

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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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.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

What do we seek in a leader? Should a leader be a take charge kind of person? Should a leader be a person with great knowledge? Should a leader have a track record of great accomplishment? What kind of temperament should a leader have? Should they be cool and calm or perhaps hot and passionate?

Certainly we can and do disagree when it comes to leadership. This Tuesday we will express our opinion on what kind of leadership our country needs for the next four years. We will have to decide what we value most in a leader.

But, in the church leadership is evaluated somewhat differently. Great leaders are not necessarily those who have the most knowledge or the highest positions in the church or government.

According to Jesus the greatest leader is a servant. According to Jesus spiritual power comes to those who humble themselves. And those who humble themselves will be exalted.

In a memorable phrase the Jesuit priest, Henri Nouwen said that the way of Jesus is the way of "downward mobility."

HARD TO BE HUMBLE

Humility is a virtue. Now I must say that humility is a rather slippery virtue. How can we humble ourselves? What can we do to become humble?

There are some who might even be proud of their humility ... in which case they are not humble at all! Others have suggested that we can't make ourselves humble, that this is something that God must do for us.

And there is an element of truth to that statement. As the old Shaker hymn put it, it is a "gift to be simple." It is a gift to be "free." It is a gift to "come down where we ought to be."

Humility is not only a virtue; it is also a gracious gift from God. When we no longer have to worry about our ego and what others think of us we are freed from many of the burdens and compulsions that plague the world.

But, this passage seems to suggest that there are some things that we can actually do to cultivate humility. Humility is not so much a feeling or a state of mind but a lifestyle.

As Forest Gump might put it, "Humble is as humble does."

FOOT WASHING

The humble person according to Jesus is a servant, and Jesus has set the example.

For 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 upon himself. 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."

Humility is simply the act of serving others. Service to others is the hallmark of leadership in the church.

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.

THE GOSPEL PERVERTED

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 lightening the burdens of others 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? 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 history of the church suggests that using religion to keep people down is always a temptation that we must avoid.

In the name of Christ wars have been fought, the poor have financed the building of expensive cathedrals and tyrants have claimed the backing of Almighty God. In the past the Christian religion often was a burden instead of a blessing. Leaders who were supposed to be the servants of all instead fell in love with the trappings of faith.

PRIDE MASCAURADING AS FAITH

The word Pharisee has become a synonym for someone who is hypocritical, and we have become accustomed to thinking of them in this way. They are the guys in the black hats.

But, it's not that simple. According to Jesus these ancient leaders did "sit in Moses' seat." This meant that they faithfully taught God's word. The people were instructed by Jesus to listen to what they had to say. The Pharisees were serious about following God's word to the letter. They were sincere in their desire to live a devout and holy life.

But, sometimes sincere people can be sincerely wrong. And that was true of the Pharisees and the scribes. According to Jesus their actions did not match their words. They didn't practice what they preached.

They were the first of a long line of religious leaders who succumbed to the siren song of status. They became enamored with the sound of their own voice. 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 afflicted 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.

I'm a bit suspicious of people who wear religion on their sleeve today. I have to ask myself, "Who are they trying to convince?"

We need to remember that style can still affect substance. If we have a religious style that glorifies us instead of God, that's a problem. We too are often guilty of using the name of God to promote our own agenda.

Last Friday my wife and I sat on the front porch and passed out candy to little goblins for an annual celebration of Halloween. My next door neighbors even constructed a haunted house in their garage. It was all in good fun. Halloween is that holiday when we dress up in costumes and pretend to be something that we're not.

But, true faith is not Halloween. 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 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."

LORDING IT OVER OTHERS

In addition to “dressing up” like persons of faith, these proud religious leaders insisted on receiving special treatment from others. 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.’”

I’m not so sure that I like that translation. 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.”

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 rulebook. We want others to play by our rules. And sometimes it’s hard to know if we do things because it is the will of Christ or our own will.

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.

The last thing we want to do is add one more burden to a people who are overburdened already.

AVOIDING SPIRITUAL ABUSE

We talk a lot these days about preventing abuse. We talk about child abuse and domestic violence and elder abuse. These are important issues.

But, I think there is one more area that should be of concern to us in the church, spiritual abuse. When religious leaders use their position of power to exploit the poor and heap guilt upon people such behavior is spiritual abuse. And the effects of that abuse are long lasting and debilitating.

Jesus tells us to beware of leaders who preach an orthodox theology and yet promote a way of life that is at odds with the gospel message.

Again, the way to avoid such hypocrisy is to actively embrace a lifestyle of service in the name of Jesus. 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."

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. 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)

This distinction is also made in 1 Peter 5:2-3. We read,

1 Peter 5:2-3 (NIV)

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; [3] not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

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

So first, we lead by making sure that God is first in our lives. Second, we lead by example. And third, we lead with humility. Humility is really the culmination of the first two. When we put God first and lead by example, humility is the result.

In the Greek world of Jesus' day humility was not a virtue to be sought after. Humility was a bad word that 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 not so sure about that word, humility. It still seems to suggest a lifestyle that is less than we would like for ourselves and our family.

But, in the end pride must be rejected by the Christian. The Bible talks about God being the one who should be high and lifted up. 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.”

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. Paul said it well in his letter to the Philippians,

Philippians 2:5-8 (NIV)

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

[6] Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

[7] but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

[8] And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death--
even death on a cross!

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.

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)

God help us learn to humble ourselves for the sake of His kingdom.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN](#)