

Matthew 23:1-12

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6 They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7 and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. 8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9 And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

DOWNWARD MOBILITY

Jesus said that the “greatest among you will be your servant.”

Henri Nouwen put it another way. The way of Jesus is the way of “downward mobility.”

Who wants that? Who wants downward mobility? Who wants to become a servant?

The great hope of many in our society is not to move downward but to move upward. We want to make more money and be in charge.

This is our dream. Right?

Maybe. But, this is not God’s dream.
Once again we see the world’s way is not God’s way.

This is very tricky.
Even those who lead God’s people can succumb to the siren song of upward mobility.

That was the problem with the Scribes and the Pharisees.

Pride blinded them to their true motives.

PRACTICING WHAT WE PREACH

The religious leaders in Jesus’ day were serious about the faith. Jesus said that they sat on Moses’ seat. In other words, like Moses they accurately proclaimed God’s word to the people. Their teaching could be trusted.

Unfortunately, this was not true when it came to their actions. They simply didn't practice what they preached. They laid a heavy burden upon the people with their stringent interpretation of God's law.

But, they were unwilling to take up that burden in their own life. And so their preaching lacked credibility. They dressed like religious people. They acted like religious people. But, their words did not ring true.

Much to their chagrin the people noticed.

When Jesus preached the people said that he preached as one who had authority. When the religious leaders preached, it was not so exciting. They said the right thing, but there was no power in their words. (Mark 1:22)

I wonder. Could Jesus say the same of us? Is there a hollow ring to the words we speak? Do we talk about following Jesus but then adopt a way of life that is the opposite of what he taught?

FAITH AND SERVICE

Whenever anyone tells me that they are having trouble believing, I always say, "Is there some area of your life where you are being disobedient? Might God be calling you to do something and you are resisting that call? Do what faith requires, and you may find that your doubts are not so strong."

Doubt grows in the rocky soil of hypocrisy. Faith grows in the fertile soil of service.

According to Jesus when we humbly serve others, we are elevated in the eyes of God. And when we seek to magnify our own importance we often look foolish and small, not only in God's eyes but also in the eyes of others.

Jesus set the example.

According to John's gospel on the night before his crucifixion Jesus not only led his disciples in the Last Supper he also washed his disciple's feet.

The disciples were amazed that their Master would do something like this. This menial job was usually reserved for the lowliest disciple. But, on this night it was their teacher and Lord who took this task.

What did it mean?

Jesus told them, "I have set an example that you should do as I have done for you ... Now that you know these things you will be blessed if you do them."

Service to others is the hallmark of leadership in the church.

THE BURDEN OF RELIGION

Our job as disciples of Jesus is not to control others. Our job is to lighten the burdens of others. We are called to take up our cross, which means to deny ourselves for the sake of others and the proclamation of the gospel. (Matthew 16:24)

But, down through the years the church has on many occasions turned the words of Jesus on their head. Instead of serving others in the name of Christ, religious leaders have managed to serve themselves and the goals of their own kingdom. Instead of making the burdens of others lighter religious leaders have added to the burdens of others.

In Jesus' day it was the strict interpretation of the law that placed a heavy burden on the people. And the religious leaders of the day seemed totally unconcerned about the hardship that they imposed on others.

Remember all those times that Jesus healed on the Sabbath? The religious leaders roundly criticized Jesus for "working" on the Sabbath. They never took into consideration the suffering that Jesus alleviated by breaking their man made rules.

Jesus was dismayed at their lack of compassion and told them, "Man was not made for the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man. Is it unlawful to do righteous deeds on the Sabbath?"

Their rules got in the way of true piety. Instead of lifting people up with their religion, they used religion to put people down. Religion was a burden instead of a blessing.

In the name of Christ wars have been fought. The poor have financed the building of expensive cathedrals. Tyrants have claimed the backing of Almighty God.

(This past week I have been studying the history behind the Nicene Creed. When the Roman emperor, Constantine attained power he made Christianity the "official" religion of the empire.

His motto was "One God, one Lord, one faith, one church, one empire, one emperor." From that day forward people have used the Christian faith as a means to gain power instead of a way to serve others.)

The history of the church suggests that using religion to keep people down is always a temptation that we must avoid. And so we would do well to ourselves,

"Do we use religion to put people down or do we use religion to lift people up? Do we see following Christ as a means to gain power or a means to empower others?"

This is a theme in Matthew's gospel. True religion is not about touting your righteousness in public. True religion is about a personal and private commitment to serving others in God's name. (See Matthew 6:1-18)

True religion is not good showmanship. True religion is good stewardship.

HUMILITY AND SERVICE

In other words, the faithful person gratefully serves out of a profound awareness of God's grace. We are (as the Apostle Paul put it so many times) saved by grace through faith and not by works.

None of us have any reason to boast. Instead we have a reason to serve in the name of Christ. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

This past week I was in a Bible study where someone pointed out that in almost all of all Paul's letters to the early church he refers to himself as a servant of Jesus Christ and a servant of the gospel. And Paul refers to those who worked with him as fellow servants in the gospel.

In other words Paul recognized that his life was not controlled by what he wanted. His life was controlled by the job God was giving him to do. His life was controlled by the demands of the gospel. His life was controlled by the example of Jesus.

The Bible tells us that Jesus who was truly divine, very God of very God let all that go in order to serve the world. Indeed, he even died for the world on the cross.

And that life of extraordinary service and courage becomes the model for those who would follow him. This model for ministry excludes doing anything out of selfish ambition or conceit. Instead, the apostle tells us that we should "in humility regard others better than yourselves." (See Philippians 2:1-11)

I'm sorry, but I don't see this kind of humility very often in the church.

I see showmanship instead of worship. I see ministers with big egos building their own religious empires. I see factions in the church who have a hard time telling the absolute truth.

And what suffers when this happens? The people suffer. The ministry of the gospel suffers. And the church, the bride of Christ is ridiculed by the world because she does not live up to her own standards.

Don't misunderstand.

I'm not just pointing at those other guys. As my preaching professor used to tell me, "Don't ever point your finger when you preach because there will be four fingers pointing back at you!"

Every time I preach on this passage and I hear Jesus talk disparagingly about those religious leaders who wear special clothing and pray in public, do you know what I think about?

That's right. Four fingers are pointing right at me!

But, it's not just about how we dress. Leaders in the church are subject to great temptation. It is easy to take ourselves too seriously and not take the job Jesus has given us to do seriously enough.

Instead of focusing on serving others in the name of Christ we focus on what often proves to be minor differences in belief. We elevate petty disagreements to the level of grand causes.

But, don't get too comfortable in those straight-backed cypress pews. I'm not just talking about ministers or elders in the church. I'm talking about all of us. There's enough blame to go around when it comes to a lack of humility.

All of us lose focus in the church. We take our eyes off of what is really important. Instead of making the load of fellow travelers lighter we are distracted by disagreements and misunderstandings.

How would things be different if we took Paul's advice and really "regarded others better than" ourselves?

TAINTED SAINTS

Now this doesn't mean that we just gloss over our disagreements. If you read the Bible's accounts of the early church you'll see that they had some very substantial and important disagreements. Paul said some pretty harsh things about some of his fellow church members.

But, despite their disagreements Paul and the early church never lost sight of the fact that they were all serving the same Lord. And in serving the same Lord they were also called to serve each other. The example of Jesus wouldn't let them do anything else.

They were all "saints." They were saints not because their behavior was so saintly. They were saints because they were called to serve in the name of Jesus.

Tomorrow is Halloween. I like to sit on the front porch and pass out candy to the kids who are dressed up.

But, we need to remember that Christianity is not a costume party. Christianity is not wearing religion on our sleeve. It's not pretending to be something that we're not.

Faith is more than just putting on the costume. True faith is more than just talking the talk.

It's walking the walk.

We can put on the costume of faith, but it is only a disguise. We can use it to fool others and even ourselves. We tell ourselves something like, "I'm a pretty good person. I go to church each week."

But, there's an old saying about going to church that I think rings pretty true. "Sitting in a church doesn't make a person a Christian any more than living in a garage makes a person a car."

C.S. Lewis suggests a test that will prevent us from falling into this trap. He wrote,

"Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good—above all, that we are better than someone else—I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil."

Life in the Kingdom of God is just the opposite. It is not based upon being better than someone else.

It is based upon being willing to serve in the name of Jesus. Disciples of Jesus know about amazing grace. We know what it means to have been blind and lost in the maze of our own sinfulness.

And so we are keen to offer hope and help to the world. In the name of Christ we want to offer God's forgiveness to a world that knows all too well that it has failed in significant ways. Our call is a decision to do what faith requires no matter what.

There are three characteristics of a servant leader that are suggested by this passage.

PUT GOD FIRST

First, we lead by putting God first in our own lives. We take our marching orders from God as revealed in Christ, not from our minister or an elder or some preacher on TV.

That's what Jesus meant when he said that we shouldn't call any earthly leader "father" or "teacher".

Obviously he didn't mean that we shouldn't call our daddy "father." Nor does it mean that we should use this passage to be critical of Roman Catholics who refer to their priests as "father."

Instead, Jesus means that we must put the will of our heavenly father above all else. Our ultimate dedication is to God alone. God alone is our true teacher. Christ alone is our model of true piety.

This is another way of obeying the commandment to "have no other gods." When God is our first love then everything else falls into place. When God is not our first love, our world falls apart.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Second, we lead by example and not by compulsion. As one commentator put it, the person who cares for the people of God is an "under shepherd" and not an "over shepherd."

Jesus told his disciples that they were not to exercise power like the leaders of their day. They were not to “lord it” over others. Greatness in kingdom of heaven would be defined by a willingness to serve. (See Matthew 20:25-28)

When I was young I had a hard, physical job. And when the sun was at it’s hottest and the work was very difficult, then my boss would be the first to pick up a shovel or a brush axe.

I worked harder for that boss than any other because he was willing to lead by example. His example did more to inspire us than any words.

HUMILITY

Finally, when we put God first and lead by example, humility is the result.

We are used to thinking of humility as a virtue. But, in the Greek world of Jesus’ day humility was not a virtue to be sought after. Humility was a curse, a symbol of failure. It meant something like “groveling.”

The ancient world sought the opposite of humility; they sought pride. The word “pride” originally meant to be high and lifted up. And that’s what they wanted. They wanted to be in charge. They wanted to be in control.

When you think about it, isn’t that what we want as well? We want to be high and lifted up. We want to be in charge. We want to be in control of our lives.

We are still not so sure about that word, humility. It still seems to suggest a lifestyle that is less than we would like for our family and ourselves.

But, in the end the Christian must reject pride. The Bible talks about God being the one who should be high and lifted up and not us. Pride always leads to idolatry, putting us first instead of God.

As one commentator put it, “To be filled with self is to be emptied of God.” And the converse is also true. To be filled with God is to be emptied of self.

More than that, we need to remember that the entire ministry of Christ is about the transformation of the world’s values. God’s power is revealed in the power of sacrifice.

The poor are lifted up; the high and mighty, they are taken down a notch. The humility of a little child is an example of greatness in God’s kingdom. It is a kingdom in which the last will be first and the first will be last.

Suffice it to say that while we are still reluctant to embrace the concept of a kingdom based upon humility; humility summarizes the ministry of Christ.

Humility is not the attitude of a person who is beaten down and has a poor self-image. Humility is the attitude of a person who has courage and faith. Humility is the attitude of a person who doesn't have to prove anything. Humility is the attitude of a person who lives by in grace.

The humble person doesn't always have to dominate the conversation or be the center of attention. The humble person can dare to listen carefully to needs of others without feeling the need to interject his or her own story.

The humble person is gracious because he or she has truly experienced the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Today Jesus offers a stern rebuke to those who were turn faith into just another way to get our way. And he challenges us to believe the great paradox of the gospel. When we lose our life for the sake of Christ and the gospel, we save it.

Amen.