

Dr. Randy Working
Christ Presbyterian Church
January 31, 2010

Okay, this passage is officially scary. It doesn't take much imagination to hear Jesus criticizing pastors and elders. He says, “Watch out! These people are full of hot air. Full of bluster, concerned for themselves, impressed with their credentials, lording it over others.”

Matthew's gospel is about the themes of authority, and surprise. Jesus has authority because he is Emanuel, God-with-us, and he keeps surprising us with pictures of God's upside-down kingdom breaking in on us.

That good news of the kingdom challenges us to obey. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 7, Jesus said the one who hears his words and does them is wise. Or like Jesus tells his disciples again in the Upper Room,

“Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”
(John 13:17)

But that doesn't mean our faith is about following the rules. It's not about rules, it's about a relationship with Jesus. If you're redeemed, if you know Jesus, your life will look different. That's why we obey what Jesus tells us to do—so we can share in his kingdom work. It means God's people are redeemed—we're saved, born again, brought into a relationship with Jesus and into the family of God—and we're redeeming, sharing with God in his rescue operation to the world.

So if you follow Jesus, if you're a Christian, you're not just redeemed, you're called to be a part of a redeeming community. That means we have to practice what we preach. The passage we read today is the beginning of Jesus' fifth sermon or speech in the gospel, and it runs for three chapters. It ends the same way as the first speech, the Sermon on the Mount, with the phrase, “When Jesus had finished saying all these things” (26:1). But the Sermon on the Mount opens with blessing for the meek (5:3-12), and this speech opens with harsh words for the religious leaders. Jesus is saying in this passage that the religious leaders and the temple system were in big trouble, and were coming over judgment. Of course, if you felt oppressed by the powers in your time, you would've heard these as words of hope. God was going to make things right one day.

These words weren't just for the scribes and Pharisees. They were warnings for followers of Jesus, too. Just like for Jesus' first sermon, he meant these words for his followers as well as for the crowds (see 5:1-2; 7:28; 23:1). We're all used to using some kind of title of respect, like Professor, Pastor, Doctor, Mr., Mrs. All of us are being warned about pushing ourselves forward, clawing privileges for ourselves.

Let me touch of four issues of this text: *truth, integrity, motivation, and perspective.*

First, the truth issue: the tradition of the Pharisees was not all bad. (23:2-3)

Jesus began his teaching with the words,

"The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. (23:2-3)

It might have surprised you to hear Jesus say that. He had spent a big part of his ministry debating with them, freeing people from their strict interpretation of the law. But here he says, the leaders of the people were worthy of respect. Why? They continued the ancient office God gave to Moses, to teach God's word, to interpret his will.

Moses received God's word, and he wrote it down for Joshua and the elders of Israel. None of the law would pass away; Jesus already told his disciples,

I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter...will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:18-19)

The law is the Word of God, and it stands forever, says Jesus. Yes, certain regulations applied for the life of Israel and have been set aside—but the great center of Scripture always stands. Jesus said the heart of the Old Testament law was to:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40)

The scribes and Pharisees taught the law, upheld the Bible, valued the Word of God. That's a continuing need with God's people, and it's why the pastor's primary job in our tradition is to be a teaching elder, one who interprets the Bible and empowers God's people for their calling. Jesus says respect the scribes and Pharisees for that role. Do what they tell you to do. Obey them as they point to the Bible. But that's where you draw the line. He says,

"But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." (23:3)

The Pharisees were not putting faith into practice. They were filled with advice, concerned for others' obedience, but they failed to do it themselves. That's what faith is—like Jesus taught in the parable of the two sons in chapter 21—faith is actually doing what the Father wants. And so he warns us,

"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20)

That's a sharp warning for us, and that leads to the next point.

Second, the integrity issue: Beware of making others obey without doing it yourself. (23:4)

The scribes and Pharisees, Jesus says, crushed others under impossible religious demands, but didn't lift a finger to make it easier for others.

This is a tricky area. Because we're not to diminish God's commands, and we're not supposed to take lightly the need for holiness. But we constantly to lift up God's standards for sexual purity, for financial integrity, for guarding our tongue, for avoiding the gossip that can destroy a person's reputation and tear apart a church. The standards are high in the Christian life, and they're even more demanding of leaders. But we also have to come to the foot of the cross, to realize we're poor sinners in need of grace. We need compassion for others, speaking the truth, yes, but speaking it in love.

Jesus told his opponents, in trying so hard, they lost integrity—they laid burdens on others they couldn't keep themselves.

Third, the motivation issue: Beware of keeping the rules not to please God but to make yourself look good. (23:5)

The phylacteries were little leather boxes containing Scripture verses. Religious people wore these boxes on their foreheads and arms because of the passage in Deuteronomy,

"These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts... Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads." (Deuteronomy 6:8; see also Exodus 13:9, 16)

That was supposed to remind the people how God brought them out of slavery in Egypt. Pretty powerful symbol. The fringes were tassels on the four corners of the prayer shawl to remind them they were bound to the law. Good idea—except when you had the outer sign, but failed to really live up to what the law actually told you to do. Then it was too easy to do the outer thing, to maintain the respect of other people, but to lose the passion for making God happy.

Does that ever happen with a cross? It becomes just a piece of jewelry if it doesn't represent the way we live to please God, not ourselves. Do you ever see folks who talk the talk, but don't walk the walk? Do you ever find yourself trying to look better than you are? I think most of us succumb to that sometimes.

Keeping the rules in order to make yourself look good is the flip side of needing the good opinion of others. I can tell you that is a deadly trap. I see that temptation in the ministry. I'm coming to understand that I'm called to love those in my life and ministry, but not to please them, but to please the Lord. At the end of the day, we don't live for human praise, but for one thing alone. We do what we do for the reward of hearing the Lord say one day, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Fourth, the perspective issue: Beware of making human rules equal to God's laws. (23:9)

The Pharisees' traditions and interpretations had become as important to them as God's law. That's losing perspective. Do we ever do that?

We Presbyterians are famous for our constitution, which includes our Book of Confessions and our Book of Order. Our Book of Confessions is made up of faith statements from our history, like the Apostles' Creed, to help explain and interpret what the Bible says. It's a great book, a great part of our tradition. Those statements help us focus on the main thing, and help us stay attached to the mainstream Christian heritage through the ages. They're a faithful interpretation of God's Word, but they're not the Bible itself. Same for the Book of Order, a way we say what's most important to us, a way to order and give structure based on the Bible to help us know what we are to believe and to do. It's a help to us—but the Book of Order isn't God's Word. When we start putting that ahead of what God has clearly stated in Scripture, we lose perspective. It's what Jesus is getting at later in the chapter when he criticize the religiously serious. They're even tithing their spices! He says,

"You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness." (23:35)

Sometimes we put our regulations ahead of people, and when we do that we're dangerously missing the point. I think there's a picture of that that took place in Texas this past fall.

Abby Johnson was a young woman who worked for nine years as a director of the Planned Parenthood clinic in Bryan, Texas. She thought it was an appropriate career, because after all, abortions are legal in

our country. But it began to bother her that the organization was trying to do more and more abortions in order to make more profit.

Abby had thought that preventing pregnancies was Planned Parenthood's goal. But she said, "It seemed like maybe that's not what a lot of people were believing anymore, because that's not where the money was. The money wasn't in family planning, the money wasn't in prevention, the money was in abortion." And Abby said she had "a problem with that."

But the moment that really changed her heart was when she was called to help do an abortion procedure, not something she normally had to do. She had never watched the abortion on an ultrasound. She said, "I could see the whole profile of the baby...I could see the whole side profile. I could see the probe. I could see the baby try to move away from the probe....I just thought, 'What am I doing?'...And then I thought, 'Never again.'"

That caused a spiritual crisis for her. It wasn't long afterward that she saw some members of Coalition for Life outside praying. They weren't angry or making threats, just praying for life, and she walked out the clinic and over to them. She began to talk to them, and they prayed with her, and she broke down sobbing.

And so, after nine years as director of the clinic, Abby Johnson left in October to join the Coalition for Life, a group that prays outside that same clinic, a group she used to complain about.

The people at Planned Parenthood don't know how to respond. They accuse her of lying about why she quit, of stealing files, and can't imagine why anyone would be more concerned about what God thinks than what human laws allow. But Abby says she feels God's forgiveness, and his strength in her new resolve.

The thing is, the people in that Planned Parenthood clinic aren't the enemy. We're called to love them. And because God was pleased to answer some Christians' prayers, the director came to see things in the light of God's reality.

I think Abby Johnson's story reminds us, it's not about being well-dressed or well-liked or well-connected, it's about making the main thing the main thing, not putting our rules and regulations ahead of God's law, of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Like the prophet Micah says,

"And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

So Jesus' words remind us of the truth question, the integrity question, the motivation question, and the perspective question.

Truth: the scribes and Pharisees remind us of the weightiness of the Word of God.

Integrity: They show us the danger of worrying about the obedience of others while overlooking your own.

Motivation: They show the futility of keeping the rules not to please God but to look good.

Perspective: And they make clear how we must not put human preferences on the level of God's law.

Be careful about exalting ourselves, says Jesus, because we'll be humbled. Jesus loves you so much that he died to save you, and he went the way of the cross, humbling himself to die for us. But his story didn't end at the cross. God raised him to new life and gave Jesus the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord. And the good news is that those who humble themselves will be exalted. Jesus he lifts up the downcast, heals the brokenhearted, forgives the sinner. It's good news! We are brothers and sisters, we have a Father who will lift us up, and we have a home one day in heaven.