

The Christian Dilemma: Obeying Those Who Reject Jesus

A Closer Look at Matthew 23:2–3 and Its Consequences

Introduction: The Dilemma in Matthew 23:2–3

In the Gospel of Matthew, there is a moment where Jesus gives an instruction that has long puzzled readers and theologians alike. Speaking to the crowds and his disciples, he says:

“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.”¹

This command appears in Matthew 23:2–3, right at the beginning of a chapter that contains Jesus’ most severe rebuke of the Jewish religious leadership. What makes this statement so perplexing is that it appears to affirm the authority of the scribes and Pharisees—those same individuals Jesus later calls hypocrites, blind guides, and enemies of righteousness.

Even more striking is the unqualified nature of the command. In Greek, the statement is framed in absolute terms:

πάντα ὅσα ἂν εἴπωσιν ὑμῖν ποιήσατε καὶ τηρεῖτε
panta hosa an eipōsin hymin poiēsate kai tēreite
“Do and keep everything they tell you.”²

This command, issued in the present tense and without qualification, is directed at an audience under the immediate influence of corrupt leadership. There is no restriction, no exception, and no caveat. Jesus does not say “*do what they say when they’re right*” or “*obey only the Torah they recite*.” Instead, he instructs total compliance with their teaching, despite also warning against their conduct.

This creates a tension that has been noted by both readers and commentators. The apparent contradiction between Jesus’ command and his wider denunciation of the Pharisees invites serious theological questions about consistency and authority. In critical and interfaith discussions, this has often been presented as a dilemma for Christian theology.

¹ Matthew 23:2–3

² Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed.

Formalising the Dilemma: Obedience to the Enemy

The contradiction at the heart of this passage can be made clearer by laying it out logically. The issue is not a subtle textual nuance but a direct clash between instruction and context.

Syllogism A: The Obedience Paradox

Premise 1: Jesus instructs his followers to obey the Pharisees.

Premise 2: The Pharisees reject Jesus and his message.

Conclusion: Jesus requires obedience to those who oppose him, creating a tension in discipleship.

This puts his followers in a difficult situation: should they obey him by obeying his enemies? In practical terms, a disciple could be caught between fidelity to Christ's own teaching and fidelity to the dictates of the Pharisaic establishment, with no clear guidance on resolving the conflict.

This tension over obedience inevitably spills into the question of legitimacy. If his followers must obey his opponents, then those opponents retain spiritual authority — which leads directly to the second part of the dilemma.

Syllogism B: The Legitimacy Contradiction

Premise 1: Jesus criticizes the Pharisees as corrupt, hypocritical, and spiritually blind.

Premise 2: Jesus simultaneously affirms their teaching authority as those who “sit on Moses’ seat.”

Conclusion: Jesus legitimizes a leadership he also condemns, undermining his reform message.

From a straightforward reading, this double stance validates the authority of leaders whose moral and doctrinal character he has already dismantled in the eyes of his audience. The effect is to create a mixed signal: on one hand, the Pharisees' authority is ratified by Jesus himself; on the other, their conduct and influence are portrayed as spiritually ruinous. This pairing undermines the internal coherence of his challenge to the religious status quo, as his condemnation of their system is coupled with an instruction that entrenches—rather than displaces—their authority.

This legitimacy problem intensifies the obedience paradox, because affirming the authority of his opponents not only obligates his followers to heed them but also entrenches the very system he warns them against.

The Pharisees in the Gospel Context

To understand why this Christian Dilemma carries weight, we must look at how the Pharisees are presented in the canonical gospels.

The Pharisees were a leading religious sect in Second Temple Judaism, known for their strict observance of the Mosaic Law and oral traditions.³ Unlike the Sadducees, who were more aligned with the priestly aristocracy, the Pharisees had significant influence among the common people, particularly in synagogues. They believed in concepts like the resurrection of the dead, the afterlife, and the authority of both the written Torah and unwritten oral law.⁴

However, their expanding legal interpretations often led to burdensome religious rules. Jesus' message of inward spiritual transformation and critique of hypocrisy directly threatened their authority and religious system.⁷ He openly condemned their showy displays of piety, their manipulation of legal technicalities, and their tendency to place tradition above divine command.⁸ For the Pharisees, Jesus was not merely a theological nuisance—he undermined their influence, exposed their flaws, and challenged their vision of religious life. Their opposition was both ideological and institutional.

Far from being morally upright or spiritually trustworthy, they are repeatedly depicted as resistant to Jesus, jealous of his influence, and determined to destroy him.

In Matthew 9:3, they charge him with blasphemy. In Matthew 12:2, they accuse him of breaking the Sabbath. By Matthew 12:14, their hostility escalates into open conspiracy:

“But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.”⁵

Their rejection of Jesus is not limited to isolated disputes; it is part of a wider narrative in which they act as defenders of the very system Jesus challenges. Jesus accuses them of elevating human tradition above God's command. He says, “*You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.*”⁶ According to Jesus, their teachings have lost all spiritual substance.

And yet, despite this backdrop of opposition and distortion, Jesus also says in Matthew 23:3 that people should “*do and observe whatever they tell you.*” This includes no guidance on how to distinguish between what is consistent with the Law

³ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 13.10.6; Mishnah, *Pirkei Avot* 1:1.

⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.1.3; Acts 23:6–8.

⁵ Matthew 12:14; cf. Mark 3:6, John 11:53.

⁶ Matthew 15:3–9

and what is rooted in tradition or personal agenda. It is difficult to separate their conduct from their doctrine when the gospels present both as deeply flawed.

Synoptic Comparison: Matthew's Unique Wording

The instruction in Matthew 23:2–3 to “*do and keep everything*” (πάντα ὅσα... ποιήσατε καὶ τηρεῖτε) the scribes and Pharisees tell you is not only theologically jarring but also textually unique among the Synoptic Gospels. When this scene is compared with its parallels in Mark and Luke, Matthew's wording stands out as an anomaly.

In Mark 12:38–40, Jesus says:

“Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes, to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.”

Likewise, Luke 20:45–47 records:

“While all the people were listening, Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes, love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.’”

Several observations arise from this comparison:

No “Moses' seat” in Mark or Luke

The metaphor of “Moses' seat” (καθέδρας Μωϋσέως) is unique to Matthew; neither Mark nor Luke make any reference to it in their parallel accounts. This is significant because both Mark and Luke otherwise preserve a broad range of polemical sayings against the scribes,⁷ yet they do so without invoking any imagery that confers legitimate authority or suggests institutional succession from Moses. In Jewish tradition, the “seat” (καθέδρα, kathedra) was a symbol of teaching authority, particularly in synagogues, where it represented the role of the one who expounded

⁷ See Kurt Aland, *Synopsis of the four Gospels: Completely revised on the basis of the Greek text of the Nestle-Aland, 26th edition, and the Greek New Testament, 3rd edition, United Bible Societies*. no. 284–285, pp. 250ff., which aligns the parallel passages (Mark 12:38–40; Luke 20:45–47; Matthew 23:1–12) and notes the absence of any reference to “Moses' seat” or obedience commands in Mark and Luke.

and applied the Torah.⁸ To place the Pharisees upon “Moses’ seat” rhetorically links them to the foundational lawgiver of Israel, granting them a derived authority over the interpretation of divine law.

By introducing this imagery, Matthew elevates their position in a way that neither Mark nor Luke do, creating an internal tension when this authority is immediately undermined by accusations of hypocrisy and corruption. This selective inclusion points toward deliberate theological framing rather than a simple, unaltered preservation of Jesus’ speech. It may reflect Matthew’s editorial intent to address his community’s relationship to the Law and its interpreters in a post-Temple context, where acknowledging the formal authority of the Law’s custodians could coexist—however uneasily—with a denunciation of their conduct.

Absence of an obedience command

In Mark and Luke, the opening imperative is negative (“Watch out,” “Beware”), warning of moral danger. In Matthew, however, the opening is an affirmative directive—“do and keep everything they tell you.” The command runs in the opposite direction from the warnings in the other Synoptics, creating a sharp dissonance if one assumes these passages reflect the same historical event.

Contradictory tone

In Matthew, the opening statement not only acknowledges but positively affirms the Pharisees’ teaching authority by linking them to “Moses’ seat”—a position that, within Jewish tradition, carried the weight of interpreting and applying the Law. This commendation is delivered without qualification, giving the impression of a blanket endorsement of their doctrinal role. Yet, within the same breath, Matthew pivots into a sustained denunciation of these same figures, branding them as hypocrites, blind guides, and spiritual dangers to the people. The result is a rhetorical whiplash: the audience is told to submit to their teaching while simultaneously being warned of their moral and spiritual bankruptcy.

By contrast, in Mark and Luke, the condemnation of the scribes is consistent and uninterrupted from start to finish. There is no initial endorsement to muddy the warning, no suggestion of ongoing legitimacy for their teaching office—only an unambiguous call to beware of them. This uniformity in Mark and Luke fits naturally within a polemical framework aimed at discrediting religious opponents. Matthew’s sudden shift from commendation to censure, however, sits awkwardly in the narrative, producing a tonal dissonance that not only blurs the intended message but

⁸ cf. *Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 11:2; *Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 88b, which describe the role of authoritative judges and teachers as sitting in judgment, an image later associated with Moses’ role as lawgiver (Ex. 18:13).

also raises questions about whether the commendation originated with Jesus or reflects an editorial addition serving a different theological agenda.

Historical-critical implications

The majority of scholars accept Markan priority—that Mark is the earliest Gospel and that Matthew and Luke drew from it, supplementing it with additional material (including Q, M, and L sources). If Mark’s warning against the scribes represents the earlier form, then Matthew’s addition of “Moses’ seat” and “do and keep everything” would be a later redaction.

Such a redaction could reflect Matthew’s community grappling with how much continuity to maintain with Jewish authority after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. If tensions existed between Jewish Christians and non-Christian Pharisaic authorities, Matthew’s editor may have sought to affirm the Torah’s authority while still critiquing hypocrisy—producing the contradictory formulation we now read.

Reception history gap

Early Christian writings—including those of the Apostolic Fathers such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna—rarely, if ever, cite Matthew 23:2–3 as a binding command upon believers. Comprehensive patristic citation indexes reveal no direct appeal to this verse in their moral or doctrinal exhortations, despite their frequent use of other Matthean material. When Pharisees are mentioned in these writings, it is almost invariably in a purely negative light, echoing the Gospel portrayals of them as opponents of truth and examples of hypocrisy. In texts like the *Letter of Barnabas* and Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, the Pharisees are presented as emblematic of spiritual blindness, not as legitimate authorities to be obeyed.

The complete absence of Matthew 23:2–3 in early catechetical instruction suggests that the verse was either consciously ignored or quietly downplayed, likely because it was theologically and practically unworkable for post-70 CE Christian communities who were defining themselves in opposition to the synagogue and its leadership. For a movement seeking to distance itself from rabbinic authority, the idea of Jesus commanding unconditional obedience to Pharisaic teachers would have been not only awkward but counterproductive.

Implications for the dilemma

If the command to obey the Pharisees is unique to Matthew, absent from Mark and Luke, and likely redactional, then two uncomfortable conclusions arise for Christians:

- Either: Matthew put words into Jesus’ mouth that he never spoke, undermining inerrancy.

- Or: Jesus truly said it, in which case Mark and Luke (and the wider Church) found it so problematic they omitted it—raising questions about selective preservation of his teachings.⁹

This Synoptic contrast intensifies the Christian Dilemma. Matthew's formulation not only creates the obedience/legitimacy paradox but also sits at odds with the trajectory of the other Synoptics, both of which portray the scribes as spiritual hazards to be avoided rather than authorities to be obeyed. The result is an even deeper fracture between historical Jesus reconstruction, Synoptic harmony, and theological consistency.

Failed Solutions: Limitation, Irony, and Scope

a. Limiting the Instruction to the Torah

One attempt to solve the dilemma is by interpreting Jesus' command as referring only to the Pharisees' reading of the Torah. This would mean he was affirming the written Law of Moses, not their broader teachings or interpretations.

However, the Greek text does not support this. The phrase "everything whatsoever they tell you" (*panta hosa an eipōsin*) is broad. There is no mention of Torah-specific content or a call to distinguish correct interpretations from faulty ones. The instruction is general and categorical.¹⁰

Moreover, if Jesus only meant "*follow the Torah*," he could have said that directly. Instead, he ties obedience to the Pharisees' role as occupants of "Moses' seat," a phrase that implies judicial and interpretive authority. That role, according to this passage, carries binding weight—even when the people in it are spiritually compromised.

b. Irony or Sarcasm

Another explanation is that Jesus was speaking ironically, by mocking the Pharisees by commanding obedience to them in a way that exposes their hypocrisy. This reading suggests that the statement was not meant to be taken literally, but rather as

⁹ This Synoptic divergence is unique in that it involves an explicit, categorical command present in one Gospel but replaced in the parallels by an opposite warning. No other case exists in the Synoptics where a positive imperative in one is reversed into a prohibition in the others. This makes the divergence highly resistant to harmonisation and renders superficial "context" explanations inadequate, since the redactional pattern itself becomes the problem.

¹⁰ In rabbinic usage, "Moses' seat" encompassed not only public Torah reading but also binding legal interpretation (*psak halakhah*) and judicial authority within the synagogue. The *Mishnah* (Sanhedrin 11:2) and *Tosefta* (Sanhedrin 7:1) use the imagery of "sitting" as a technical term for rendering rulings, not merely recitation. Archaeological evidence from Chorazin includes a carved basalt seat in the synagogue with an Aramaic inscription referring to the "chief of the synagogue," indicating a role of judicial and interpretive authority. This undercuts any claim that "Moses' seat" in Matthew 23:2–3 refers to a narrow, non-interpretive function.

a form of satirical indictment, forcing the listeners to recognize the absurdity of obeying corrupt leaders. However, there is no textual indication that irony is at play. The tone of the passage is solemn, and the grammatical construction is emphatic. The imperative verbs ποιήσατε (*poiēsate*, “do”) and τηρεῖτε (*tēreite*, “observe” or “keep”) are unambiguously serious and instructive in form. They are not softened by qualifiers or linguistic cues that would suggest rhetorical distancing or mockery.

Moreover, irony appears entirely out of place in this context. Matthew 23 marks the beginning of one of Jesus’ most severe public denunciations of the religious elite. His tone throughout the chapter is condemnatory, not playful. This is not a parable or a moment of veiled rebuke; it is direct moral instruction to the crowds and his disciples. To propose that Jesus was being sarcastic at the very outset of this solemn discourse undermines the clarity and seriousness of his message.

In fact, interpreting the passage as sarcastic would introduce further theological and ethical confusion. If the people listening to Jesus were meant to understand the command as sarcasm, they would have to intuit that he meant the opposite of what he said—something that would place an unreasonable interpretive burden on the audience. Such an approach risks misleading the very people he intended to guide, especially since there is no clarifying remark that reorients the listener to the supposed irony. This would render Jesus’ communication style opaque and prone to misinterpretation, which contradicts the consistent portrayal of him in the Gospels as a clear and authoritative teacher.

Finally, sarcasm at this moment would diminish the force of the later condemnations in the chapter. If Jesus begins his address with a sarcastic endorsement of the Pharisees, how are the listeners to differentiate when he switches to genuine denunciation? Irony, used in this way, would destabilize the entire rhetorical structure of Matthew 23 and reduce its moral seriousness.

c. A Transitional Moment in Salvation History

A third approach suggests that Jesus’ instruction in Matthew 23:2–3 was only meant to apply before his crucifixion and resurrection. According to this interpretation, Jesus was still operating under the terms of the old covenant (*diathēkē palaia*, διαθήκη παλαιά), and as such, he affirmed the authority structures that were still in force—including the scribes and Pharisees who, at that time, occupied “Moses’ seat” (*kathédras Mōuseōs*, καθέδρας Μωϋσέως). After the resurrection, with the inauguration of the new covenant (*diathēkē kainē*, διαθήκη καινή), that authority would be rendered obsolete, replaced by apostolic leadership under Christ himself.¹¹

¹¹ cf. Hebrews 8:13 – “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.” No early Christian writer appears to interpret Matthew 23:2–3 as a time-limited directive valid only before the resurrection. The Apostolic Fathers, who wrote extensively about the transition from the old to the new covenant, never cite this passage as a transitional example. Where they speak of the Law’s authority being superseded, it is portrayed as an

While this explanation introduces a chronological transition, it does not resolve the core dilemma. The contradiction still stands within the immediate historical and ethical context. At the very moment Jesus issues the command, he is telling the crowds and his disciples to submit (*hypotassesthai*, ὑποτάσσεσθαι) to men who are already distorting the Law (*nomos*, νόμος), elevating human tradition above divine command, and actively plotting his death.

Furthermore, if Jesus' goal was to transition people away from Pharisaic leadership, it would be self-defeating to command his followers to submit to those very authorities he had been denouncing for years. The command effectively reinforces the authority of a group whose teachings, Jesus insists elsewhere, are blind guides (*hodēgoi typhloi*, ὁδηγοὶ τυφλοί)¹² and children of hell (*huioi geennēs*, υἱοὶ γέεννης).¹³ How can such figures remain spiritually binding—if even for a short time—without undermining Jesus' broader message of reform?

Theological and Ethical Collapse

A. Impact on Jesus' Authority

Throughout the gospels, Jesus is portrayed as the final authority on God's will. He regularly contradicts established interpretations of the Law and offers new insights that challenge conventional religious thinking. In Matthew 5, he famously says, “*You have heard it said... but I say to you,*”¹⁴ signaling a shift from second-hand instruction to direct divine teaching.

This authority is supposed to supersede the scribes and Pharisees. But if he turns around and tells his followers to obey those same figures—without distinguishing when they are right or wrong—it weakens his position. It suggests that truth still flows through the very system Jesus claims to be reforming.¹⁵

immediate shift upon Christ's arrival (e.g., *Epistle of Barnabas* 2:6–10), not as something that continues through the authority of his opponents. The lack of precedent for a “temporary obedience” reading undermines the plausibility of this explanation.

¹² Matthew 23:16, 24

¹³ Matthew 23:15

¹⁴ Matthew 5:17–48; cf. Matthew 7:29.

¹⁵ The Torah itself provides grounds for rejecting leaders who misuse their position to lead people away from God's commands (Deut. 13:1–5; cf. Jer. 23:16–22). Respect for office was never intended to override fidelity to God's will. In fact, the prophetic tradition repeatedly models open opposition to corrupt religious leaders (e.g., Elijah against Ahab's prophets, Jeremiah against temple priests). Thus, appealing to “respect for the office” does not fit the Jewish scriptural precedent, which prioritises truth over institutional position.

B. The Ethical Burden on Believers

Another serious problem is in its practical application. Jesus tells his followers to do what the Pharisees say, but not what they do.¹⁶ But if their actions are corrupt and their teachings are often self-serving, how can ordinary people separate the two?

The instruction demands a level of discernment that most followers would not have. If their leaders teach one thing and practice another, and if their teachings sometimes contradict what Jesus himself teaches, what guidance remains?

Syllogism C: The Application Dilemma

Premise 1: Jesus commands people to obey the Pharisees' teaching.

Premise 2: The Pharisees distort religious teachings and blend them with man-made traditions.

Premise 3: Jesus gives no clear method for filtering their errors from truth.

Conclusion: The command imposes an impractical and unsafe burden on ordinary followers.

Conclusion: The Weight of the Contradiction

Matthew 23:2–3 raises a serious problem for Christian interpretation. Jesus affirms the teaching authority of men who are portrayed elsewhere in the gospels as his fiercest opponents. He tells his followers to obey their instructions without qualification, despite exposing their hypocrisy and condemning their actions.¹⁷

Attempts to explain this tension—by limiting the instruction to Torah, reading it as sarcasm, or framing it as part of a transitional moment—all fall short. The language is too strong, the tone too direct, and the context too charged to reduce this to a passing remark.

This strikes directly at Jesus' credibility as a moral and spiritual guide. A teacher who commands obedience to corrupt leaders risks undermining his own message. If the Pharisees were untrustworthy, their guidance should not have been followed. If they were trustworthy, then Jesus' constant rebuke of them seems misplaced.

This is not a marginal textual curiosity but a fundamental crisis for Christian belief: the gospels depict Jesus commanding submission to leaders who openly reject and oppose him, forcing Christians to confront whether their master endorsed obedience to the very enemies of his message. This Christian Dilemma is a charge that remains unanswered in Christian apologetics to this day.

¹⁶ Matthew 6:1–6; Luke 11:39–44.

¹⁷ cf. Matthew 15:3–9; Mark 7:6–13.