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DON'T LISTEN TO THE PHARISEES

A number of people claim that we should look to the Pharisees and their instructions for how to keep some of God's laws. Thus it is claimed that for the observance of the Passover and of the Feast of Pentecost we should look at when these days are observed by the Pharisees.

When Mr. Armstrong wanted to disprove a wrong theory, he would always focus on "the trunk of the tree", the main issue and the foundation on which the whole wrong theory was built. Let's follow the same approach with this question we are looking at here.

The trunk of the tree for any claim that Christians should look to the Pharisees for guidance as to when and how we should observe certain Old Testament laws is based on Matthew 23:2-3.

Matthew 23:3 is the trunk of the tree for this particular question! IF this verse does not really tell us what people claim it tells us, THEN the whole idea that we need to look to the Pharisees for guidance crumbles and falls to pieces. So in this article we will carefully examine this verse.

The discussion will of necessity be somewhat technical. This is because this verse has been rather carelessly translated and it is only by specifically focusing in on EXACTLY what Jesus Christ actually said that the true intent of this verse will become obvious. So I apologize that a lot of what I will say will involve grammatical technicalities, but I don't see how I can present clear proof without getting into technicalities.

Let's now examine this Scripture carefully.

MATTHEW 23:2

Here is verse 2 from the King James Version.

Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: (Matthew 23:2)

The Greek for the verb "sit" is "ekathisan", which is the aorist tense, active voice and indicative mood of the verb "kathizo". The indicative mood in Greek expresses "a simple statement of fact". And that is precisely what we have here.

Jesus Christ was stating THE FACT that the Scribes and the Pharisees were occupying the "seat of Moses". Christ did not say that they SHOULD have been on that seat; He didn't say that God GAVE them this position; and He didn't say who else had sat on that seat since Moses had died about 1400 years or so earlier. Christ simply stated THE FACT that at that point in time the Pharisees were on that seat. Christ did NOT state or imply that "the seat of Moses" belonged to the Pharisees from then on out.

"The seat of Moses" had not always belonged to the Pharisees. The sect of the Pharisees only sprang up at some time between 180 B.C. and 100 B.C.. Their power-base was not really established all at once. Because of the religious corruption of the priesthood at that time (second century B.C.), the Pharisees (basically laymen without any priestly or even Levitical connections) managed to usurp a certain amount of religious authority. They were self-appointed! The basis for their claims to religious

leadership lay in their knowledge of and their education in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and not in any genealogical claims (e.g. such as claiming to be of the line of Aaron). They had no claims to having been appointed by God.

Jesus Christ did NOT imply that the Pharisees would continue to sit "on Moses' seat" until His second coming. He simply made a statement of fact that was correct for the 30's A.D., but not necessarily for the year 500 A.D. or the year 1500 A.D. or the year 1996 A.D. ... even as that statement would not have been correct for the year 300 B.C. or the year 800 B.C. or the year 1200 B.C..

It is important to keep in mind that the Pharisees occupied a certain position at one specific point in time ... i.e. during the ministry of Jesus Christ. They had not had that position in earlier centuries and there is no indication that they were to retain that position in the centuries and the millennia that would follow Christ's ministry.

WHAT IS "THE SEAT OF MOSES"?

What exactly did Christ mean by "the seat of Moses"? Did Moses actually have "a seat"?

[By the way: in the Greek text the word "seat" does not have the definite article, but the word "Moses" does have it ... i.e. the Greek reads "epi tes Moseos kathedras" meaning literally "upon (a) seat of the Moses". New Testament Greek did not have an indefinite article. Thus when the definite article is not used, then the indefinite article is generally implied for us in English.]

So what did Moses do "from a seat"? It wasn't that he "gave laws" from a seat, was it? No, the laws he gave he had brought down from the mountain, after having communicated with God. And those laws he did not give "sitting down".

The expression "Moses' seat" is not used anywhere else in the Bible, only here in Matthew 23:2. And Moses is not really recorded as having had a seat (excluding the occasion when he raised his arms in prayer to God and then sat on a rock because of sheer tiredness), except for one occasion, in Exodus chapter 18. Notice the account.

And it came to pass on the morrow, that MOSES SAT TO JUDGE THE PEOPLE: and the people stood by Moses from the morning unto the evening. (Exodus 18:13)

This is an account of people bringing their disputes to Moses for settlement. As Moses explained to his father-in-law Jethro ...

And Moses said unto his father in law, Because THE PEOPLE COME UNTO ME TO ENQUIRE OF GOD: When they have a matter, they come unto me; and I JUDGE BETWEEN ONE AND ANOTHER, AND I DO MAKE [THEM] KNOW THE STATUTES OF GOD, AND HIS LAWS. (Exodus 18:15-16)

This is the only occasion when Moses had "a seat". He SAT before the people. Notice what was involved here:

- 1) The people wanted to know God's will.
- 2) So Moses EXPLAINED God's laws and judgments to them.

3) Then Moses JUDGED by applying God's laws to the people.

It is a relatively simple matter to study into Jewish history for the period after Ezra and Nehemiah and going up to the ministry of Jesus Christ. It is well-known that the Pharisees, as a group, had taken it upon themselves ... "to make known the statutes of God and his laws"! But, unlike Moses, they had no authority to then also "pronounce binding judgments". That authority was at that time reserved for the Sanhedrin, which included A FEW of the Pharisees, but also non-Pharisees (e.g. Sadducees).

Thus: WHY did Christ say the Pharisees sat "upon Moses' seat"?

Answer: Because they had taken it upon themselves to be the final authority in explaining the laws of God! They were the ones who, at that time, studied the Scriptures and they SHOULD have been able to explain the Word of God correctly to the people. BECAUSE these lay-people (i.e. they were not "ordained" or "set apart" into any ministry) claimed expertise in understanding the Word of God, THEREFORE it was not difficult for them to gain control of the synagogues throughout the country. This gave them control over the dissemination of God's Word. By assuming the responsibility of explaining the Word of God, they had ipso facto placed themselves upon Moses' seat. They had NOT been appointed by God!

This verse (Matt. 23:2) provides the background to Christ's statement in the next verse. It is verse 3 which must be clearly understood. But before we see verse 3, let's take a brief look at the whole chapter.

MATTHEW CHAPTER 23

After the brief opening comments about the position of the Scribes and Pharisees in verses 2-3, the rest of this chapter is A BLISTERING, HARD-HITTING ATTACK ON THE UTTER HYPOCRISY OF THE PHARISEES! Seven times in this chapter Jesus Christ is recorded as saying:

"WOE UNTO YOU, SCRIBES AND PHARISEES, HYPOCRITES!"

See verses 13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27 and 29.

By calling the Pharisees "hypocrites" seven times, Christ was telling us that the Pharisees were TOTAL AND COMPLETE HYPOCRITES, seven being the number of completion and perfection.

Question:

Would God ever expect His people to look, in an unqualified way, for spiritual leadership to a group of people which God Himself designates as total and complete hypocrites?

Answer:

Certainly not!

Question:

Does it really make sense to think that God FIRST tells us to look to a specific group of self-appointed religious leaders for spiritual leadership and for instructions ... AND THEN have

God give a scorching expos of the utter hypocrisy and double-standards of this group?

Answer:

No, that doesn't make sense!

Question:

Wouldn't it be natural to ask: "Lord, WHY do You tell me to listen to these people, when You have also told me how completely hypocritical they are in their conduct? Do You REALLY want me to follow the teachings of hypocrites?"

Answer:

Yes, those would be natural questions!

Right, now let's take a look at verse 3.

MATTHEW 23:3

Here is the verse as it appears in the KJV.

All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, [that] observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. (Matthew 23:3)

And here is the Greek text for this verse, transliterated into our alphabet.

panta oun hosa an eiposin humin terein tereite kai poieite kata de ta erga auton me poieite legousin gar kai ou poiounsin (Matthew 23:3)

There are several things to notice about this verse.

For a start, this verse presents a very clear contrast. The first part of this verse is contrasted with the second part.

Next, the English word "bid" is a translation of the Greek verb "eiposin", which is the second aorist tense active voice and the SUBJUNCTIVE MOOD of the primary verb "epo", which means "to say, to speak".

THE WORD "BID" IS A MISTRANSLATION! HERE IS WHY!

The English word "bid" implies a command, but in the Greek no command is implied!

Webster's 7th New Collegiate Dictionary defines the verb "bid" as follows:

"1 a: archaic: beseech, entreat; b: TO ISSUE AN ORDER TO: TELL; c: to request to come: invite; 2 : to give expression to; 3 a: offer -- usu. used in the phrase 'to bid defiance'; b: past bid

(1) to offer a price; (2) to make a bid in a suit of cards."

Apart from the archaic meaning of "to beseech and entreat", the first meaning listed is "TO ISSUE AN ORDER". The same dictionary also defines the verb "tell" as "order, direct, as in 'told her to wait'".

In the New King James Version, in the Introduction by Arthur L. Farstad, Executive Editor NKJV, there are three specific goals stated which the translators of the NKJV set themselves. The third goal is stated as follows:

"To neither add to, take away from, nor alter the communication that was the intent of the King James translators but to transfer the Elizabethan word forms into twentieth-century English."

The point is that the NKJV has tried to retain the meaning which was conveyed by the original KJV. In the NKJV this verse is translated as follows:

"Therefore whatever they TELL you to observe, that observe and do, but do not ...". (Matthew 23:3 NKJV)

Thus it is clear that the NKJV translators also felt that by rendering the verb "eipsin" as "bid", the original KJV translators wished to convey A COMMAND!

Moffatt translates this verse as follows:

"so do whatever they TELL you, OBEY THEM, but do not do as they do. They talk but they do not act;". (Moffatt, Matt. 23:3)

Moffatt is probably one of the more outspoken translations which implies that this verse is A COMMAND TO OBEY THE PHARISEES IN EVERYTHING ... but that is simply not true!

Notice also that the two words "ALL WHATSOEVER" in the KJV have been replaced by the one word "WHATEVER" in both, the NKJV and in Moffatt. But in the Greek text there are actually THREE words for this "whatever" in the NKJV ... the three Greek words being "panta hosa an".

IF IN THE GREEK THE VERB "EPO" WAS INTENDED TO CONVEY A COMMAND, THEN THE IMPERATIVE MOOD WOULD HAVE BEEN USED! It is the imperative mood which conveys commands.

But the imperative mood is not used for this verb. Rather, the subjunctive mood is used. Thus "eiposin" should not really be translated as either "bid" or as "tell", but as "say" or as "speak". This is the way it is translated in Young's Literal Translation. Notice:

all, then, as much AS THEY MAY SAY TO YOU to observe, observe and do, but according to their works do not, for they say, and do not; (Matthew 23:3 YLT)

You might be asking:

"So what's the big deal as to whether it should be translated as 'say' or as 'speak' as opposed to being rendered as 'bid' or as 'tell'?"

The answer to this question lies in the use of the SUBJUNCTIVE mood. The English translations imply that the imperative mood (expressing a command) is used. But in the Greek text it is actually the subjunctive mood which is used.

So what is the "subjunctive mood"?

The subjunctive mood is THE MOOD OF POSSIBILITY AND POTENTIALITY. The action described MAY OR MAY NOT OCCUR, DEPENDING UPON CIRCUMSTANCES. This tense is used in many commands following CONDITIONAL purpose clauses.

The subjunctive mood presents possibilities, but not necessarily certainties. The things it describes "may or may NOT occur".

Yes, the later part of verse 3 does state three commands ... but they are all introduced into the discussion as POSSIBILITIES by the use of the subjunctive mood with the earlier verb.

J. Gresham Machen, a highly qualified scholar of biblical Greek, wrote in his book "New Testament Greek for Beginners", copyright 1923, the following in Section #400, titled "CONDITIONAL RELATIVE CLAUSES":

"The indefinite relative clauses which in English are marked by the suffix -ever added to the relative word (e.g., whoever, whichever, whatever, wherever, whenever), have in Greek ordinarily THE SUBJUNCTIVE with the particle 'an' or 'ean'. THIS IS ONE OF THE COMMONEST USES OF THE SUBJUNCTIVE." (page 174)

In Matthew 23:3 the Greek particle 'an' is used and we are dealing with A CONDITIONAL CLAUSE! Without stating it in so many words, this Greek grammatical construction implies inherent CONDITIONS! The things that follow, including commands that are stated, may or may not occur.

Are you beginning to understand?

Now let's examine the Greek words which appear before the verb "say" or "speak". There are four words. They are:

"panta oun hosa an".

"Panta" means "ALL"; "oun" means "therefore" or "then"; "hosa" means "whatever" or "as many as"; and "an" is a Greek primary particle, which we will examine very carefully later.

To avoid confusion, we can eliminate the word "oun" (i.e. "therefore" or "then") from our examination. It does not have any impact on the things we need to understand. Thus we are left with the three Greek words: "panta hosa an".

"PANTA" is the nominative plural in the neuter gender of the adjective "pas", which means "all".

"HOSA" is the nominative plural, also in the neuter gender, of the relative adjective "hosos", which means "whatever", amongst a range of other meanings. {In Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon more than two full columns are devoted to a discussion of this word.}

"AN" is a primary particle. In Thayer's Lexicon one and one-half pages are devoted to a discussion of

this little word.

THIS WORD IS IMPORTANT FOR US TO UNDERSTAND!

Here is how it is explained in Thayer's Lexicon:

"a particle indicating that something CAN OR COULD OCCUR ON CERTAIN CONDITIONS, OR BY THE COMBINATION OF CERTAIN FORTUITOUS CAUSES. In Latin it has no equivalent, nor do the English words 'haply, perchance', or German 'wohl, etwa', exactly and everywhere correspond to it."

In plain English: the use of this Greek particle 'an' indicates that the statement COULD OCCUR ... ON CERTAIN CONDITIONS! Or by a combination of "fortuitous" causes!

Look up the word "fortuitous"! In Webster's Dictionary, under the entry for "ACCIDENTAL" it lists a number of synonyms. There it states the following:

"FORTUITOUS so strongly suggests chance that it often connotes ENTIRE ABSENCE OF CAUSE." (Webster's 7th New Collegiate Dictionary, bottom page 5)

Are you beginning to understand what the Greek text is actually telling us? Consider the difference this little word "an" makes to the Greek text.

Thus:

"Panta hosa eiposin ..." = "All whatsoever they say ...".

But:

"Panta hosa an eiposin ..." = "All whatsoever ON CERTAIN CONDITIONS that they say ...".

The CONDITIONAL aspect of this whole statement by Jesus Christ is therefore emphasized in two specific ways:

- 1) By the use of this particle "an" in the Greek.
- 2) By the use of the subjunctive mood with the word "say".

It is an easy matter to verify these two points by checking any reliable Lexicons of New Testament Greek and Greek grammar books. Yet the translations we have looked at have failed to convey the conditional nature of Christ's statement. It seems none of them really understood exactly what Jesus Christ intended to convey to us with His statement. That is why they have rendered the Greek subjunctive mood "eiposin" into the English imperative "bid" and "tell" (i.e. except for Young's Translation).

JESUS CHRIST'S INTENT IN THIS VERSE

Notice Matthew 23:1 ...

Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, (Matthew 23:1)

This discussion goes to the end of verse 39. The next verse after that (i.e. Matt. 24:1) shows Jesus departing from the Temple. Thus all of chapter 23 forms one complete episode.

So what was Christ's main purpose in this whole episode? It should be clear that Christ's main concern was to carefully spell out the utter hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the Scribes. Seven times He called them "hypocrites". This was no empty "name calling" ... Christ was trying to open the eyes of people to the hypocritical double-standards of their religious leaders. The whole chapter makes this purpose very clear.

So EXACTLY WHAT did Christ intend His audience to get from His statement in verse 3?

Was it ...

A) "Before I spell out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in great detail, I want to first of all make sure that you respect their God-given office and that you will therefore carefully and meticulously OBEY everything they tell you to do, even if they ARE nothing more than a bunch of two-faced hypocrites"?

Or was it ...

B) "Even though they themselves are hypocrites, the Pharisees will nevertheless IN MANY CASES (i.e. a qualified "all") SAY the right things, and I am SPECIFICALLY thinking of those areas where they themselves do not DO the things they teach should be done, you, my disciples, actually SHOULD DO what they teach. Don't use their two-faced approach as an excuse to also not do what is really expected by God. Specifically I mean: don't neglect to pray just because the Pharisees have turned praying into a sham (verse 14); don't neglect tithing just because the Pharisees have taken this law to ridiculous extremes (verse 23); don't neglect faithful heartfelt obedience to God just because the Pharisees have turned obedience into a hollow and outward ritual (verse 25); don't reject the message of the kingdom of God just because the Pharisees have presented it in a negative light (verse 13); don't neglect the real works of obedience that are associated with obedience to God just because the Pharisees set such a bad example (verse 4); etc."?

Which of these two approaches do you think Jesus Christ had in mind?

Remember that the Pharisees did not really have any "GOD GIVEN" position. They had appointed themselves to positions of religious authority within their communities. Their group very rapidly turned into a closed fraternity, with stringent regulations for accepting new members into this fraternity. Jesus Christ simply acknowledged the position the Pharisees had ipso facto assumed, when He said that they sat in Moses' seat. Having assumed this position made the Pharisees ACCOUNTABLE before God, irrespective of whether they should have had that position or not.

Jesus Christ's main concern in this statement was to present A CONTRAST between what the Pharisees would SAY (often this would be quite correct!) and what they would DO (often they would break the very rules which they would spell out for other people).

A SIMILAR CONTRAST IN PAUL'S WRITINGS

For the sake of establishing a contrast, the Apostle Paul also used the word "all" rather generally. He assumed that his readers would understand that his use of "all" had OBVIOUS limitations. Here are two verses from 1. Corinthians.

ALL THINGS ARE LAWFUL UNTO ME, but all things are not expedient: ALL THINGS ARE

LAWFUL FOR ME, but I will not be brought under the power of any. (1 Corinthians 6:12)

ALL THINGS ARE LAWFUL FOR ME, but all things are not expedient: ALL THINGS ARE LAWFUL FOR ME, but all things edify not. (1 Corinthians 10:23)

Even though Paul said four times "ALL THINGS are lawful to me", surely none of us would argue that Paul really meant "ALL THINGS"! It is obvious that he did not mean that killing, stealing, idolatry, lying, coveting, hating, committing adultery, blasphemy, etc. are "lawful" to him.

In these two verses it is assumed that we will figure out on our own that obvious limitations are intended in applying the word "all" ... and neither the conditional particle "an" nor the subjunctive mood are used to help us reach this conclusion. Paul's intent in using the word "all" is to create a contrast. But in Matthew 23:3, where Christ's intent was also to create a contrast, and in spite of the use of the particle "an" and also of the use of the subjunctive mood, people want to apply an unlimited meaning to the word "all". That is not right!

Consider the use of contrasts!

When people present a verbal contrast, it is invariably the second element that is presented which is the focus of attention. Think about this. In a contrast it is never the first argument to which the speaker wishes to draw attention, but the second argument or statement. The first statement is merely a means, an avenue, an opportunity for presenting the real point the speaker wishes to draw attention to. That is the case with Paul's statements and that is the case with Christ's statement.

Paul was not trying to emphasize that "all things are lawful to him", but rather that "all things are not expedient" and that "all things don't edify". In the same way, Jesus Christ was not emphasizing obedience to the Pharisees, but the matter that we should not follow the bad examples of the Pharisees. And in the rest of Matthew 23 Christ then spelled out exactly how bad those examples were. This is the answer to the question we looked at earlier, when we asked ...

"Lord, WHY do You tell me to listen to these people, when You have also told me how completely hypocritical they are in their conduct? Do You REALLY want me to follow the teachings of hypocrites?"

The answer is: Christ is only telling us, in a qualified way, to listen to the Pharisees in those things where they SAY what is right but then they themselves don't even DO what they say should be done, for the sake of setting up an effective CONTRAST! It is the second part of Christ's statement, that the Pharisees were hypocrites who did not even practise what they preached, which is the point Christ was emphasizing. Christ's first statement was simply a way of setting the stage for the point He wished to highlight. That is always the case when people make their point by way of a contrast.

SO SHOULD WE EVER LISTEN TO THE PHARISEES?

It is not a matter that we should NEVER listen to anything the Pharisees said. In many cases they would actually TEACH the right things, and then we should be willing to act on this right teaching. But the point is that we should certainly NOT look to the teachings of the Pharisees in an unqualified way!

[The same point can be made about all the Protestant churches today. In many cases they will SAY the right things, like don't kill or steal or lie, etc., and then we will obviously be in agreement with them. So, in a qualified way, we can accept some of the things the Protestant churches teach.]

The ultimate authority must always be THE BIBLE, the written Word of God. It is only in those areas where the teachings and the customs of the Pharisees do not contradict the clearly recorded instructions in the Bible, that we should give any credence to the teachings of the Pharisees. In the event of a clash between what the Bible teaches and what the Pharisees teach (and there are MANY clashes in this regard!) we have a duty to always accept the biblical instructions and to reject the instructions of the Pharisees.

Thus, in the face of clear biblical instructions to do things one way, it is NEVER acceptable to teach something different by appealing to the customs and traditions of the Pharisees. The only time it is acceptable to appeal to the Pharisees and their understanding is when that understanding is also in harmony with what the Bible actually teaches.

It always comes back to Isaiah 8:20 ...

To the law and to the testimony: IF THEY SPEAK NOT ACCORDING TO THIS WORD, [IT IS] BECAUSE [THERE IS] NO LIGHT IN THEM. (Isaiah 8:20)

Actually even those people who tell us to look to the Pharisees and their customs for guidance don't really mean this in an unqualified way. They simply appeal to the customs of the Pharisees for very specific and limited issues (e.g. the Jewish calendar, observance of the Passover and Pentecost). For the rest they also REJECT the customs and teachings of the Pharisees.

The teachings of the Pharisees are recorded in the Talmud, which consists of the Mishnah and the Gemara. In its totality, the Talmud is an unbelievably staggering work with endless picky and inconsequential instructions, which nobody in their right mind would try to live his life by! It would require a lifetime of study to wade through these endless humanly-devised instructions. It is these teachings of the Pharisees which are "the heavy burdens" Jesus Christ referred to in Matthew 23:4.

So the people who appeal to the supposed authority of the Pharisees clearly do so on a "pick 'n choose" basis. They themselves decide when to appeal to the Pharisees for authority and for support, and when to reject the teachings of the Pharisees. But what such people SHOULD do is FIRST establish that a teaching is BIBLICALLY sound and correct; only then should any appeal to the teachings of the Pharisees even be considered.

THE PHARISEES ARE NO LONGER ON THE SEAT OF MOSES

When Christ said in Matthew 23:2 that the Pharisees were sitting on Moses' seat, Christ did NOT imply that this condition would continue through all ages.

How long after Christ spoke those words in Matt. 23:2 did they CONTINUE to sit on Moses' seat? NOT VERY LONG AT ALL!

We have seen that they sat on Moses' seat because they claimed for themselves the right to "make known the laws of God". They claimed the right to be the ultimate authorities in expounding the Word of God. And because there was no group around which had been legitimately appointed by God to this responsibility (i.e. the Levites had in effect relinquished this responsibility by their acceptance of pagan customs), therefore the Pharisees had been able to usurp this responsibility. But their hypocrisy made clear that their days of usurpation were also drawing to a close.

Already in Matthew 16:18-19 Jesus Christ had made clear that He was giving "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" to the Apostle Peter and to the leadership of His Church. The Church was officially founded

on the Day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. At that time God gave His Holy Spirit to every member of the Church.

And in Matthew chapter 18 Christ had made clear that THE CHURCH (once it was established) was to be the final authority in making known the will of God. Notice the sequence ...

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and TELL HIM his fault between thee and him ALONE: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear [thee, then] take with thee ONE OR TWO MORE, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell [it] unto THE CHURCH: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. (Matthew 18:15-17)

The sequence is:

Step 1 = sort the difference out alone.

Step 2 = take along one or two witnesses.

Step 3 = appeal to the Church for a judgment.

Christ gave these instructions for sorting out problems between people. These instructions were for people who should have had the Holy Spirit dwelling within them. And these instructions REPLACED the procedure Moses had used in conflict resolution!

Once the New Testament Church of God had been established, "the seat of Moses" was in effect TRANSFERRED TO THE CHURCH! This is made quite clear by Matthew 18:17.

From the time of its establishment the Church became the authority for making known the laws of God and the will of God. This is clear from the Jerusalem Council in Acts chapter 15. It is also clear from the writings of Paul. For example ...

Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? (1 Corinthians 6:1)

It should be quite clear that here Paul was speaking from the premise that THE CHURCH was now occupying "the seat of Moses". Therefore members of the Church should look to the Church for conflict resolution. [Incidentally, we would also have to group the Pharisees amongst those Paul referred to as "the unjust".]

So how long did the Pharisees continue to sit on the seat of Moses? Only until the Church was founded on the Day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2. With the giving of the Holy Spirit on that day, God was showing that the usurpers had been removed, and they were no longer to be looked upon as being in any position of religious authority. And after the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter 5 nobody in the Church dared to challenge the authority of the apostles in this regard. As verses 11-13 state:

And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things. And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch. AND OF THE REST DURST NO MAN JOIN HIMSELF

TO THEM: BUT THE PEOPLE MAGNIFIED THEM. (Acts 5:11-13)

So certainly, for God's people today, in 1996 A.D., the Pharisees do not represent any kind of religious authority at all! Even though people still like to appeal to the Pharisees to validate and to justify the customs they wish to observe, the Pharisees lost any claim to positions of religious authority on the Day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, the day the New Testament Church of God was founded.

So now let's briefly summarize everything we've seen about Matthew 23:2-3.

MATTHEW 23:2-3 SUMMARIZED

- 1) The Pharisees usurped the seat of Moses at one specific point in time.
- 2) They were removed from that position on the day of Pentecost in 30 or 31 A.D.. They have never again had any religious authority. Today the Church of God is on that seat.
- 3) The words "bid" and "tell" imply a command and should not be used for verse 3. The Greek should be correctly translated as "say" or as "speak" ... see Young's Literal Translation as an example of this.
- 4) The conditional aspects of verse 3 are made clear by two different things: the use of the subjunctive mood, and the inclusion of the Greek particle "an".
- 5) Jesus Christ was very clearly presenting A CONTRAST. And in a contrast it is always the second element which is what the speaker wishes to focus attention on.
- 6) Look at the writings of Paul for examples of contrasts. It should be quite clear that Paul did not intend for people to make an exhaustive examination of his statement that "all things are lawful for me". Obviously Paul did not mean "all things" with its ultimate meaning. The implied limitations in "all things" are obvious.
- 7) The whole thrust of this chapter is to make clear how BAD and how UNRELIABLE the Pharisees were. And even in those areas where they DID teach what is correct, they themselves didn't even practise what they taught. They represented the ultimate in double-standards. They were the ultimate hypocrites.
- 8) Our authority for establishing exactly what it is that God wants us to do must be the Bible. When the Bible clearly teaches one thing (e.g. the Passover is to be on the 14th) and the Pharisees teach something else (e.g. they want to keep the Passover on the 15th), then the ideas of the Pharisees are always to be rejected!

So, as I said in the title, don't listen to the Pharisees!

Frank W. Nelte