

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

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Scripture: Various

"Call No Man Father?"

TITLES AND SUCH

As many of you know, St. Bartholomew's became the pro-cathedral of our diocese. Cathedrals were traditionally the center of the diocese in terms of resources and support for the rest of the parishes in a geographical region. They were also considered to be Bishop's see or chief place of worship and where his "seat" was located.

Of course, times are a bit different now since we have become part of the ACNA and are members of the International Diocese. Our diocese is one which is defined not by geography but by mission. This mission is to support the international work of our Bishop, the Rt. Rev. Bill Atwood, with the worldwide Anglican Communion. So it is a great honor to be named the pro-cathedral of the International Diocese.

Traditionally, the head of a cathedral is known as the "dean" and the priest becomes "The Very Reverend" instead of "The Reverend." However, you can just keep calling me "Father Ward" the popular designation for priests in the Catholic tradition (recall that means Roman, Anglican, and Orthodox).

A COMMON QUESTION AND CONFUSION

And yet, you won't find the title, "Father" used in most Protestant Churches. In fact, I often get questions from people as to why priests are called "father" when Jesus tells us not to call any man on earth, "father" in **Mt. 23:9**. It is a legitimate question and one I would like us to look at. In doing so, not only will we answer that question, we will learn some principles of Biblical interpretation in the process as well. You see the challenge of reading God's Word is to be able to understand what is meant. The Bible says in **2 Tim. 2:15** that we should handle the word of truth (ie. God's Word) accurately.

So let's go to this troublesome passage. Please turn with me to **Matthew 23:1-12**.

*"Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, **2**saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; **3**therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them. **4**"They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. **5**"But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. **6**"They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, **7**and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. **8**"But do*

not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. 9“Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. 10“Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. 11“But the greatest among you shall be your servant. 12“Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.

It is because of these words that we have the already noted division in Christendom.

Now if we are going to interpret this and any passage of Scripture there are two things one must always keep in mind. **First, is finding the context of the passage.** We find the context by answering the who, what, why, when, where and how questions. In other words, Who is audience and why are they being addressed? What is the issue at hand? What is the historic and cultural setting? Etc.

The second thing that is important in understanding the Word of God is determining **the universal principle and application** of the passage? In other words, what does it mean for us today?

CONTEXT

In our Matthew passage, the context is very straight forward. What is Jesus talking about? He is criticizing the Pharisees and scribes – the Jewish religious leaders and teachers of the day – for their hypocrisy, pride and misapplication of God’s law; leaders who outwardly practice their religion but inwardly don’t know the Lord. Their hearts are far from the truth. In short, they are hypocrites.

In what way? They are more concerned about their teachings and traditions than they are about the truth of God’s Word. They are supposed to know the Word of God and the spirit of the law but instead they teach the traditions of men and add more rules and laws to God’s already perfect pre-existing law. Not only do we know that they are not right with God by their actions, but they don’t even understand their own Scriptures when it comes to recognizing that Jesus is the Messiah.

Who is Jesus addressing? He is addressing His disciples and the crowds around them. They are not to be like such religious leaders. So Jesus tells His Disciples do what they say but not what they do. Rather, they are to be about humbly serving one another.

But Jesus also says something about names and titles. Why? During this time, a number of the leading Pharisees were called “Rabbi” which can be translated “Lord, Master, or Teacher.” Still others who had been considered notable rabbis of previous generations were called “father.”

Jesus tells His disciples not to be called by such names. Why? Not because there is anything wrong with the titles themselves, but rather because of what the names have come to represent. The Jews followed certain rabbis and earlier teaches of the law (ie. fathers) as if they had the final word on God’s

Word. Jesus says absolutely not! He is the final Master and Teacher and Lord. He is the only One with a perfect relationship with the Father. Recall Jesus said in **Jn. 10:30**, "***I and the Father are One.***"

So Jesus is making the point that He has replaced all the Jewish "teachers" and "fathers" and they are not to be followed any longer.

In terms of the title, "father," we know that a tradition developed in Judaism of looking to specific teachers of the law as ones who had special insight on God's Word. The title "father" may have come from the words said by Elisha to Elijah when Elijah was taken up to heaven in **2 Kings 2:11-12**: "***As they were going along and talking, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven. Elisha saw it and cried out, "My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" And he saw Elijah no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.***" (p. 382)

And yet, these same teachers and fathers became corrupted in their teachings. Four centuries later we read this warning in **Malachi 2:1-2; 7-10**. p. 951

"And now this commandment is for you, O priests. 2"If you do not listen, and if you do not take it to heart to give honor to My name," says the LORD of hosts.... For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. 8"But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi," says the LORD of hosts. 9"So I also have made you despised and abased before all the people, just as you are not keeping My ways but are showing partiality in the instruction.

10"Do we not all have one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?

So we see Jesus' words reaffirmed in the Hebrew Scriptures of the prophet Malachi. The priests and teachers of the law had become so corrupted that they failed their Heavenly Father. As a result, not only will they have to give an account for their hypocrisy and false teaching, but they should no longer be looked to for leadership and guidance. Furthermore, there is only one Father and God, and no one should presume to speak in their Father's place or think someone else can speak solely for Him.

MEANING AND APPLICATION

Thus, the prohibition that Jesus gives is not so much about titles but about what they represent and who is ultimately getting the glory. If Christ and His Father are not looked to as the final authority concerning matters of faith and life then the priests will be corrupt and their people doomed.

Moreover, His disciples are not to gravitate toward title seeking or look for the accolades of people. Otherwise, human pride and ego will predominate. We should never to look at our religious leaders as if they are little “gods” or super Christians.

Humility, service, and looking to Jesus for all things should be the order of the day.

That my friends is the context, the message and the universal application of Jesus’ Words.

But what about the application of *not* using the title “rabbi” or “father,” at all? If you pull this passage out of context and universally apply the prohibition, then no titles should be used at anytime. You shouldn’t call someone “mister,” or “doctor,” or “professor,” and so forth. In fact, you shouldn’t even call your earthly father, “father!” And there are some Christian groups, for example the Quakers and the Amish, who don’t use any titles in reference to their leaders. They may be applying the literal meaning of Jesus’ words but again they do so out of context. They miss the whole point of Jesus’ words. In fact, I believe a stronger case can be made for the acceptance of titles as long as they are no abused or used in a way that conveys authority and power that usurps the authority and power of the Lord.

Now when it comes to interpretation, it should be noted that whenever something is mentioned only once in the Bible, it is never a good idea to base a doctrine on that one passage. In fact, anything that is clear and important in the Scriptures will always be referred to over and over again. The Bible tells us to let everything be confirmed by two or three witnesses. Outside of our Matthew passage, there is no mention in the Bible concerning the use and nonuse of titles. And yet, the call to humility and service, the warnings against pride and hypocrisy, the exclusive claims of Jesus as God’s Son and God in the flesh (which are the central themes of our Matthew passage) are found over and over again throughout the Scriptures.

“THE USE OF “FATHER” IN OTHER NT PASSAGES

In addition, the term “father” and “fathers” are used in a spiritual sense by the Apostles Paul and John. For example, in **Acts 22**, after he is arrested, the Apostle Paul uses “father” to address older distinguished Jews and those from previous generations

Acts 22:1, 3, 14: *“Brethren and fathers, hear my defense which I now offer to you.” **2**And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet; and he said, **3**“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today.. **14**“And he said, ‘The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth.”*

In **1 Cor. 4:15**, he identifies himself as a spiritual father to the Corinthian Church: **15** *“For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.”*

Then in **I Jn. 2:13, 14**, the Apostle John addresses the elders of the Christian churches as “fathers.”

He writes, *“I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. **14**I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.”* Clearly, in this context, John is addressing the prominent elders of the faith community as “fathers.”

The above examples confirm another principle of Biblical interpretation – Scripture interprets Scripture! It clarifies rather than confuses.

NO ONE CAN TAKE THE PLACE OF OUR HEAVENLY FATHER!

But even if we only had the Matthew passage to go by, there is something else that stands out. Note that in reference to *“Rabbi”* and *“Leader”* Jesus uses the passive verb – *“do not be called...”* But when it comes to *“father,”* He uses the active *“do not call anybody father, for you have one Father in heaven.”* In other words, don’t attribute anything that is rightfully the Lord’s to man. Don’t look to anyone or anything in place of your Heavenly Father. The principle has not so much to do with titles and names in and of themselves, but rather their meaning.

Sadly, many of the Jews of Jesus’ day, were guilty of looking to their leaders in place of God and their leaders, in turn, accepting the praise as if they were the final standard of God’s truth. Both leaders and people trusted in their own righteousness and so called special position as “God’s Chosen” rather than in God, Himself. As a result, many missed the truth that Jesus Christ is really their Messiah and that there is no special status before our Father in heaven. All people, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, rich or poor, male or female are sinners, and *all* can be saved through faith in Jesus Christ.

THE USE OF “FATHER” IN THE CHURCH

But what about the use of “father” for clergy in the Christian Church? The term “father” was first used in the early Christian Church to refer to bishops. Later it was also used to refer to those early church leaders who after their deaths were looked to as defenders and articulators of the faith. We still call them today, the “Church Fathers.” Eventually, priests also became referred to as “father.”

The important point always to remember is "What do you mean by a title or name?" In the Catholic tradition, the term "father" was used because of the view that the church is a family. The Bible says that the father is the head of the family. Therefore, just as an earthly family has a father who is to lead his family so too a church has a father to lead the congregation. While the head of all families is ultimately always Christ, that does not negate the importance of fatherhood and having leaders with a specific role that includes fatherly attributes; qualities such as leading and serving by example, defending the faith, protecting the integrity of the family, and lifting up the vision of the Lord.

But what about churches who do not call their leaders, "father?" In those churches, the most popular title is usually "pastor." When the title "pastor" is used, it is an indication that the church is viewed not just as a family but as a flock of sheep. For "pastor" literally means shepherd.

So whether a church uses the term "father" or "pastor," the issue is not the prohibition of titles, but rather, the meaning behind the title or name. Moreover, are the people simply looking to the man or are they keeping their eyes on the Lord? For the same problem can be happen in using the name, "pastor," if you look to your pastor as the great and good shepherd, rather than to the one who is the only Great and Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

For Jesus' words remind us that it is not the title that makes a leader, it is the heart that follows after His heart, that makes us great in the Kingdom.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!