

November 3, 2019 Walking With Jesus Matthew 23:1-12

Walking with Jesus is not necessarily an easy way. At the beginning of this 23rd chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Matthew gives us a glimpse of just how great the divide was between Jesus and some of the religious leadership of the Jewish people. It begins with something that would have probably made the Pharisees smile...perhaps even puff out their chests a little bit. Jesus addressed the crowds that gathered to hear HIM, and the disciples who have bound themselves to HIM. You need to understand that when Jesus called people to follow HIM, HE called them to follow HIM in word and deed. They were expected to accept HIS teaching, and to follow HIS example in conduct. That they stayed with Jesus for the balance of HIS three year ministry is the best evidence they understood that and accepted the conditions of discipleship.

Jesus begins by saying, "The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees sit in Moses seat." It is high praise indeed. He is saying they have the responsibility of leadership and shepherding that Moses did during the Exodus, and the journey in the wilderness. He is telling HIS audience to give them the respect they deserve. And lest HE be misunderstood, Jesus immediately added, "Obey them. Do what they tell you to do." The Pharisees were Biblical scholars. Teachers and preachers. What Jesus indicates is that HE has little quarrel with them when it comes to doctrinal issues. He respects their reverence

for and devotion to the teachings of the Law and the prophets, the bulk of the Old Testament Scriptures. He is saying in these matters they are fundamentally sound. If you are a Pharisee in the audience, and you can count on the fact that there were Pharisees in the audience, their response would tend to be, "So far, so good! Thank you very much."

But here comes the verbal cuff across the back of the head. "Do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." This is what Jesus called and calls hypocrisy. Saying one thing and doing another. Jesus specifically charges them with creating great burdens, spiritual burdens which produce a sense of guilt, real burdens, duties, responsibilities, but they were not willing to help people carry out those duties, nor were they particularly careful about setting the example....failing to live the life they called for in their public statements about God and community. In our ordinary speech we say, they talked a good game, but they failed to walk the walk. In verse 13 Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, "Woe to you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!"

In verse 5 Jesus condemns them for that hypocrisy. "Everything they do, (not everything they say), everything they do is for men to see." They are concerned most of all about their image, what they are believed to be, as opposed to what they are. They are not transparent. While they are quick to share what is on their minds, they are not quick to reveal their

souls, their hearts, the person they are as seen by the Holy, Almighty, and redeeming God.

Jesus points out that there are two details that illustrate this hypocrisy. In Exodus 13, Deuteronomy 6, Deuteronomy 11, God calls on HIS people to bind HIS words as a sign on their hands and between their eyes. Obviously the meaning of those words is that they should take God's words very seriously. The Pharisees reduced such a command to an ornament. They created leather capsules with a verse of Scripture inside them, and sewed them to their cuffs, and put them on a head band so that they hung between their eyes. It was not about obedience or submission, both of which have to do with humility, it was rather a way of publicly proclaiming that they were holy men who had made great sacrifices to hold office. Jesus says their creed was better than their public behavior. Listen to them, but do not do what they do.

The Law also commanded them to wear tassels and attach blue cord to the corners of their garments as reminders that they are to be a distinctive people, a special people, God's chosen people. The Pharisees turned that into a style statement. Longer tassels. Outstanding blue cords that were extremely attractive....they were making a statement. From time to time I get asked why I do not wear the black shirt and collar as the appropriate ministerial garb. I wish I could tell you there are deep theological convictions involved in that decision. In fact when I was involved in full time ministry in Pickering I

faced a choice. When I graduated from seminary decades ago I bought a vest that attached a collar fairly painlessly. In 1983 when I began serving in Pickering it needed replacement, the fabric of the vest was separating where I have always had a bit of a roll. I also needed a new suit because my former Sunday dress-up was fraying at the cuffs. Because the vest was tailor made, and the suit was off the rack, they were equal in price. That is when and the why, I started wearing white shirts which I had, and ties which I owned. And money was tight. I would hope I am known for my faith, and faithfulness, rather than the style of my “uniform.”

Jesus was familiar with the Pharisees’ attitude. If they went to a banquet, they not only delighted in, but expected to be seated at the head table. One of the things that delights me about our pot luck suppers is this: no head table where the Officers of the Congregation sit. I delight in finding a place to sit among you, near you, with you. Reputation is not built by being the most visible person in the room, but rather by being counted as someone the people in the room can depend upon when there is singular need. And do not misunderstand I am not saying I am better than the Pharisee...I know something about my own sins, I am saved only by the grace of God, through faith in Jesus...as are you. As are we.

Jesus gets to the matter of titles. They love to be called Rabbi. They love to be met in the marketplace and greeted by the title of Rabbi. We tend to use titles as Presbyterians and

Protestants. Reverend. Or even Doctor...although I must admit I tend to think of that one as descriptive. I hold a degree. But what Jesus says on this matter of titles is, "You have only one Master and you all are brothers." We would be foolish to assume there were no women present. And no one in the Biblical collection of documents was as gracious toward women as was Jesus. And Jesus was never careless with language. So what is HIS point.

We all have one Master. That is what Jesus said. It is clear to me that HE is referring to HIMSELF. If we have any faith at all, we all serve one Master, the Lord Jesus. The Reverend, the Preacher, the Teacher, even Doctor Mitchell. If we believe in Jesus, HE is our Master, our Lord and our God. From the least in the pew to the greatest in the pulpit we are first and foremost servants of Jesus, when it comes the Kingdom of God. And we are all brothers. That should never be understood as women do not count. Too often it has been. Nor should it mistakenly be taken to mean the women of the church must become like the men of the church. God forbid. We men have proven our ability to mess it up. No! Jesus is saying something much more profound. His apostle Paul would years later verbalize it in his letter to the Colossians as "in Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew (race does not count) slave nor free (class does not count) male nor female (gender is not the issue) for all are one in Christ. Brothers who stand together. Brothers who work together. Brothers who defend one another. And we would be as foolish as the Pharisee, dangling a Bible verse in a

leather pouch between our eyes, if we thought that word said something about the superiority of one sex over the other.

Jesus wound up this part of his discourse, Matthew tells us, by saying, “whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” By the way, my first choice of a title for this message was “OOPS!” I am learning a lesson I think. We can sometimes like the Pharisee take things too literally. Jesus says we are a band of brothers. Something to think about as we attempt to walk with Jesus.

Let us pray;

Once more I am using the words of a hymn for the prayer this morning. I used to think of it as a rather light hymn, I am beginning to think it is rather profound. It is number 641 in our Book of Praise. Let us pray;

Dearest Lord Jesus;

One more step along the world I go

One more step along the world I go

From the old things to the new,

Keep me travelling along with you.

And it's from the old I travel to the new...

Keep me travelling along with you.

Amen.