

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 21st Sunday after Pentecost, Nov. 2, 2014

**Practice What You Preach**

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Matthew 23:1-12

For the past month I have been discussing Jesus' interaction with the Sadducees and Pharisees, the priests and the scribes, and their efforts to trap Jesus into saying something that they could use to charge him with heresy.

The debate began with their question to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you the authority?" As the debate went on, Jesus kept putting his adversaries down by means of parables which countered their questions and which made it clear that they were serving their own selfish ends instead of serving God. They had a literal "holier than thou" attitude and held themselves up to the Jewish people as models of virtue and piety.

They were anything but what they claimed to be. Yes, they preached the laws of Moses but they didn't follow those laws very well. They did not practice what they were preaching.

Our scripture passage from Matthew 23 is Jesus' indictment of the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees for not practicing what they were preaching. Jesus is talking to the disciples and to the crowd which had gathered to witness the debates and his words were a cannon broadside to the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, and for that matter to anyone in public life today who Walks the Talk instead of Talking the Walk.

Listen again to verses 1-4 of our Gospel reading as expressed in contemporary language by Eugene Peterson:

*"The religion scholars and Pharisees are competent teachers in God's law. You won't go wrong in following their teachings on Moses. But be careful about following **them**. They talk a good line, but don't live it. They don't take it into their hearts and live it out in their behavior. It's all spit-and-polish veneer."*

Effectively this scripture says that the scribes and Pharisees are preaching "Do

as I say, not as I do.” They preach the laws and are good at doing that but they themselves often don’t follow the very laws that they are preaching.

How many people do you know like that? The world is full of hypocrites in public positions, in churches, in civic organizations, in business, everywhere in the community, who hold themselves out as paragons of virtue but who are all clothed in a spit-and-polish veneer. They look and sound good but the way they live their lives is totally contrary to the public face that they put forward. Jesus is talking to them just as he was talking to the scribes and Pharisees almost 2000 years ago. Do any of you recognize anything of yourself in this? I hope not, but if you do, listen carefully to what this scripture is saying to you.

Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase goes on:

*“Instead of giving you God’s Law as food and drink by which you can banquet on God, they package it in bundles of rules, loading you down like pack animals. They seem to take pleasure in watching you stagger under these loads, and wouldn’t think of lifting a finger to help. Their lives are perpetual fashion shows, embroidered prayer shawls one day and flowery prayers the next. They love to sit at the head tables at church dinners, basking in the most prominent positions, preening in the radiance of public flattery, receiving honorary degrees, and getting called ‘Doctor’ and ‘Reverend’.”*

It is human nature to want recognition and some sort of status; to be recognized for what you do or what you have accomplished, but when status and recognition become ends in themselves, as it unfortunately does for so many people, it means nothing.

Don’t seek status. Don’t seek recognition. Serve the community. Serve the church. Serve those in need. Do that and you will receive recognition in the eyes of God, and in the eyes of everyone who knows you and sees what you are doing. Don’t be a Pharisee and seek out the best seat at the head table, or the greatest number of recognitions and awards.

Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

*“Don’t let people do that to you, put you on a pedestal like that. You all have a single teacher, and you all are classmates. Don’t set people up as experts over your life, letting them tell you what to do. No one else should carry the title of ‘Father’; you have*

*only one Father, and he is in heaven. And don't let people maneuver you into taking charge of them. There is only one Life-Leader for you and them – Christ.”*

On July 7<sup>th</sup> last year, I stood in this pulpit and gave a sermon that I know some of you remember, if only for its title and not for its content. That sermon was called “Don't Plant Dandelions.” In that message I talked about excessive pride in what we do or accomplish. If we allow pride to dominate our lives, we become what the Pharisees and Sadducees were. They were impressed with their own importance. It went to their heads and became an end in itself. The position at the head table, the honors and accolades were what they were looking for. They were oblivious to what they should actually be doing – serving God and the people.

Satan was cast out of heaven for pride and in his comments about the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus is attacking them for their pride in themselves.

In that sermon last year, I quoted David Rhodes who said:

*“Pride is the dandelion of the soul. Its root goes deep; only a little left behind sprouts again. Its seeds lodge in the tiniest encouraging cracks. And it flourishes in good soil. The danger of pride is that it feeds on goodness.”*

Jesus is attacking the Pharisees and scribes for their pride and their lack of true service to God. He is also warning them and us against arrogance and self-exultation.

You may not be familiar with one particular word in our scripture as I read it before beginning this sermon. Repeating verse 5, *“Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long:”* The word you may not be familiar with is “phylacteries.” A phylactery, which is also called a “frontlet”, is a leather container which is worn on the forehead or the upper left arm by Orthodox Jews during prayer times. The phylacteries are bound with leather thongs to the forehead or arm and contain small scrolls written with scriptural commands from Exodus or Deuteronomy.

Usually the phylactery is worn on the forehead. When they are instead worn on the upper left arm, the intent is that when a person crosses his arms, the scriptures would be close to the heart.

Phylacteries are supposed to be small but the Pharisees tended to wear rather large ones in order to call attention to themselves and to show off their piety. It was all

show – not substance. This is what Jesus is condemning in Matthew 23:5.

In today's times, some people seem to try to show off their faith by frequent references to Jesus or to the scriptures in their interactions with other people, whether it is appropriate or not. They make an outward show of faith and, at times, it is just that, a show. You may have heard the expression, "Wearing your faith on your sleeve." While not actually wearing a leather box, they are really wearing an oversized phylactery.

Peterson's paraphrase concludes with an excellent summary of what Jesus is telling us to do in today's Gospel passage:

*"Do you want to stand out? Then step down. Be a servant. If you puff yourself up, you'll get the wind knocked out of you. But if you're content to simply be yourself, your life will count for plenty."*

Christ's message is clear. It was said for the Pharisees and the scribes and the crowd of observers but it is meant for all of us. Forget about glory and honors. Simply be yourself. Serve the Lord. Christ told the disciples to feed his sheep, to care for the needy, the poor, the downtrodden, the tax collectors and sinners. Do that and your life will be meaningful.

Putting on a show does not serve God nor does carrying your faith on your sleeve. Action is what is expected of us. As I have said before from this pulpit, Christ expects us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and might and to love our neighbors as our self.

Do that and you will be truly serving God. Accept the grace which is offered to you and show your gratitude through your actions as Christians.

**Amen!**

(Scripture quotations are from the NIV Bible)