

Practice What You Preach
Sermon on Matthew 23:1-12 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, October 30, 2005

For many people who are not yet Christians, hypocrisy is a huge obstacle. “The church is full of hypocrites,” our critics say with a measure of truth. They remind us that Jesus spoke out against hatred and vengefulness and small-mindedness and point out that many Christians they know are hateful, vengeful, small-minded people. And that no doubt has a measure of truth. But to have Christianity rise or fall on what Kenneth Richard Samples calls the “ethical inconsistency” of some—perhaps even most—Christians is not at all reasonable. As the Christian apologist John Warwick Montgomery once quipped, “If Albert Einstein were arrested for shoplifting, would that make $E=mc^2$ wrong?”¹ The ethical inconsistency argument grows out of a misconception—popular even among many Christians—that Christianity is primarily a set of rules, which, if we follow them, will make us good people. If that is true, then hypocrisy becomes *the* mortal sin. Failing to follow the rules leads to the demise of Christianity.

But our faith is not primarily about following the rules. The theologian Alistair McGrath puts it this way: “Christianity is a strongly ethical faith. This does not, however, mean that Christianity is about a set of rules, in which Christians mechanically conform to a set of instructions. Rather, it is about a set of values which arises from being redeemed.”² Being a disciple of Jesus means believing that God came among us as Jesus of Nazareth to restore a relationship that had been broken by sin and to include us in God’s work of redeeming the world. And so we live in obedience to Christ’s commands both because we are redeemed and so that we can be a part of that redeeming work. The church is the redeemed and redeeming community.

¹ From “An Answer to the Hypocrisy Excuse” by Kenneth Richard Samples, originally published in *Facts & Faith*, reprinted at <http://www.augustinefellowship.org/augustinefellowship/resource/00000007.shtml?main>.

² Alistair E. McGrath, *An Introduction to Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), xix-xx, quoted by Samples.

And because you and I as followers of Jesus called Christians are a part of that redeemed and redeeming community, we must practice what we preach. We must practice what we preach not simply to avoid our critics' charge of hypocrisy, but because Jesus calls us to it.

It started out strangely enough. After numberless hours of debating with them, refuting their application of the law, and pointing out how misguided they were, "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; ...'" (Mt. 22:1-3a). It must have caused a lot of head-scratching on the part of the disciples. Here was Jesus, conceding that the scribes and the Pharisees, the two groups largely responsible for the day-to-day governance of the Jewish people, were actually entitled to just a little R-E-S-P-E-C-T. They continued in Moses' office of interpreting the will of God as it was revealed in the law, and by sitting in Moses' seat, they exercised a teaching authority. To that extent, people were to "do whatever they teach and follow it." But that's where Jesus drew the line.

"Do not do as [the scribes and the Pharisees] do," Jesus warned, "for they do not practice what they teach" (Mt. 23:3b). Don't be the hypocrites that these people are, Jesus says. The word hypocrite comes from the Greek word meaning actor, one who wears a mask and plays a part. All too often, the Pharisaic approach to religion involved people in the show, not the substance, of faith. Truly this was a matter of "Do as they say, but not as they do."

For the scribes and the Pharisees had made a well-intentioned mess of things. First, they imposed heavy burdens on others that they themselves were unwilling to bear. That burden was obeying perfectly the 613 rules, regulations, and ordinances of the Law of Moses. Not only the laws but also their customs of observance had become tedious and too difficult to obey. The regimen was overly demanding, the rules too strict. As Tom Long says, "no human being could

possibly accomplish them; no one could ever hope to keep the full weight of all these laws and carry the heavy freight of this ethical load...”³

Second, their deeds were all for show; they wanted to seem and be seen as pious by virtue of their prominent displays of public devotion. Robert H. Smith calls the scribes and Pharisees “peacocks of piety” who strutted and preened and “perform[ed] in hopes of attracting admiring stares.”⁴ To do so, they wore “broad phylacteries” and “long fringes.” Phylacteries were small cases containing scraps of paper inscribed with the words of the law which men would bind to their upper arms and foreheads to indicate that the law was—almost literally—on their heart and mind. The fringes were tassels on the four corners of a man’s prayer shawl demonstrating that he was bound to the law. Although phylacteries and tassels were called for in the law and were meant to remind the faithful of their covenant with God, Jesus said they had become fashion statements. The same thing has happened to the cross. I was at a luncheon this week attended by Christians from all denominations, and at the end of lunch there was a drawing for an 18-karat gold cross pendant encrusted with rubies and sapphires, the value of which we were repeatedly told, was \$4000. Is the cross a decorative or devotional piece, a sign of value or victory?

Third, the religious leaders craved the honor, praise, and respect due to people of their important office. And who doesn’t love to have the place of honor at banquets, or the best seats in church, to be greeted with respect in public and have people address us with our titles? Now here, as a friend and student of mine would say, Jesus gets to meddlin’. What Jesus is criticizing is a “reserved parking space mentality,”⁵ the sense that the world owes us something because we’re good enough, we’re smart enough, and gosh darn it, people like us. The desire to lead others had given way to a desire to be loved and praised and adored by others.

³ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 259.

⁴ Robert H. Smith, *Matthew*, Augsburg New Testament Commentary (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 271.

⁵ Long, 260.

But you, says Jesus, you disciples and potential disciples and all who want to follow me, don't be like the scribes and Pharisees. Don't be like them not because they aren't nice people or even because all too often they are hypocrites. Don't be like them because they are missing what is really going on. While they are out looking for someone to teach them the way of life, God has already sent that person to us. That teacher, that instructor is Jesus, sent to us in love by the Father who is in heaven.

And what do we learn from Jesus, our Teacher and Messiah? We learn that Jesus invites those "who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens" to come to him, for he will give rest. And having given over our heavy burdens to Jesus, he invites us to take his yoke upon us, for his yoke is easy and his burden is light (Mt. 11:28-30). Of course, in taking on the yoke of Jesus, we agree to be obedient to the law and wisdom of God, we submit to God's direction and will for our lives. Tom Long explains, "The yoke of Jesus is easy and his burden is light because it is the way of God, and it is profoundly satisfying to the human soul."⁶

We learn that following Jesus is going to involve some surprising moves. The way of God is not the way of upward mobility, career advancement, or self-fulfillment. Those who seek greatness, says Jesus, will find it not in leading others but in serving others, for "The greatest among you will be your servant" (Mt. 22:11). "True greatness," says R. T. France, "is to be found in being little, true importance in being unimpressive."⁷ Indeed, sings Paul in Philippians 2, Jesus was like God in every respect—a very impressive thing—but Jesus emptied himself of all the rights, privileges, and titles that came with being God, and "taking the form of a slave ... humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (vv.6-8).

⁶ Long, 132.

⁷ France, 270-271.

The good news is that the story of Jesus did not end at the cross or with his death. God raised Jesus to new life and restored to him all the rights, privileges, and titles he had willingly given up in order to serve us. And so we can claim the truth of Jesus' promise, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Mt. 22:12).