

People love to criticize the Catholic Church by quoting this Gospel. Have you heard this one? "Jesus says, 'Call no one Father,' and that's what you Catholics call your priests." They imply that Catholics either don't read their Bible or don't listen to Jesus or just aren't Christians. Those are strong implications from a single verse of Scripture, but I have to admit we have a problem here. I usually weasle out of it by saying, first of all that Jesus exaggerates here. He says call no one teacher and no one father. And we call our teachers and fathers by those titles all the time. Besides, calling priests "Father" comes fairly late in Church history. So Jesus could not possibly be talking about the Catholic Church or Catholic priests here. To this day there are some countries where only religious order priests are called "Father," and that could be a partial solution, but they call their diocesan priests "Lord," and I don't think that would catch on very well. Still, Matthew's is the Gospel where we learn the Lord's Prayer from Jesus, and discover that "Father" is a term he lovingly reserves for God. I suspect if St. Matthew were here today and learned that Catholics call their priests "Father,"--even if we told him it's because priests enact a spiritual fatherhood for the faithful--I don't think he'd like it. Matthew would remind us we have to go deeper to find out that our true spiritual Father is God.

The main point of Jesus' speech today is to warn people about ostentation in religion. Some people put on religion for show, and he says the worst offenders in his day were the leaders of Judaism. They wore large phylacteries, they took seats of honor, and they loved titles. Phylacteries: This is embarrassing, but when I was learning that word in Scripture study I kept confusing it with prophylactics. Phylacteries were boxes people wore on their arms or heads when they prayed. Inside were pieces of paper on which Scripture verses were printed, like, "You shall love the Lord your God." The scribes and pharisees wore huge ones to call attention to how much they prayed.

Showing off is a serious matter in religion. It tempts us in other areas, too--the clothes we wear, the houses we live in, the cars we drive. (I think I'd look great in a jag.) But how sad it is when the poor spend money on great tennis shoes before they spend it on food. When they feel no inner success they purchase the symbol of success which you and I have created. But showing off bites hardest in religion because religion is a matter of the spirit. People with inner spirit will let it out in external ways. But if we follow the external ways when our inner spirit is void, we're showing off. Our religion becomes shallow.

Jesus says to go deeper. There is one teacher, one father, one master. Find that one. Have you seen those wooden dolls from Russia? You pull them apart at the waist and there's another one inside. Pull it apart and there's another, then another, and another. If you call your professor a teacher, go deeper. If you call your employer a master, go deeper. If you call me Father, go deeper. Then religion will be sincere.