

“Where You See Humility, there You See God” based on Micah 3:5-12, Matthew 23:1-13
Delivered on November 1, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

On Saturday night, I made homemade matzo for the fourth straight month for communion. It's become a rather simple exercise for me these last three months. I put the flour in a small bowl and add a small amount of water. Then I mix it with my fingers until it makes a relatively dry ball of dough. I run that dough through my pasta maker, slowly reducing the thickness, until finally, a really thin sheet of dough comes out. I place that dough on a piece of parchment paper, perforate it a little and put the tray in the oven. Six minutes later at 500 degrees and voila, there is matzo. I know what to do now, and I can expect the same results every time.

Now, to be perfectly clear, I know that my matzo is not perfect, but I'm proud of it. I can realize at 10 p.m. on a Saturday night that I hadn't remembered communion, and churn this out in less than 15 minutes. Or I can remember, and plan ahead, and the end result is the same, and no one needs to know if I forgot. The fact of the matter is that I can rely on the process. I know the rules. I know how it works and can guarantee the results.

I think we as human beings like things like this. We like having results that we can depend on. We want solutions that are exact and precise. It's the scientific method. You have a theory or a problem to solve, you take action, observe the results, and repeat, until you can do it again and again. There is a comfort in those results.

Last week, we saw that when the Pharisees asked Jesus about a Greatest Commandment, he told them, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength,' and then he added, 'Love your neighbor as yourself. This sums up the law.' After that answer, Matthew says the Pharisees stopped asking questions. You see, for the Pharisees, the law was central to their Jewish identity. If you kept the law, you were in fact a faithful child of Israel, and God would reward you in the afterlife.

In Christian circles, we often start to make the Pharisees out to be the 'bad guys,' in part because of texts like today's, where Jesus is really very hard on them. We tend to imagine ourselves in this scenario as being the faithful Christian, one of the Apostles following Jesus and learning from him, and not one of those misguided and confused Pharisees. We say the people we disagree with must be the Pharisees. I think this is a very dangerous reading of the scriptures. And when we do exalt ourselves like this, we prove only one thing, that we are, in fact, the Pharisees.

You see, as harsh as it seems Jesus is toward the Pharisees in this text, we have to remember that Matthew is writing this gospel to Pharisees, or at least their followers. That is to say he is writing this account of Jesus to a mostly Jewish audience, and if he wrote it around or shortly after the fall of the temple in 70 AD, then his Jewish readers would have been followers of the Pharisees. The fall of the temple was the end of the Sadducees.

We read this now, as if we're enlightened Christians, who can see the Pharisaic traits in others, but early readers may have first seen themselves not in the apostles, but in the Pharisees. In fact, when you see people calling Jesus 'rabbi,' it's like they are assuming he is a Pharisee. Rabbi is Aramaic and Hebrew for teacher and it was the title for Pharisee leaders.

The Pharisees were the first century pastors for the common, ordinary Jewish person. They taught people how to interpret the bible in a rapidly changing world. Rome's occupation of Judea made life very uncomfortable for the Jews, especially in the last few years under Pontius Pilate, and Rome's roads made it very tempting to find new opportunity. But the Jewish people wanted to maintain their worship, and not give in to worship of the empire or false gods. So, the Pharisees set up synagogues everywhere, and helped the people remain faithful, by following the law personally, even without the temple.

In today's text, we see that Jesus's primary criticism was not about what they tried to do. Jesus affirms that the Pharisees do sit in Moses's seat. They are teaching the law. What Jesus objects to here is their hypocrisy in applying the law, and the primary motives of the Pharisaic leaders in first century Judea to exalt themselves. So, what we see is not an indictment of those who follow Pharisees, and not even an indictment of all teachings by the Pharisees, but an indictment of the quest for power in leaders, those who make rules for others, but not themselves.

Living in 1st Century Judea was hard, and hope in a 'good' afterlife was probably appealing. So, when the Pharisees interpreted the law to be applied without the temple, and promised a way to be sure you would receive God's blessings after death, they became more and more popular, even if their laws were at times difficult to follow, and their standards were a burden to bear for ordinary folk. Still, the prospect of knowing for sure that God loved you, was worth giving these leaders authority over you.

In truth, this is not unlike the Christian church today, even though we often claim otherwise, as we point our finger at others. Even though we paint the Pharisees as the bad guys and boogymen who failed God, the truth is that the Reformation started with a critique of Roman Catholic indulgences and this is the 503rd anniversary of Martin Luther's objections to them. But indulgences were merely actions you could take, fees you could pay, not to get into heaven, but to limit your time in purgatory, and shorten your time in the waiting room before heaven.

Now, today, the sale of indulgences isn't really an issue, but across every denomination, we continue to sell assurances, as in, we peddle different formulas for salvation itself, things that we tell people to do to prove they are a Christian, prove they have faith, prove that they have salvation. We do this, because like those first century Jewish commoners, life today is still hard and a 'good' afterlife is appealing. We want to know that we are in.

We want to know what we can do to be sure that we are loved by God. We know the promise of eternal life and the resurrection on the last day, and we know that Jesus said that he is the way, the truth and the life, but still, commands like 'Love God and love your neighbor,' well, they leave too much to interpretation. We want rules. Just having faith isn't enough, we want a conversion prayer to say to prove we have faith, we want something we can do, some ideology we can embrace, that shows we deserve what we want.

If we have a certain number of rules to follow and we can follow them perfectly, then surely, we can feel confident that we have done enough to have assurance, to know that we are among those whom God has called and will raise again. And so, like the Pharisee leaders then, modern Christian leaders now make official or unofficial lists of moral laws that are mostly good.

These are sins to avoid, good works to do, behaviors – the kind that we expect to see in a 'good' Christian. The rank-and-file Christian is made to feel like if you are not falling in line, you may be failing, and forgiveness is rarely emphasized, for fear it might be taken as license to sin. But then if a leader does not follow the rules, then that's when forgiveness suddenly becomes the emphasis, to forgive the leader.

This is what Jesus is criticizing in today's scripture, not the actual teachings themselves, but the arrogance of the leaders that they think they deserve titles and honors, when they are putting burdens on others, but never helping to carry them. Jesus is warning his apostles not to be like this when they are leaders. Jesus says the Pharisees and scribes use the law for their power, in that they lock people out of the Kingdom of Heaven, yet, they do not go into the Kingdom themselves, and they try to stop others from going in.

This is the first of a series of 'woes' that parallel the beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12, which were a consolation to the people who had no power, no influence or authority, and now these 'woes' are warnings from Jesus to those who have power, have influence and seek authority. This one parallels, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, the kingdom of heaven is theirs.' When Jesus calls the poor in spirit, they are the humble, exhausted, and poor in the world, and he calls them 'blessed.'

In this passage, he warns the exalted, the proud, the wealthy in this world of their sins. Indeed, the beatitudes exalted all those who were humble, and now Jesus is humbling those who were exalted. God is with the humble people because they seek God, not the exalted rulers who seek themselves.

That is the heart of the good news, that God does not expect us to earn God's love. God's love is freely given, and when we are humble enough to accept that love, and respond to that love in repentance, turning to God and away from sins, then we know the presence of God in our lives, and truly understand that God is with us.

This is why Jesus fulfilled the law, not by expecting us to meet its every precept, instead, God came down to us, to share in our humanity, live as we live in every way but sin. This revealed for us both God's very self and the fullness of our own humanity. Jesus humbly laid down power to serve us, going to the Roman cross to die, and then rising to new life as the first of the new creation. This revealed that by his death our sins are covered up, or atoned for, and we are made righteous not by what we accomplish, but by what Jesus accomplished for us.

The law is not for us to earn salvation, but summed up by a command to love God and neighbor. This is so that we might know the love of God who loved us first as revealed on the cross. Then we respond with our love for God and our love for one another to share in the work God has prepared for us to reconcile all things to him. We share in the work. We do not earn this but receive it. We receive the Holy Spirit, as we become the temple, where God's love is poured out.

There are times, I'd rather just have a list of things I have to do to make God happy. Then I could do the bare minimum and proudly boast that I've accomplished it. But as Paul warns us, by this we would be bragging that we earned salvation. This is what the prophet Micah warns the city of Jerusalem about, because they think that since they have the temple, they are more beloved by God than others and safer. But in this, they push God's presence away in their arrogance. They see peace as when they are well fed, and make war against the less powerful, becoming rich by perverting equity.

Where you see humility, there is where you can see God's presence exalted. Where you see arrogance, you see God's presence pushed away. Friends, we must turn to the word of God, which is first our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Word of God made flesh, who commands us to love one another. We must be humble enough to let go of our desire for control, humble enough to receive God's love without thinking we have to earn it. We must be humble enough to admit that we do not deserve it. Yes, we must be humble enough to repent of our sins, not by making excuses for them, but by turning away from them, and toward our God.

The Pharisees sat on the seat of Moses, but God in Jesus fulfilled the law on our behalf, not to give us license to sin and do whatever we want, or to act as if sin doesn't exist. No, instead we are empowered to love without fear of what it costs in this world, without regard to our power by this world's standards, because Jesus has already paid the price. Jesus has already defeated sin and death for you and me, all of us, so that like Jesus, we might be humble servants, and rise to new life in the new creation. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

(Matthew 23:1-12 NRSV) Then ***Jesus*** said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the ***Pharisees sit*** on Moses' ***seat***; therefore, do whatever they teach you and ***follow*** it; but do not do as they do, for they do not ***practice*** what they ***teach***. 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; for they ***make*** their phylacteries ***broad*** and their fringes ***long***. They ***love*** to have the ***place*** of ***honor*** at banquets and the best seats in the ***synagogues***, and to be ***greeted*** with ***respect*** in the marketplaces, and to have ***people*** call them rabbi. But you are not to be called ***rabbi***, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And ***call*** no one your father on ***earth***, for you have one ***Father***--the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one ***instructor***, the ***Messiah***. The ***greatest*** among you will be your servant. All who ***exalt*** themselves will be humbled, and all who ***humble*** themselves will be exalted. But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you ***lock*** people out of the ***kingdom*** of ***heaven***. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you ***stop*** them.