



Chapter 2

It's Show Time!

“Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’ But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”—Matthew 23:5-12

During World War II the American and British military brought the material goods of their culture into the remote islands of the South Seas. These civilizations had never experienced the wealth and prosperity enjoyed by the powers that had recently arrived to occupy their land. When the war was over, the military bases were closed, and there were no more shipments of the material resources to which the inhabitants of these islands had become accustomed.

The lifestyle of the islanders drastically changed. Up until the end of the war some of the soldiers shared medi-

cine, canned food, radios, tents and clothing with the islanders. The locals had become accustomed to crates descending out of the sky, filled with Coca-Cola, candy, canned meat and all manner of riches and delicacies they had never known. Suddenly the supply of this heretofore-unheard-of treasure trove of resources dried up.

The islanders longed for the cargo which had once arrived by plane or by ship to reappear. In an effort to cause the resources to return, followers of what came to be called *cargo cults* started to mimic the activities they had observed the soldiers perform, thinking if they acted like the soldiers, the resources would return.

The islanders built landing strips where airplanes could land with the cargo they so longed for—hence the term *cargo cults*. They created replicas of headsets, carving wooden headphones adorned with bamboo antennas. The hand-crafted headsets were worn by cargo cult followers who sat in towers, seemingly functioning as air traffic controllers—for non-existent airplanes. They lit up the runways with signal fires and torches, hoping to attract night landings.

Hoping to cause the return of the cargo and merchandise they had once enjoyed, they staged drills and marches, with sticks substituting for rifles and military uniforms and insignias painted on the bodies of the cargo cult “soldiers.” They believed that the occupying armies had some special and unique connection with the gods, and that something they did influenced the gods to rain down material blessings. The cargo cult followers seemed to be doing all of the right things. They had created, to the best of their abilities, the same form and appearance they had seen before—but of course to no avail, for the cargo did not materialize. No planes landed. No merchandise arrived.

In 2 Timothy 3:5 Paul warns of those who do not love the one true God, who have a form of godliness but deny its power. Religion can deceive us into thinking that the physical, outward, external form (what is seen and touched and felt) is more important than the spiritual, inner, unseen sub-

stance. The image that the eye sees is powerful, leading religion to motivate its followers by appearances. Jesus said that “everything” the teachers of the law and the Pharisees did was “done for men to see.”

There are all kinds of “forms” of godliness that are alive and well within Christ-less religion today:

1) Ritual. Many feel that if they can just perform the right rituals and ceremonies and duties, in the right way at the right time, then God will bless them with health and wealth—and conversely he won’t curse them. Shades of the cargo cult!

2) Attendance. Many feel that if they just show up, assemble and attend—then that will make God happy. If they just march around in a “Christian” assembly, with their little stick rifles, in “God’s Army” then that will keep God happy—at least for one more week when they will need to do it all over again.

3) Heritage. Many believe that they have a form of godliness because they were born into a particular religion or denomination. They believe that their religious club has “the truth” or “more truth” than anybody else. They belong to or frequent a particular spiritual address because it’s the only thing they have ever known.

4) Liturgy. Many think candles, bells, stained glass windows, choirs, pipe organs, incense and chanting is what God wants, and if they engage in such “holy” behavior and worship then God is pleased. Others, who favor a more contemporary experience, feel if they raise their hands to lively music in an exercise called “praise and worship” then their “worship” will ensure that they know God.

The Bible speaks of empty, meaningless religion as being like wells without water. A religious well without water holds the promise of being able to quench thirst—but when the truth is finally realized, such an empty well is but a mockery. Christ-less religion is incapable of dispensing God’s grace.

Apart from God, religious rituals and ceremonies are *secondhand spirituality*—humans merely going through the motions. Jesus makes it clear—if we are to have an authentic, real, vibrant relationship with God we must personally respond to him and allow him to transform us. Jesus uses the metaphor of being born spiritually, from above (John 3:3).

All forms of cargo cult religion are but a mockery. God is not influenced, conjured up or manipulated through machinations, obedience, rituals, uniforms, behaviors or practices. The power of God is not isolated to musical expression or devout prayer or outward appearance.

Believe it or not, every year in the Republic of Vanuatu a celebration is held, even to this day, with islanders clothed in what look like old United States Army fatigues and uniforms, marching with bamboo rifles slung across their shoulders. It's so obvious to sophisticated North Americans, isn't it? Cargo cult religion is primitive idolatry. Cargo cult religion is superstitious, oppressive religion that holds its people in spiritual captivity.

Religious Uniforms: Phylacteries and Tassels

The signature passage for this chapter serves as a prelude to the “seven woes” of Matthew 23. Before we consider the seven woes let's pause and consider the warning Jesus gave in the initial verses of Matthew 23. He cautions about the priority religion gives to concentrating on appearances, and in so doing, missing the real power of God that is often not visible to the naked eye.

Jesus warns about a pseudo-spiritual image that can be created by uniforms worn by religious professionals. Such attire creates a holier-than-thou atmosphere. Costumes can then become an essential part of the show, when religious business is conducted.

Most religions have distinctive “garb” or accessories which they use to distinguish and decorate its officials and leaders. Robes, vestments, habits and clerical collars are among those more familiar to most of us. The teachers of

the law, Pharisees, Sadducees and priests of Jesus' day were no different. Jesus mentions two pieces of apparel used as clerical dress by Jewish religious leaders of his day. While religious trappings themselves have no "magical" powers, many attribute spiritual strength and supremacy to those who wear them.

Pictures of modern and ancient *phylacteries* can be found, online, via a request through a search engine. Orthodox Jewish men today still wear *phylacteries* or *tefillin*, small leather boxes containing selected texts from Exodus and Deuteronomy. Phylacteries are required by Jewish oral tradition to be worn during prayer. Two boxes are bound with leather straps, one to the forehead and one to the hand. Here is one of the texts typically contained in the boxes, the famous *Shema*—a Hebrew word that means *hear*:

Deuteronomy 6:4-8: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads" (See also Exodus 13:9, 16; Deuteronomy 11:18).

The Jewish oral traditions, later recorded in the *Mishna*, take this Deuteronomy 6:8 quote quite literally, and thus verses are bound to foreheads and hands with leather straps. You might not see examples of this practice in your day-to-day life. But in the world of orthodox Judaism, it is a daily occurrence.

You can see phylacteries being worn in many orthodox Jewish metropolitan areas in North America or Europe. Phylacteries are commonplace in synagogues, in places where orthodox Jews congregate throughout Israel, such as the Western Wall in Jerusalem, and on many El Al Airlines flights.

Jesus said that the teachers of the law and Pharisees made “their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long.” Bigger boxes and longer tassels were more than fashion statements in the religious hierarchy of Jesus’ day. Jesus exposed the silliness of spiritual one-upmanship holiness contests, revealing them to be a façade of faith. Attributing special powers and status to those who bedeck themselves with spiritual uniforms is a sign of an outward religion, not an internal relationship.

Apparently the religious leaders of Jesus’ day were purchasing and wearing bigger and fancier phylacteries to distinguish themselves in the practice of prayer. Do better boxes make prayers more effective? Does God pay keener attention to the prayers of those who wear broader phylacteries? It is laughable. But it was happening. According to Jesus, prayer competition among clergy is futile religious ambition. Religious arrogance and pride appalled Jesus.

Can bigger boxes change the human heart? Do bigger phylacteries make a religious leader a bigger and better man of God? Some apparently thought so. Jesus could not abide this spiritual obsession without scathing criticism.

It was the same thing with longer tassels. Orthodox Jewish men today still wear prayer shawls called a *tallit*. The tassels on each of its four corners are called *tzitzit*:

Deuteronomy 22:12: “Make tassels on the four corners of the cloak you wear.”

You may remember the New Testament story of a woman with a hemorrhage being healed by touching the “edge” of Jesus’ garment (Matthew 9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48). This was undoubtedly the *tzitzit*. It represents not only the ritual purity of the wearer, but also his authority as head of a family. Only family members were allowed to touch it. But Jesus calls the woman “daughter,” thus, rather than condemning her for the act, he generously includes her in his spiritual family, as one coming under his household protection.

Thus, in a futile attempt to enhance their relationship with God, the Pharisees super-sized their phylacteries and the tassels on their prayer shawls.

Places of Honor and Important Seats

Jesus accused the Pharisees of loving “the most important seats in the synagogues.” Once again, Jesus expresses his opposition to the love of appearances which religious authorities can find attractive. The Pharisees loved being big cheeses. They loved being seen. They loved the spotlight. They loved the acclaim of men.

Within the religious culture of Jesus’ day, seating at dinners and banquets was assigned according to social rank. The host was seated in a place of honor, as were the most honored guests. The closer you sat to the host, the higher your place in the social pecking order. Jesus accused the teachers of the law of coveting the best seats. As so often is the case in his ministry and teaching, Jesus indicates his preference for the precise opposite of prevailing practice and custom:

Luke 14:8-11: “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this man your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Jesus is addressing pride in the human heart. Humble yourselves, he is saying. Forget the social symbols that play to your vanity and ego:

Matthew 23:12: “For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

Mark 9:35: “Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.’”

Jesus had a great deal to say about the futility of thrusting yourself into a place of prominence. It was one of the primary themes of his message. You cannot fake humility. You cannot act humble for the purpose of self-exaltation. Rather, Jesus is talking about a state of being. He is talking about the habits of a humble heart, imparted as a gift of God's grace.

So how do you kill the social ambition that poisons your heart? How do you overcome the normal human desire to be seen in places of prestige and to be esteemed by your peers as being important? If Jesus lives in you and you live in him he will help you to see the futility of trying to climb the ladder of human importance and prestige. Jesus, as he lives within you, will help you confront the ugliness of your own desperate arrogance.

After all, building your sense of self-worth on societal or religious position is a house built on sand. How much recognition is enough to prove your worth before God? How many accolades will quench your self-justifying thirst? Religious prestige will never satisfy your soul.

On what can you build your spiritual self-worth, if not your own social status? How about asking God to impart the worthiness of Jesus, so that your worth will depend on God's love for you, without regard to what anyone else thinks, in spite of the circumstances life brings?

If your self-worth is built on Jesus and his words and his love, then the specific seat you are assigned at a dinner is completely irrelevant. If your spiritual self-worth is built on Jesus—if he lives in you, then you will care less about your own esteem and prestige—far less about what others think and more about what Jesus thinks.

As I write, unemployment in many places here in North America is in double digits. People are suffering the financial hardship and humiliation of being unemployed. A friend of mine has been out of work almost two years, and he has been prayed for and encouraged by many friends. Yet a few

“friends” have subtly removed him from their social calendar. Apparently the unemployed do not enhance the guest list.

The Lord does not play the exclusive guest list game, and those who love him do not abandon those who have been humbled by life’s circumstances. The Lord exalts the humble and brings down the proud. Humility is the character of God. A slaughtered little lamb is the central symbol for Jesus in the Book of Revelation. All of heaven sings:

Revelation 5:12: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”

Jesus was exalted not because he seized exaltation, but because he relinquished it. He did not cling to his power and position. He emptied himself. He humbled himself. That is the character of God. As Paul wrote:

Philippians 2:5-11: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

By God’s grace, our attitude can be that of Jesus, as he lives his risen life in us. Humility is one of the primary attributes of a Christ-centered life. When we are Christ-centered, Christ in us has no interest in being on the A-list, jockeying for position or seeking religious accolades and the praise of our fellows.

There is no wonder that religion leads to self-exaltation, because religion is all about human performance. What we do, when we do it and how much of it we accomplish are all

the indicators which, institutionalized religion assures us, will adorn our heavenly scorecard. Heaven, as religion has it, is filled with angels who scurry around keeping score of our good deeds. By its very nature, Christ-less religion leads to competition, envy, greed and covetousness. Religion is all about human performance. Jesus is all about the humility he lives in us, by God's grace.

Jesus makes it crystal clear that the Pharisees were slaves of empty religion. They coveted the seats of honor at banquets. Their scorekeeping hearts made them jockey for positions of honor before their honor-hungry colleagues. How sad that rather than humbly serving the humble, they ignored the humble to exalt themselves.

God did not come to this earth, in the person of Jesus, so that we might serve him with peeled grapes, chocolate bars and ice cold drinks while fanning him with palm fronds. He came to serve us. While God desires our love and service, apart from his grace we have nothing he needs. He doesn't need any product we are capable of producing. What he desires is for us to accept his service, which will transform us from thinking solely of ourselves to being his very children who are humble, internally adorned with the attitude of Jesus, thinking of and serving others, in his name.

God is not interested in anything religion assures us that we can earn. Larger prayer phylacteries, longer prayer shawls and getting the places of honor at dining room tables earn you nothing before God. What matters to God is transforming us, by his grace, into his very children in whom Jesus lives.

Call No One Rabbi, Father or Teacher

Jesus was not finished with the Pharisees, the appearance-loving religious professionals. His next statement raises the question of what is appropriate, in God's eyes, to call religious professionals.

Rabbi, an Aramaic and Hebrew word, means "my great one," or "my honorable sir." It is most often translated as *Master*. It is a title of respect used when addressing a bib-

lical expert. Jesus himself was addressed as *rabbi* frequently (Matthew 26:25, 49; Mark 9:5, 11:21, 14:45; John 1:38, 1:49, 3:2, 4:31, 6:25, 9:2), most often by his own disciples.

Jesus said, *“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers”* (Matthew 23:9). Humble as always, Jesus did not specify who this one Rabbi is. But we all know, since he allowed his disciples to address him as Rabbi. Moreover, Jesus equalizes everybody else. We are all brothers (and sisters).

Is Jesus telling us that we must not call a pastor or priest by honorary titles such as reverend, teacher, preacher, elder or bishop? Some religious professionals have advanced degrees. Is Jesus opposed to recognizing the title of doctor when we speak of or to a pastor?

Like phylacteries, tassels and chief seats in synagogues and at banquets, a title of honor is not a problem, in and of itself. Jesus is telling us to reserve the ultimate spiritual sense of what it means to be rabbi, father and teacher for God alone. There is no one-upmanship or competition for status if we are all equal, spiritual siblings. The religious game the Pharisees were playing was futile. Jesus exposes the lofty title game for what it really is: egotistical, arrogant, self-promoting snobbery. No one should fall for the idea that their title makes them a better or superior person. We should not think of those who have titles as being better or superior persons. When it comes to human beings, we are all in the same boat—we’re humans. Jesus then goes a step further, and he steps right on our toes. He says the same thing about the title *father*:

Matthew 23:9: “And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven.”

Jesus knew of the commandment to honor your father and your mother, of course. Obviously, he was not telling us to refrain from referring to our own fathers with the respectful title of “father.” Jesus was not talking about the physical relationships we have, and the physical honor we owe

our parents. He was talking about the spiritual honor of father which our Father in heaven alone deserves.

Even at the age of twelve, Jesus said to his panicked mother and father, “‘Why were you searching for me? ...Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?’” (Luke 2:49) And when the grown Jesus was told that his mother and brothers were at the door, he told those gathered, “‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother’” (Mark 3:33-35). Jesus used these occasions to intentionally distance himself from any claims of the ultimate priority of physical family in order to underline the eternal priority of spiritual family.

As with the title *rabbi*, Jesus limits the title *father*. *Rabbi* is a title appropriate only for God the Son. *Father* is a title appropriate only for God the Father. Jesus pulls the rug out from under anyone who would elevate himself, whether fathers or teachers of the law.

Then there is another title: *Teacher*. It is translated from a rare Greek word found only twice in the New Testament, both times in Matthew 23:10. The word is *kathegetes*, meaning “one who guides.” Jesus not only calls the teachers of the law and Pharisees blind guides (Matthew 15:14, 23:16, 23:24), but he denied these blind guides the title of teacher. Jesus limited its spiritual and ultimate use to the Messiah (Paul uses a different Greek word for teacher in Ephesians 4:11).

Again, out of true humility, Jesus makes no claim here to being the Messiah, the Christ. He leaves that determination to his listeners. Talk about nerve! *Do not call anyone rabbi*, he says to religious leaders who covet the title. *Do not call anyone father*, he says to people who are proud of their religious observance of the commandments, including the one about honoring your parents. *Do not call anyone teacher*, he says to religious professionals who long to have others look to them as a spiritual guide and teacher.

Jesus gave these prohibitions because no mere mortal deserves these titles of honor, in their ultimate, spiritual sense. Those in whom Jesus lives, in all humility, will not covet such titles. *Humble yourselves and honor God alone.*

The Show of Religion in the Church

Are religious professionals today guilty of religion for show? Of course! Many religious authorities covet larger congregations and more beautiful buildings, bigger homes and cars, more respect in town and places of honor in the church and community, prestigious diplomas from better universities, higher offices in larger denominations, bigger salaries in churches with bigger budgets, best-selling books and large TV, radio and Internet audiences and ratings, and famous members from high places of commerce and government who attend their church.

Before we point fingers at religious leaders, however, we would all do well to check our own pride. Many people boast of their religious leaders as being better preachers. Others take pride in what they have been told is better theology, while still others bask in the spiritual arrogance of bigger denominations and nicer buildings. It's all religious pride. It's all a show. Christ-less religion is always about "the show." And therein is a huge red flag. If it's a show, can it be real and authentic? Think about it.

Our Prayer:

Father, Rabbi and Teacher: Apart from you we are all such posers and pretenders. Search us and reveal to us if our primary interest is in being image-conscious imposters. Expose our false façades, and lead us to the humble carpenter from Nazareth, whom we know, by your grace, as our King of kings, Lord of lords, Messiah and Savior.