

Humble Hypocrisy

In the name of him who for us and for our salvation made himself the servant of all, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel lesson is one of those texts that if taken by itself out of the broader context of Jesus' teaching, is easy to misunderstand and misapply. On its own where Jesus says, "The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do" it sounds like he's saying that the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees is just peachy. The problem is the way they live out that teaching in their lives. They don't practice what they preach. So, do what they say but not what they do.

That, however, flies straight in the face of the multiple criticisms that Jesus has fired at the scribes and Pharisees specifically over what they were teaching. Jesus has repeatedly told his followers to beware of the leaven (that is the teaching) of the scribes and Pharisees and to reject it. It hardly makes sense that he's telling his followers to obey their instructions now. So, let's unpack this a little more carefully.

When Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees sit on the seat of Moses, he means that when you go to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, some fellow who belongs to one of those two groups is most likely going to be the guy who reads the Scripture lessons for the day. You will hear Moses through them. Thus, they sit on Moses' seat. And what you hear from them when they're reading the Scripture is solid gold. Keep and follow the words you hear. They are from God's mouth to your ears. In them is life and salvation.

The problem is with what the scribes and Pharisees do with those words afterward. What do they do? They teach and preach on them. They interpret them for you. They tell you how to apply them to your life. And that's where they go wrong. They don't know what they are talking about. It's like where elsewhere Jesus says of false teachers "By their fruit you shall know them." He doesn't mean that you'll know a false teacher if he says one thing and does something else. For goodness sake, pastors like me stand in pulpits and preach against all manner of sin week after week. And then we go out and commit all manner of sins. That doesn't make what we preach false. It simply means that we are sinners in need of God's grace and forgiveness like everyone else. No, the idea is that the fruit of a teacher is what he teaches; just like the fruit of a baker is bread and the fruit of an orchard owner is, well, fruit. A false teacher is identified by his false teaching.

And that's what the scribes and Pharisees were. And to be fair to them, they were actually doing a pretty good job of following the things they taught that were supposedly based on God's Word. What were they teaching? They were obsessed with obeying the letter of God's Law. And to ensure that they did, they built a complex hedge of rules and regulations around the Law that (in their minds, at least) kept them from even getting close to violating a commandment. So, for example, the Third Commandment is about honoring the Sabbath Day. On it you are to rest and do no work. That's what the command says. Ah, but what constitutes work? Exactly how many steps can you take? How heavy an object can you lift? How many chews can you take before you swallow? They came up with the answers to these and a thousand questions like them.

Let me give you another example that still lives on among religiously observant Jews today. There is a command in the Law of Moses that prohibits cooking a baby goat in its own

mother's milk. I'm not sure why God commanded it. It may have something to do with it being inappropriate and perhaps a bit cruel to cook an animal in that which was meant to feed and nourish it. It doesn't matter. In the mind of someone who thinks like a Pharisee, this means that you may never combine meat and dairy products in the same meal. Cheeseburger? Pizza with sausage or pepperoni? Gyros with yogurt sauce? Forget it. In fact, in a kosher kitchen they have two complete sets of dishes and utensils: one set to be used with meat and the other with dairy products. And the two must be kept completely separate. The fear is that a bit of residual grease from meat might accidentally come into contact with something containing milk or cheese. And then you'd be in violation of the law. Believe it or not, they even have rules about how many hours after eating a meat or dairy product you must wait before eating something that contains the other. Again, the fear is that there may be a bit of something leftover in your mouth that may come into prohibited contact and thus put you in violation of the command.

Yes, it's nuts. But imagine rules on top of the rules like that for all the commandments of God and you'll have a pretty good idea about what the scribes and Pharisees were teaching – and to the best of their ability, obeying.

The question is: Why? And it's here that we often go wrong when we think about the scribes and Pharisees. We assume that they did all this mostly so that they could prove themselves righteous in the sight of God. There may have been an element of that, but Jesus makes it clear that the main reason they did it was to prove themselves better than other people. It was all about the show. And all these outward rules made it easy to evaluate exactly how observant or not each other person was. The rules gave you a multitude of categories and ways in which to judge others and to compare yourself to them. They created an elaborate pecking order on the relative righteousness scale. And of course, the scribes and Pharisees were on the top of it. But even among themselves, there was a pecking order of relative righteousness.

Thus Jesus says of them, "They make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long." These are more examples of their very literalistic approach to the Law. There's a place where Moses speaking of the commands of God tells the people to "bind them on your forehead and tie them to your hands." It's a figurative way of saying think about them constantly and do them. But the Pharisees said that's not enough. If the law says to tie the commands to our foreheads, then that's what we have to do. That's what a phylactery is: they're little black boxes that contain passages of Scripture that observant Jews actually tie to their foreheads and forearms with leather straps. They wear them when worshipping or praying. And again, it's all about the outward display of obedience. Look at me! See how dedicated to the law I am? Oh, and my phylacteries are bigger than yours. That makes me better than you!

But let's not deceive ourselves. Criticizing Pharisees for their narrow-minded obsession with rules is like shooting fish in a barrel. Worse, it's a way to judge ourselves better than them – which means, we are playing the same game. It's just that we have a different set of rules. Some are written, some not; but we all do it. We judge others and think of ourselves as more righteous than they are. For our own faults we have excuses and alibis. For others we have only condemnation. Did you see what she was wearing? Showing a little too much skin, if you ask me. And she should probably move up to a larger size. I can't believe he bought that new car; there's no way he can afford it. He sure doesn't know how to handle his money. You know, I wish that couple would learn how to discipline their kids. I think they have too many of them anyway.

Yes, self-appointed judges, juries, and executioners: that's what we are. Of course, we are far more subtle about it. We know that obvious displays of self-righteousness and judging others are frowned upon. Humility is a Christian virtue to strive for. And so, we pretend to be humble. That's what we want others to see in us. My humility is deeper and more sincere than yours. Thus, the title of today's sermon: humble hypocrisy. And we're all guilty of it.

I've said before that sinners cannot be humble. Our pride won't allow it. But we can be humbled. That's what the Law of God is supposed to do to us. It's to reveal our hidden sins and faults mostly to ourselves. The Law is to show you that in you dwells no good thing, that you have no righteousness, that your heart is filled with sin. It is not given as a standard by which you are to compare yourself with others. All such comparisons are harmful to your faith in Jesus who alone is your righteousness. And so, when you find yourself making comparisons and casting judgments on others, the task is to stop looking at them and see that the real problem is with you and your sinful desire to judge yourself superior. That, in turn, will bring true humility and repentance. And that will make you rely more on Jesus who suffered and died to save you from your sin.

This goes a long way to explain the second part of today's Gospel lesson in which Jesus speaks of not using titles of respect or honor like rabbi (which means "great one") or father or instructor. We need to understand that Jesus is here using what's called "hyperbole". It's an exaggeration to stress a point – like when he says if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. I'm sure that when Jesus was growing up, he called Mary "mother" and Joseph "father", and that he called the synagogue leader in Nazareth "rabbi".

The point that Jesus is making is that the law of God is the great leveler. No one of us is greater or more important or more righteous than any other. Each and every one of us stands before God naked and ashamed. And all of us who are in Christ are equally covered by the blood he shed for us. And when you see and understand that, you will look at others differently: not as people to judge on some imagined scale of goodness on which you'll come out on top, but rather as brothers and sisters in Christ who have needs – needs that God has given you the ability to meet. The question on your mind then will be not "How can I judge you?" but "How can I serve you?" That's what it means to be conformed to the mind of Christ: to think of others as he thinks of them – as people to love and to serve. That's true humility worthy of exaltation. May God grant it to you and to all of us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!