil, just as Jesus did in the first century, the masses saw the truth. They didn't need the Pope and his minions for spiritual safety; they simply needed the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

This is why the Puritans, whom I consider the best branch of the Reformation, placed great emphasis on the believer's role in evaluating the pastor's sermon. The Christian pastor, in contrast to the Pharisee or the Roman Catholic prelate, was a servant who fed the people the Word of God. He served them, and they were to analyze, critique, evaluate, and discuss his words as a body of believers. Today, in many churches, members would feel uncomfortable if discussions about the pastor's sermon centered on anything but

agreement with him. So, our text has been applied throughout history, and it has brought great blessing to the world.

Let us now briefly consider this text itself. In verse 8, Jesus defends his claim that we are not to be called rabbi by pointing out that we are all brothers. The theme of family is crucial for the church. Paul wrote to Timothy about this in 1 Timothy 3:15, showing how one ought to conduct oneself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God. The priesthood of all believers is at play here. Why does Jesus ground his prohibition against being called rabbi in the fact that we are all brothers? Because brothers are equals. The true church of Jesus Christ is a family. The theme of family is applied to the church, not to a kingdom. This is why Paul emphasizes that the church is a household. In this family, we are all brothers when it comes to religious authority. There are leaders in the church, but they are not leaders in the worldly sense. Worldly leaders rule over those under them, lording it over them, whether flagrantly or subtly. But it is not to be so in the family of Jesus Christ. Leaders are to be as servants. This isn't just a cliché for a seminary course on servant leadership; it's the essence of leadership in the church. How many times did Jesus emphasize this to his disciples? The church is not like the world. So, Jesus says we are all brothers. Interestingly, in 1 Timothy 3:15, after describing the church as a household, Paul declares that the church—not just the leaders—is the pillar and buttress of the truth!

Can you imagine the Pharisees' response to that? Paul, with all his special skills, seminary training, and background from the group that founded the seminaries—the ones who created discounts for denominational students, the group whose existence depended on the idea that they were essential for the people's spiritual health—says, "Hey, the pillar of truth isn't you leaders; it's a rag-tag group of believers who meet in homes week to week, trying to go to the Temple but getting kicked out, kind of like homeschool kids trying to play on the government school playground and getting booted." If you can understand how the Pharisees would have reacted to Paul's claim, then you can grasp why many modern church leaders oppose anything that questions the status quo, whether broadly or locally in their specific church. It's this mindset that leads "spiritual leaders" who preach "reformation" to resist actual reformation in "their" church, because it would question the status quo.

So, Jesus says, do not buy into this whole system of "Rabbi, Rabbi"—you are all brothers. Now, I need to clarify something: knowledge means you know this truth and can talk about it. You might say, "Oh, yes, of course, the pastor is just another brother. I believe this text." But in practice, you adopt the very system Jesus condemns. You view the rabbi, the teacher, as vital to the church's health—more vital than other parts. A little leaven leavens the whole lump; if one part suffers, the whole body suffers. Every orthodox church has this

knowledge, but do they have wisdom? When families leave a modern church, do the people mourn? Yet, even the hint that the pastor might leave, step down, or resign sends church members into hysteria. This is knowledge without wisdom. Wisdom takes the knowledge from this text and applies it to life, to the church. It leads men to adopt and embrace the worldview Jesus presents—a view that emphasizes the equality and brotherhood within the church.

Again, verse 9. The hyperbole might cause some to reject the truth behind it, but that would be a mistake. Undoubtedly, Jesus is speaking in terms of religious and spiritual leaders, as this verse sits in the immediate context of his denunciation of the religious leaders of his day. You can't get more direct than this; Matthew 23 is the chapter of woes against them. How Roman Catholics navigate this verse is beyond me. We think that if we lived in Reformation times, we would have spotted the error. But the Pope exercised lordship over the people to "benefit" them.

Verse 10. If there's any verse that could deter more young men from attending seminary, spending thousands on books they could borrow from a library for free, and putting their families through the rigors of work and school, it might be this one. Hey, young man, the people do not need you to be their instructor! The people have an instructor—His name is Jesus Christ. The biblical pastor is a servant who seeks to serve the people by showing them Jesus. This is why most of his qualifications are moral, and his teaching must reflect his life. As Spurgeon said, if a preacher doesn't live out the Christian life at home, he should go far from home, and when he gets up to preach, say nothing and sit back down.

In closing, what remains of the position of pastor? You might ask what is left of the modern conception of the Christian leader if we apply these verses as I'm suggesting. Perhaps not much of the modern conception, but hopefully the biblical one emerges in our minds. Peter tells us that Christian leaders are to be examples to the flock, affirming what we've learned from Jesus' words here. A Christian leader wants the people to grow and reach maturity. Maturity means a child no longer needs spoon-feeding; he doesn't need milk but can handle meat. Spiritual maturity means a Christian doesn't need the basics taught over and over—he can think critically, discerning good from evil through constant practice, as in Hebrews 5:11-14. How can Christians achieve that when their "leader" doesn't want them to judge every word from his mouth, discuss it, challenge it among themselves, and wrestle with it? A leader who rejects the system Jesus condemns won't cling to his position; he'll want to help more men reach maturity alongside him. He wants them to test the spirits, including his own, as in Galatians 1. Here's the knowledge versus wisdom distinction again: people say, "Oh, yes, if the pastor teaches a false gospel, we should reject it and call him out." But for everything else, it's "grace" and "respect for the pastor" not to question or

discuss how he could be wrong every Sunday. Yet, if the "common, uneducated" people are trusted by Paul with guarding the most important thing—the gospel—why are they so dependent on the pastor for everything else? It's like telling my kids they're capable of watching their little siblings, the most precious things, but can't play with the dog. Again, the priesthood of all believers: if we have direct access to God and His Word, why depend on "religious leaders" for lesser matters?

What remains of the pastor is what I believe Jesus intends. Just as a father makes a difference by what he does, a Christian leader—a pastor, an overseer—makes a difference by his actions, not by the nature of his "position or office." The condemnation of a system of titles and positions in Matthew 23 shifts the church's focus to the role of pastor. I have to tell you, I don't feel any safer "under the authority" of some board of elders that doesn't even have the time or desire to talk to me. I'm much safer among a group of Christians who share the same Holy Spirit and the same Scriptures. This idea that Christians need a seminary-approved church system is baloney. We need each other—that's what the church is. We need the church, just like we need family. In a family, it's the function of the father that's important, not the title. You can have a deadbeat dad who coasts on being "the dad" and insists the family needs him so much. Or you can have a kid whose dad isn't around, but an uncle steps in, spends time with him, disciplines him, teaches him, and models good behavior. That man fulfills the function of father, no matter what he's called! That man has true authority in the boy's life. His biological father may have the title, but no authority. True servanthood authority is gained in practice, not through promotion. But our seminary model forbids this. The biblical descriptions of the church fly in the face of the current model—they portray a body, a family, a home, not a kingdom, a government, or a business. Those images are important but not for the church.

What can we say in summary? Applying the Bible to life is an exciting endeavor. The more I live, and the more I study history—which is like living through many people's lives—the more I see the beauty of applying Scripture to reality. These three verses in Matthew 23 contain a treasure of wisdom that must be sought out. As Proverbs 20:5 says, "The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out." The purpose behind Christ's words opens a vast landscape of application and wisdom. We are to be men and women of understanding who draw out every drop of wisdom from the Bible. How did this text apply in its original time? What happened in history when it was followed? When it was abandoned? How much is it being followed today? These questions and so many more are the kinds we can ask as we delve deep into the waters of God's heart. I don't want to stand here and give you regurgitated mush. Sadly, that's what the modern system promotes: the pastor does all the "hard work" and then spoon-feeds partially digested food to the people. Paul's goal was that we all reach "full manhood," as in

Ephesians 4:13-16: "until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love." In Hebrews, he chastises the church for not being mature: "You should be teachers by now!"

Take the Word of God and dive into it. You do not need a seminary degree. The church is here to serve you. Those who have gone before have done much work. The knowledge part just takes a little time. It's the wisdom part that's the most work—and the most exciting: think about how a truth ought to be applied. Discuss it with the ability to question the status quo, even if it's your own. Sometimes the status quo may be correct, but it shouldn't be assumed. Jesus lays down a different way of living out the Christian religion. It's a way that removes power from an elite group and gives it to all who have the Spirit of God. This actually protects orthodoxy and the purity of the gospel better than any other system, but I'll leave you to ponder how that might be for now. I encourage you to discuss these things and question them. Compare them with Scripture. In light of this, if any of the men have comments or questions, please share them now.