

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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10/30/05

Matthew 23:1-12 (NRSV)

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.

THE GREAT SIN

In his book, Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis refers to pride as "The Great Sin."

He wrote, "There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others ... Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind."

And yet, sometimes those with the most pride consider themselves to be very "religious." Lewis asks, "How is it that people who are quite obviously eaten up with pride can say they believe in God and appear to themselves very religious? I'm afraid it means they are worshipping an imaginary God."

That's what our Scripture lesson for today is about, religious people who are filled with pride. These were very important religious people indeed.

They (as Jesus put it) "sat in Moses' seat." In other words, they were the keepers of the religious tradition. They were the ones trained to interpret God's law.

DO AS THEY SAY

And they were good at their job. Jesus told the crowd and his disciples, "Do what they tell you to do. They are good teachers. They have been well trained. But, don't imitate their behavior. Don't do what they do."

You see, they had one fatal flaw. They were hypocrites. Their lifestyle did not match what they taught. They didn't practice what they preached.

Did you ever have someone tell you, "Do what I say do, not what I do?" That's never very convincing. There must be a connection between what we do and what we say.

I think there's an old Native American saying that goes something like, "What you do speaks so loud that I can't hear what you say."

That's why so many people are turned off to what they call "organized religion."

There needs to be a connection between what we say and what we do, and often that connection is missing.

RELIGION ON THEIR SLEEVE

Why couldn't these religious leaders understand the fallacy of their lifestyle? According to Jesus, it was because of their pride. Jesus said that they were fatally inflicted with the disease of pride. All of their deeds were for public

consumption. They wanted men and women to praise them for their holy deeds.

You could see their pride in the way they dressed. You've no doubt heard this phrase, "wearing your religion on your sleeve." Well, these religious leaders literally wore their religion on their sleeve and on their forehead!

Some Jews wore little leather boxes tied around their heads and their wrist. These boxes were called phylacteries, and inside those boxes were verses of Scripture. This was a way to symbolize that God's Word was a "lamp unto their feet and a light unto their path."

In addition to this, the faithful also wore prayer shawls. Again, this was a symbol of a person's devotion to God, their allegiance to the commandments of God. Jesus himself wore such a garment.

There was nothing wrong with these practices. There was scriptural warrant for what they did.

But, the religious leaders had taken these practices to an extreme. Their leather boxes were longer and larger than the average. Their prayer shawls had practically become robes. They wanted people to look at them and say, "My goodness, these men are so holy!"

And I'm sure some people did say that. But appearances can be deceiving.

PRETENDING TO BE SOMETHING WE'RE NOT

I'm a bit suspicious of people who wear religion on their sleeve, people who wear gigantic crosses and sport a bumper sticker that says something like, "My God is Alive. Sorry about yours!"

I have to ask myself, "Who are they trying to convince?" Style can affect substance. If we have a religious style that glorifies us instead of God, that's

a problem. We are often guilty of using the name of God to promote own agenda.

Halloween is upon us. That's the holiday when we dress up in costumes and pretend to be something that we're not.

That's what the misguided religious leaders of Jesus' day were doing. They were dressing up like faithful people, but it was just a costume. It was just a way to hide their true self. When I was growing up, the country preachers at the revival used to refer to this as "playing church."

In that regard, I think most of us are guilty of this at one time or another. We put on the costume of faith, but sometimes it is only a disguise. We 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."

We need to be aware that the trappings of faith cannot take the place of a life that is devoted to God. In fact, the trappings of faith can become so prominent in our life that we miss the essence of faith. There can be a hole in our heart that no amount of preaching, liturgy and hymn singing can fill.

SPECIAL TREATMENT

In addition to "dressing up" like persons of faith, these proud religious leaders insisted on receiving special treatment from others. Again I like the way Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*, brings the story up to date. He translates verses 6 and 7,

"They love to sit at the head table at church dinners, basking in the most prominent positions, [7] preening in the radiance of public flattery, receiving

honorary degrees, and getting called 'Doctor' and 'Reverend.'“ That’s a little too close to home!

In essence, the message of the religious leaders of the day was “I know more than you, and that makes me a better person.”

Jesus told his disciples, “Don’t you fall into that trap. Don’t think that you are better than anyone else, that you can teach others about faith. When it comes to faith, there is only one teacher and you are all classmates.”

As a religious leader, I’m in a strange position. I have been trained in the Bible and theology. I am expected to lead.

And yet, I must always remember that the authority I wield is very limited and derivative.

I have to lead in such a way that I affirm the priesthood of all believers, the doctrine that all of us have equal access to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

In the Presbyterian Church we have a kind of religious operations manual called the Book of Order. In the first paragraph of the first chapter of that book we say in effect, Christ is Lord and Head of the Church. We’re making these rules in an attempt to follow Him.

But, if any of these rules are against what Christ teaches, they shouldn’t be obeyed. We should change our rules because Jesus alone is our true teacher. He alone gives us the power to teach and preach.

This is not an easy thing to do.

All of us want to deify our own personal rule book. We want others to play by our rules.

A HEAVY BURDEN

Did you notice how Jesus criticized the religious leaders in our lesson for today? According to Jesus, these religious leaders' interpretation of the law placed a heavy burden on the people. And these proud leaders didn't care one little bit about the hardship that they imposed on others.

I remember all those times that Jesus healed on the Sabbath. Jesus was roundly criticized for "working" on the Sabbath by the religious leaders.

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.

We need to ask ourselves, "Do we use faith to put people down or do we use faith lift people up?" The latter is always the point of true religion.

PRIDE VERSUS SERVICE

We want to imagine that God is always pleased with us, that what we say and do always has divine approval. But, the words of Jesus warn us against such presumption.

Jesus said that there will be some who preach and teach in the name of Jesus, but at the end of the world He will say that He never knew them. And the frightening fact is that any of us can be in this category at any time.

C.S. Lewis writes about 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. It is based upon being willing to put the needs of others before our own needs.

Jesus said,

“The greatest among you will be your servant. [12] All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Matthew 23:11-12 (NRSV)

That truly is the world turned upside down. But, how do we achieve such a world? How can we fight the all too natural tendency to promote ourselves instead of God’s kingdom?

HUMILITY IS A GIFT

First, we need to remember that humility is a gift from God. It’s a gift to (as the old Shaker song puts it) “come down where we ought to be.”

Some things cannot be had if we try for them too directly.

For example, when I play golf with our choir director, Mark and he’s not doing so well I say, “Mark, you’ve got to relax. Try real hard to relax!”

Trying real hard to relax does not work.

Humility is the same kind of elusive commodity. It seems like the harder we try to “be humble” the more pride creeps into our life.

We can even take “pride” in our superior humility!

When I was in high school, I had a t-shirt that proclaimed with tongue firmly in cheek, “When you’re as great as I am, it’s hard to be humble.”

Actually, that t-shirt was not too far from the truth. We cannot get away from the idea that we are great. Any conscious attempt at humility will be a false one.

Only God can give us the gift of humility. Only God can help us learn to enjoy serving others in the name of Christ.

So, first we need to remember that humility is a gift from God.

The only thing that we can do is admit our pride and ask God to give us the gift of humility.

It is only by the power of God’s Spirit that we can live a life that is not controlled by selfish, conceited desires.

AN ENGAGING HUMILITY

And second, we need to recognize that true humility is not how it has often been portrayed. The truly humble person is not someone who has a poor self-image, who bows and scrapes before others.

The truly humble person will be quite pleasant.

Again let me lean upon C.S. Lewis. He wrote,

“Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays; he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what *you* said to *him*.”

Does that describe you? Are you really interested in the needs of others?

Do you really listen to what someone is saying to you or are you just waiting for a break in the conversation in order to say what you want to say?

If the latter is true, you may need some help with humility.

HORVILLE SASH

Thomas Hilton tells a fable that gets at the essence of Christian humility.

There was a man with the odd name of Horville Sash. Horville worked as a lowly mailroom clerk in the basement of a great building, but one day he wanted to climb higher.

Well, it just so happened that one day Horville saw a bug scurrying across the mailroom floor. He raised his foot to squash the hapless bug, but this was a magic bug who could speak. He cried out, "Spare me, and I will grant you your fondest wishes."

Horville spared the bug and said that he wished to be promoted to the second floor. Immediately he found himself working on the second floor in a better job. But, Horville was not satisfied. He heard the footsteps of those on a floor above him and so he asked to be promoted to the third floor. In a flash the magic bug did his thing and Horville found himself on the third floor.

You can imagine what happened. Horville's ambitions were not satisfied until he made it all the way up to the ninety-sixth floor. There were no floors above him. He had reached the pinnacle of his ambition. But, as he sat in his fancy office, he again he heard footsteps. There was someone above him.

He found a staircase that led to the roof and there on the roof was a little boy with his eyes closed. He asked the little boy, "What are you doing?" And the little boy replied, "Praying." And Horville asked, "To whom."

The little boy pointed skyward and said “to God.”

Horville’s ambition had grown with every promotion by the bug. It seemed to have no limit.

Horville summoned the magic bug and said, “Make me a god. Put me in the type of position that God would hold if he were on earth.”

The wish was granted. And that very day Horville began work in the mailroom.

You see, the Bible tells us that this was exactly what happened when God came to earth in His Son, Jesus. The Scriptures tell us that he “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” (Philippians 2:7)

He was a carpenter who gave up everything, even his own life, for those that he loved.

And our attitude should be patterned after this servant God.

We too should empty ourselves of ambition in order to fill ourselves with the glory of God. (Philippians 2:5-8)

It is what one commentator called the way of “downward mobility.” It is the blessed gift of humility.

May God grant us this wondrous gift.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN