



“DO AS THEY SAY...”

Matthew 23:1-12



NOVEMBER 2, 2014

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From a sermon by Roy Lloyd, <http://day1.org>

You sometimes hear people say, “I don’t go to church because it’s full of hypocrites.” Well, to them I say, “Our church is NOT full of hypocrites! There’s ALWAYS room for one more!”

Today’s Gospel from Matthew 23 finds Jesus in the middle of a crowd where he dismisses the scribes and Pharisees as fakes – hypocrites he calls them. *“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. They do all their deeds to be seen by others...”* And he goes on...

That’s pretty harsh, don’t you think? And near as I can tell, they’re right there! No wonder they didn’t like him very much! Jesus calls these guys out. It seems they like to show off and sit up front to be admired.

Does anyone remember a song by the Oak Ridge Boys called “Rhythm Guitar”? I’ll play it – it’s short.

SONG

Did you hear that? “Nobody wants to play rhythm guitar behind Jesus; everybody wants to be leader of the band.” It’s funny, because it’s true. In other words nobody wants to see themselves as part of the supporting cast of helpers, with Jesus in the lead up front – the star. So often we find that people want to be out front – to be even more important than Christ. So I thought this rather humorous statement fit perfectly with today’s message, which has to do with a lack of proportion in our lives.

Jesus talks a lot about humility in the Gospel, but today’s passage is one of the ones where Jesus seems really angry. All too many of those who opposed Jesus liked the place of honor. If the Gospels are even a little accurate they were always jockeying for position. Jesus told them - and us – that we have to have this proportion in our lives – that the love of God must be in us, giving us a sense of humility.

Here’s a little story about humility. Once upon a time, there was a shepherd. And because of his great devotion and faithfulness to his king, he was promoted to the position of prime minister. The king’s other ministers were jealous that a lowly shepherd should be given such an honor, and they tried to find some way to bring him into

disfavor. But they couldn't find anything incriminating on him, except for one curious thing.

Once a week the shepherd would go into a locked room where he'd stay for about an hour. The nobles told the king about this and said they were certain he must be sneaking some of the wealth of the kingdom into that room. The king doubted it, but gave permission to break into the room and make a search. What they found was a small bundle containing a worn-out pair of shoes and a ratty old robe. The prime minister was brought before the king and asked about this curious bundle they'd found. And he said, "I wore these things when I was a shepherd. I look at them regularly so that I won't forget what I once was, and how unworthy I am of all the kindness and honor you've given to me."

Humility -- the word comes from the word for soil or earth, humus. Now, if you only hear one thing today, hear this: being humble does NOT mean treating yourself like dirt. No. Think of the dark earth of the valley, or potting soil -- fertile, nutrient-filled, and bursting with possibilities, primed and open to the planting of the seeds of hope. There's a quote going around lately that says "Humility doesn't mean thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less." Good one, huh?

In 1953, at the Chicago railway station, a man stepped off the train on his way to accept the noble peace Prize. He was a tall man with bushy hair and a big moustache and as the cameras flashed and city officials rushed up to him, hands outstretched, he thanked them politely and asked to be excused for a moment.

The officials were puzzled as he walked on through the crowd and over to an elderly black woman who was struggling with two large suitcases. He picked them up, smiled, and escorted her to her bus, helped her get on, and wished her a safe journey. Then Albert Schweitzer turned to the crowd and apologized for keeping them waiting. It is reported that one member of the reception committee told a reporter, "That's the first time I ever saw a sermon walking."

We have been given a marvelous task: to live in harmony, to weep with the mournful, to laugh with the joyful, and to not get conceited. We are called to be righteous, but not self-righteous. We are called to be humble.

In our Gospel today, Jesus paints a poignant picture of a barren religious life with all the outward signs but none of the inward grace. Oh, they looked good; the Pharisees

and scribes were always prepared to set the rules and to enforce the regulations, but there was no love behind it. They didn't practice what they preached.

What if -- what if one day we were forced to preach what we practice, instead of the other way around? If we had to put what we really do out in front of God and everyone, would you or I really be prepared to do that? Probably not. Jesus is showing us that there needs to be a connection between the professions of faith we make each Sunday and the kinds of lives we lead during the week. We must be humble.

I like what psychologist Gordon Allport said about how a code of ethics can be hollow thing without something to back it up. Following the RULES of faith -- as if that was all that was required -- is like living on the perfume of an empty flower vase. You can enjoy the perfume of an empty vase for long time, but sooner or later you find yourself in a situation where there had better be some real flowers and not just the aroma.

In our Gospel this morning we see the tragedy of being outwardly religious -- of putting our main emphasis on outer conduct rather than on inner character. The men Jesus was talking to probably didn't even realize they needed to do anything different. These people talk a good game, but when they have to fall back on their inner resources of faith, they discover that the tank is empty. And Jesus says, "Don't do as they do for they don't practice what they teach." All perfume, no flowers.

The religious leaders used piety as a front for their hypocrisy. Their charity was bogus. Jesus said, "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." Paul writes in 1 Corinthians that, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

If you and I treat others with contempt, as inferior, our Christianity is nothing more than an annoying hypocrisy.

A guy fell into a pit and got stuck. "Help me," he cried, "I'm sinking!"

Two Christians were passing by on their way to church and they said to him, "We can't help you right now, or we will be late. But we'll pray for you."

Not terribly helpful. It's all about priorities, isn't it? Jesus, on the other hand, would break the common rule of not working on the Sabbath so he could heal a crippled woman.

I had a pastor friend in Florida who said, "That's not Christianity, that's more like 'religianity.'" It's a made up word but you get the point. This 'religianity' loves self-made people. 19th century theologian and minister Joseph Parker once said to someone who boasted of being a self-made man: "Well, that relieves the Lord of a great responsibility."

These self-made religionists lack love and character. They love the spotlight. They love to be seen. They love themselves more than God. Something is missing, and you know what it is?

Jesus. Jesus is missing. With Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives we can get rid of the hypocrisy and false religion. We become humble, grateful, gracious, and loving...

A man was being tailgated on a busy boulevard. Suddenly, the light turned yellow just in front of him. He did the right thing – he stopped at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by speeding through the intersection.

The tailgater hit the roof -- and the horn -- missing the chance to get through the intersection, screaming obscenities and gesturing angrily.

As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, finger-printed, and photographed, and then placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind you while you were honking your horn, and flipping off the guy in front of you, and I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do?' bumper sticker, the 'Follow Me to Sunday School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car!"

There's a place for us in the band, but our job is to play rhythm guitar and let Jesus be the front man. Christ is the focus, not us; and His is the song we should sing.

Amen.