

“Justice and Mercy”

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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.

GOOD TEACHING

“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore do whatever they teach you and follow it...”

According to Jesus, the scribes and the Pharisees were good Bible teachers.

They had the training and the authority to teach God’s Word to the people.

Jesus said, “Listen to them and do whatever they teach you.”

This is just one verse out of twelve, but it intrigues me.

Matthew’s gospel is filled with conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders.

And in our lesson for today that conflict deepens.

But, despite this open hostility, Jesus does not seek to undermine the authority of Israel's teachers. Instead, he tells his disciples and the crowd to listen to their religious leaders and put their teaching into practice.

I believe that it's important to embrace orthodox theology.
We should have our facts straight when we talk about the Bible and what we believe.
And Jesus thought that was important too.

But, notice also that memorizing the Bible and embracing orthodox theology does not guarantee right action. On the contrary, sometimes religious leaders can act in ways that brings shame upon the community of faith.

BAD ETHICS

This was true of the religious leaders of Jesus' day.
Their theology was good.
Their ethics...not so hot.

And so Jesus told his disciples and the crowd,
"Do what these religious leaders tell you to do.
On the other hand, don't follow their example.
Unfortunately, they don't practice what they preach."

If you have more than just a passing acquaintance with the Bible,
you know that the religious leaders of Jesus' day didn't practice what they preached.

In fact the name of one group, the Pharisees has become synonymous with hypocrisy.

If we say that someone is pharisaic, we are saying that their actions are hypocritical.

..that these people are self-righteous.

BAD ETHICS TODAY

This passage requires careful interpretation.
As one commentator put it,

we shouldn't point the finger of blame at these ancient religious leaders. Instead, we should point the finger in the other direction, and think about how our own actions are not in line with God's Word.

That's a lot harder to do.

Most of us don't have the gift of seeing ourselves as others see us. We are often blind to our own hypocrisy.

And even when we recognize that we don't practice what we preach, our attempts to do the right thing often fall short.

Once again I go back to Paul's letter to the Romans when he said, "I don't understand my own actions. I know the right thing to do, but I don't do it. Indeed, most of the time I find myself doing the very thing I shouldn't be doing."

So, it doesn't help to just preach a sermon that encourages us to try harder to do the right thing.

No doubt you've heard those sermons. The pastor says something like,

"Jesus rejected the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day. And we should reject hypocrisy as well. We should just practice what we preach."

There's only one problem with that sermon. We don't do it.

The church has often used God's word to justify doing the wrong thing. And I'm sure in many ways we're doing the same thing today.

That's the problem of turning the good news into good advice. We can't put that advice into practice.

WHY?

Knowledge is not enough.
Willpower is not enough.
We need something more.

These Scribes and the Pharisees had the Bible memorized.
Their teaching was sound.
Jesus wanted all his disciples to listen to them
and put their teachings into practice.

But, these religious leaders failed in their practice of the faith.
They didn't do what faith required.

We can't just leave this problem in the past.

The most important question we need to ask this morning is why?
Why have religious people often done the wrong thing...
from the time of the Scribes and the Pharisees down to our own time?

Why can't we just practice what we preach?
Apparently we need something more than just knowledge and willpower.

MISTREATMENT OF JEWS BY THE CHURCH

In fact church history teaches us that for long time the we used passages like this one to actually justify profoundly unethical and hypocritical behavior directed at God's own people.

For a long time the church suggested that God had rejected His people (the Jews) because (like the Scribes and the Pharisees) they did not put their faith into practice.

The proof of that was that they rejected Jesus and had him crucified.

And because of that, all of their ancestors bore the blame.
They were rejected by God and replaced by the church.

Jews were called derogatory names by Christians.
Some even referred to the Jews as "Christ killers".
This is a dark stain on the history of the church.

There are even a few isolated passages of Scripture that can be ripped from their context and used to bolster this viewpoint.

And this onerous doctrine was the predominant teaching of all branches of the church up to the 20th century.

Do you know what changed? The Holocaust.

Faced with the horror of the Holocaust and the fact that many Christians did nothing,
the church, the whole church changed it's teaching.

We are now in general agreement.
God does not go back on God's promises.
The Jews are still God's people.

It was profoundly immoral for us to make them second class citizens or try to force them to convert to Christianity.

But, what led us to make such a horrible mistake in the first place?
How could religious leaders who had the Bible memorized be complicit in such an evil event?

BLIND SPOTS YESTERDAY AND TODAY

The church...or at least a large portion of the church was blind to what it was doing.

Some church leaders were like the Scribes and Pharisees.
They knew the Bible but they did not practice what they preached.

(Oh, there were some who courageously did the right thing in the face of this terrible oppression. But, they were the minority.)

The majority of the church taught for many years that God had rejected his chosen people. They were chosen no more.
And this corrupt theology laid the groundwork for the Holocaust.

We see that clearly now.
Conservative and liberal theologians are in agreement on this.
As they say, "Hindsight is 20/20."

But, I wonder.

What blind spots do we have in the church today?
Who are we crucifying today in the name of right religion?

I think that today's passage gives us an opportunity to struggle with those questions.

STANDING IN THE NEED OF PRAYER

Let me also say that I don't think it's helpful to use this passage to criticize or second guess others. That's a very tempting thing to do.

I think of specific leaders today (religious and otherwise) when I read this passage, and I am very tempted to name them and their hypocrisy.

(I bet you've been thinking about them this morning already!)

But, I am operating on the assumption that we too are included among those who do not practice what we preach.

To quote an old hymn, "Not my brother or my sister, but it's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer." We are the ones who need prayer. We are the ones who need to practice what we preach.

The Bible is always more helpful when we take it personally.

Jesus said that it's always easy to see that splinter in our neighbor's eye while missing the log in our own eye!

Today I want us to take a look in the mirror and see if we can remove a few logs!

So what principles can we learn from Jesus' criticism of the Scribes and the Pharisees?

HEAVY BURDENS

Jesus' first criticism of the religious leaders was that they "laid heavy burdens" on the shoulders of other people.

Jesus, of course did just the opposite.

In Matthew 11:28 we hear Jesus say,

“Come to me, all you that are weary
and are carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest.”

Many of us have memorized that passage because it speaks to our situation.

All of us...in one way or another are carrying heavy burdens.

And the promise of Jesus to take away those burdens, to give us rest
...is good news indeed.

I wonder.

Maybe when we lift the burdens of others,
we find the peace that Jesus promises in Matthew 11.

Maybe when we lift the burdens of other our own burdens become lighter.

And if our interpretation of the Bible creates a burden for others,
maybe that not only separates us from each other but also from God.

I am reminded of what the prophet Micah said.
The prophet asked,

“What does the Lord require of us?”

The answer according to Micah is not longer worship services, more Bible study, or giving more.

The Lord want us to:

“do justice,
love mercy
and walk humbly with our God.” (See Micah 6:6-8)

To put it another way, we are called to lift heavy burdens.

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day knew this passage very well.

HOW DO WE LIFT HEAVY BURDENS?

But, they had difficulty putting it into practice. Instead of lifting heavy burdens Jesus said that they added to the burdens of the people.

One of the things that scares me to death about preaching is that I might inadvertently add burdens instead of lifting them. I am afraid that I might say something that will add to the pain and misery that someone feels instead of bringing a word of grace and hope.

I live with that fear, and I try to evaluate every sermon by this norm.

Does this sermon promote justice and mercy or does it place an unnecessary burden on my people?

That's not always an easy question to answer.

I grew up hearing some sermons delivered by well meaning ministers that were often more burden than promise.

And one of the reasons I became a minister is that through this experience I felt called to preach a different message.

I'm sure my results have been mixed on that. Despite our best intentions we sometimes do the very thing we want to avoid.

But, this is my standard as a sermon writer. And this should be your standard as well.

All of us write sermons every day...not just with our words but also with our actions.

If we're wondering about the right course of action in any given situation, maybe we should ask,

“Does my action lift a burden or does it impose a burden?”

As followers of Jesus we are in the burden lifting business.

But, we need to be clear about this.
In the final analysis we cannot lift those heavy burdens.

Only the grace of God can do that.

As another hymn puts it, "Burdens are lifted at Calvary."

In other words, God's grace and forgiveness,
grace and forgiveness as revealed in Jesus Christ,
are the final answer when it comes to lifting heavy burdens.

When we leave everything else and come to the throne of grace,
then those heavy burdens are lifted once and for all.

HUMILITY

In addition to practicing justice and mercy,
the prophet encourages us to walk humbly with our God.

This is the second thing that the religious leaders of Jesus' day got wrong.

Instead of humility these religious leaders were self-promoters.
You could see this lack of humility in a number of ways.

First, they dressed to impress.
They wore long prayer shawls and large leather boxes that contained portions of Scripture.
We might say that they wore their religion on their sleeve.

Second, these religious leaders wanted status and respect.

They claimed the seats of honor at the banquet table and at the synagogue.
They loved being greeted with the honorary title Rabbi in the marketplace.

Jesus said that this quest for honor had harmed these religious leaders spiritually.
They claimed honor that was due only to God.

Humility has always been a hard virtue to approach.

Let's face it.
We don't want this virtue!

We don't want to be humble.
We want to be successful.

We want honor and titles.
We want people to respect us and look up to us.
We like people to tell how good we are.

But, this desire for success often blinds us to what is really important.

Jesus said in verse 12,
"All who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The way to get ahead in the kingdom of God is not to step over people.
The way to get ahead in the kingdom of God is to lift people up.

Serving others in the name of Christ is the way to exaltation.

This goes against the ways of the world.
And it goes against our natural instincts.

But, it represents the essence of the kingdom of God.

It is the way of Jesus.
Earlier in Matthew's gospel Jesus tells us that he didn't come to be served
but to serve. (Matthew 20:28)

WALK HUMBLY WITH GOD

What can convince us to abandon our idolatrous drive for success and ex-
altation?

Once again it is a deeper understanding of God's amazing grace.

When we walk with God it is easier to see our own sinfulness.

Compare me with others and I might look pretty good...for a while.
Compare me with God and (according to the prophet)

my so called righteousness will look like filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6)

If we truly walk with God, we walk humbly.
We have no choice.
There's no other way.

HEAVY BURDENS TODAY

All of us come to worship each week bearing heavy burdens.

And sometimes, in our pain,
we try to shift the burden to someone else.

We place blame
and walk farther away from a God who loves us.

Once again the Lord invites us to humbly come near.
We don't have to hide our sin or place the blame on others.

The burden has already been lifted.
To quote yet another gospel hymn,

"Jesus paid it all.
All to him we owe.
Sin hath left a crimson stain.
He washed it white as snow."

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.
Let us once again eat the feast that he has prepared.

A meal based upon forgiveness.

In him we find mercy
... grace that is greater than all our sins.

Amen.