

Scripture:

Matthew 23:1-12

“Practice what you preach.”

Today in Matthew’s gospel we have the beginning of the harshest ----- most pointed ---- admonishing and accusatory speech that Jesus ever spoke.

It wasn’t everyday that Jesus tore into people --- but boy oh boy does he ever in Matthew 23.

The first 12 verses that we’ll focus on this morning are merely the beginning of what quickly turns into the equivalent of Jesus tearing a strip off the teachers of the law and the Pharisees.

If we read through the rest of Matthew 23 we see that Jesus really lays into the teachers and Pharisees ----- He doesn’t hold back anything --- He lays it on the line and tells them what He thinks of how they are living.

Indeed he calls them some pretty harsh names ----- describing them as -----
 ----- children of Hell in verse 15 --- children of hell ----
 ----- blind fools in verse 17 ----- as well as blind guides twice in verses 19
 and 24
 ----- in verses 13, 15, 23,25,27,28 and 29 ----- for a total of 7 times Jesus refers to them as hypocrites ---- and we’ll get to what He means by hypocrite in a minute ---- because when Jesus uses this term it means something significantly different than what we often think.

But for now ----- children of hell ----- blind fools and blind guides ---- hypocrites ----- and as if that’s not enough He also refers to them as snakes ---- and a brood of vipers in verse 33.

Pretty harsh --- negative ----- cut to the core --- words ----- Jesus uses.

Think about it for a minute ----- Jesus Christ calling someone a child from hell ----- if that doesn’t raise an eyebrow I’m not sure what would --- and yet that’s exactly what Jesus says in a controlled and pointed way ---- to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees.

And curiously enough even though He calls them out on their behaviour ---- He does say listen to them and do everything they tell you.

Verse 3 ---- “So you must be careful to do everything they tell you.”

Listen to them ----- do what they tell you ---- these children of hell --- these blind fools ---- these hypocrites --- these brood of vipers.

But ----- and we do well to always pay attention to whatever is said after the word but ----- in scripture and in life.

Do as they say ----- **but** -----

“But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.”

“.....do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.”

And then Jesus goes on to talk about how they do things just to make themselves look good and get noticed.

They make their ---- “phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long.....”

Chances are some of us are asking ---- O.K. but what is a phylactery ----- phylacteries were little boxes which you wore on your left arm and on your forehead ---- which contained pieces of parchment with scripture verses written on them ---- they were traditionally worn for morning prayer and worship.

And tassels were well tassels ---- an ornamental piece of clothing that would clearly indicate that you were someone special --- someone to be revered and respected.

In essence phylacteries and tassels --- were like wearing buttons or placards that read ----- I’m doing something important ----- I’m someone important -- - look at me --- take notice of me.

Now --- in their defense it wasn’t all that unusual for people in their position to wear these items --- what is unusual is that --- at least according to Christ

----- theirs were wider and longer than usual --- bigger than the norm --- more gaudy you might say.

They wore enlarged ones --- and in all likelihood they probably wore oversized ones in settings where it was borderline inappropriate if not outright inappropriate ----- that's likely why Christ took issue with them wearing them.

There is a time and a place for these things to be worn and then there is a time and a place for these things to be taken off and it seems the teachers and the Pharisees had lost perspective.

“The greatest among you will be called servant” ----- Jesus said in verse 11.

And He followed this up saying ----- “For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” --- verse 13.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees were doing the exact opposite of what Jesus desires.

Instead of being humble and having servant hearts --- they were exalting themselves ----- drawing attention to themselves ---- doing things so that people would take notice of them and laud them.

They had become focused on looking like they were doing good things instead of actually doing good and faithful things.

They were concerned mostly with their appearance ---- with creating a public image ---- and upholding and growing it even --- making them selves look like they were holy and praiseworthy --- fine examples of the faithfulness to God they read about in the scriptures and interpreted as teachers of the law.

They had become more concerned with how they appeared to other people -- ---- as opposed to who they actually were on the inside --- when nobody was looking.

They had become more concerned with their public persona than their true inner self.

They wanted people to look on them as Holy in order to generate prestige and status for themselves.

They were posturing ----- and play acting as opposed to actually living out.

And this idea of posturing and play acting is crucial.

I mentioned that along with calling them children of hell ----- blind fools and blind guides ---- as well as a brood of vipers ---- Jesus refers to them 7 times as hypocrites.

More than anything else Jesus keeps returning to calling them hypocrites.

Hypocrites.

Talk about a powerful ---- and derogatory word --- hypocrite.

No one ever wants to be described as a hypocrite.

Anyone ever aspire to be called a hypocrite?

So ---- what is a hypocrite --- besides being a very negative put down and insult --- what does it mean to say someone is a hypocrite?

I think we can all likely agree that when we think of a hypocrite we think of something along the lines of ---- someone who says one thing and does another.

Someone who says one thing and does another ---- that's kind of a basic --- definition of a hypocrite right.

And it's fairly accurate --- at least in our day and age.

But hypocrite in this context --- in the time of Christ ---- means something far more powerful and cutting as well --- it's more than just someone who says one thing and does another.

Yes part of what Jesus means in calling the teachers of the law and the Pharisees hypocrites --- has to do with saying one thing and then doing

another --- Jesus does talk about practicing what you preach --- but there's more.

At the time of Christ ----- hypocrite --- was far more of a technical term.

A hypocrite was a technical term for actors or rhetoricians --- people in Greek society who gave public performances.

They were actors --- and speakers --- people who stood up in front of people --- and played a part --- pretended to be someone other than themselves.

This kind of changes what Jesus meant in calling them hypocrites doesn't it.

Some commentators argue that Jesus likely knew a little Greek and used this very specific Greek term in a crafty way in order to capture this idea of play acting --- getting up on stage in front of people and pretending --- play acting ----- which of course always ends in applause --- exaltation and praise ----- attention drawing behaviour.

I can't help but think Jesus knew exactly what He was saying in using the term hypocrite ----- saying one thing and doing another --- not practicing what you preach ---- and play acting ---- play acting that ultimately seeks applause and adulation.

Clearly Jesus wants to stress that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees got up in front of people and acted ----- did things with the hopes of being noticed and getting applauded for their efforts.

Things like wearing elaborately ornate clothing --- wide phylacteries and long tassels.

Kind of sounds like they almost wore something like costumes doesn't it.

They loved the place of honour at banquets----- they liked to be in places where they got noticed.

Kind of sounds like a stage for actors doesn't it.

And actors often get seats of honour by adoring fans don't they.

They loved to be greeted with respect in the marketplace --- in public.

In other words they like to be greeted and treated like celebrities.

Again kind of sounds like stages and actors --- a performance.

Being exalted ----- as opposed to serving --- and being humble.

They wanted to have and maintain an image --- a persona ----- they wanted to play act --- be a hypocrite ---- on a stage in a costume.

As opposed to being humble and having a servant heart.

They didn't practice what they preached --- and they preached --- in the very literal sense.

They taught in the synagogues.

And we know this because we are told they sat in Moses' seat.

By the seat of Moses Jesus confirms that they had the authority to teach and to preach.

And that is precisely why --- even though they are mere play actors and hypocrites ---- they must be obeyed --- "so you must be careful to do everything they tell you." --- Jesus says.

The law they taught and read and preached on ---- was the scriptures ---- our Old Testament.

And at that time that would have been the only opportunity many people would have had to hear the law --- the scriptures.

So Jesus says ----- "Listen to them and be careful to do everything they tell you --- because what they preach and teach --- is God's Word ---- the scriptures."

But --- and remember --- we always pay attention to what comes after the but.....

But ---- Jesus says ----- it's not enough.

It's not enough to just talk about faithfulness.

It's not enough to just talk about being a humble servant of God ----- and then turn around and do the exact opposite --- exalting yourself --- sitting in the place of honour at the banquet ---- taking the most important seat in the synagogue ----- wearing wide and long ornate pieces of clothing --- drawing attention to yourself in public places --- and so on.

Play acting ----- creating a stage ----- and image ---- and persona for yourself --- exalting yourself.

Part of what this passage reminds us is that Jesus is critical of leaders that build themselves up and visibly separate themselves in conscious intentional ways.

Part of what this passage reminds us is that ----- Leadership that is Christian leadership is all about discipleship.

Leadership that is Christian leadership is all about following Jesus on His path and participating in His work and ministry of building a faithful and just community of inclusive love and fellowship.

Leadership that is Christian leadership is about being called into relationships that are infused with humility and the ability to forgive one another ----- building mutual relationships born out of love and compassion --- not prestige --- posturing ----- and play acting.

Jesus was a far greater leader and teacher and preacher --- and of course so much more ----- that any of the teachers of the law or the Pharisees would ever be ---- or could ever even imagine.

Unlike them He practiced what He preached.

Unlike them He didn't draw attention to Himself ----- or want seats of honour --- or recognition --- to be exalted.

Unlike them He was gentle and humble in heart.

Jesus can't stand the pretense and sham of these leaders.

They try to take something that is false and empty and present it as genuine and true.

Their lives give no evidence that they take seriously the very law --- the very scriptures ---- about which they endlessly debate.

And it irritates Jesus to no end --- so much so that He goes on for a fair length of time ---- speaking His mind to them about it.

The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ for today is that we must practice what we preach.

We must live out what we believe.

We must be humble in heart as opposed to seeking glory and adulation.

To know all there is to know about the scriptures and not have them affect your life is useless.

To memorize verses of scripture ---- to know all about the intent and message and truth of scripture ----- and not have that truth of scripture affect your life is useless.

To say things like James was the first book written in the New Testament --- -- followed by some of Paul's letters in the 50's ----- then came the first written Gospel of Mark in or around the year 55 ---- then Luke a few years later and so on.

Means nothing if you cannot also articulate how James --- Paul's letters --- how Mark ----- and Luke --- affect you --- change your life ---- cause you to be transformed by the saving light of Jesus Christ.

Yes --- sometimes knowing these other things --- when they were written and by whom ----- can help us to better understand their truth and message and more readily apply it to our lives.

Yes sometimes memorizing scripture --- can be a great help ----- but unless we are altered by what we know and what we memorize ---- the point of knowing and memorizing is lost.

The teachers of the law and Pharisees --- know and memorize.

Indeed they know and memorize more than anybody else likely did ----- but clearly what they know and what they have memorized hasn't affected their true inner being.

Rendering much of their knowledge useless.

Listen to them yes ---- do everything they tell you yes --- but that's about it.

And that's it because they don't practice what they preach --- what they know doesn't affect their lives and attitudes and actions.

And because of this ----- they are ---- according to Christ ---- blind fools --- blind guides ----- hypocrites ----- snakes ----- children of hell even.

Jesus makes it pretty clear --- He's pretty harsh in His description of what He thinks about those who consider the gospel a mere intellectual exercise.

Children of hell ----- evil ---- are they who fail to practice what they preach.

Blind fools ---- are those who aren't humble and gentle of heart.

As John Calvin said ---- the gospel is not a doctrine of the tongue --- but of life.

“The gospel is not a doctrine of the tongue --- but of life.

And as John Calvin also said --- “there are social implications to our faith.”

Calvin is right ----- there are social implications to our faith.

And we know this not because Calvin wise a wise old Presbyterian Pastor --- we know this because Christ Himself teaches us so Matthew's gospel today.

Augustine put it another way ----- “Preach the gospel --- use words if necessary.”

“Preach the gospel --- use words if necessary.”

Yes there was a cultural context to this sentiment ----- preaching the gospel in words was forbidden at one point in Augustine’s life ----- so he urged people to continue to be faithful by living out their faith in deed.

For us we can speak the gospel freely ---- so it isn’t just about one or the other --- it must be both --- spoken word and word lived out.

Just as it wasn’t enough for the teachers of the law and Pharisees to merely speak about God’s will ---- they also had to live it out and demonstrate it in their very lives.

So it is for us.

Just as we need God’s Word ---- the scriptures --- and God’s living Word ---
- Jesus Christ.

So do we need to share Christ in word and in deed.

We need to preach --- share Christ in word ----- and we need to practice what we preach ---- live out the beauty and the wonder and the loving saving reality of Jesus Christ.

At some point ---- we all have to look ourselves in the mirror and ask ourselves do we practice what we preach ---- do we act out --- live out ----- sweat out what we actually believe.

Do we try to share Christ and be Christ.

Do we see Christ in everyone we meet and do people see Christ in us.

Or --- are we just play actors --- hypocrites --- posturing about here and there --- without any kind of genuine inner conviction and effort to be and share the grace and the mercy and the love and the compassion of Jesus Christ.

Do we practice what we preach?

Are we honouring Christ in all we say and in all we do?

Do our lives evidence the fact that we now Christ and celebrate His saving --
- compassionate ----- humble love?

That love that takes us by the heart and by the hand ---- and makes of us
something humble ---- and beautiful and useful --- something faithful ---
caring and compassionate ----- gracious ---- and merciful.

Do we practice what we preach --- or are we just play actors?

Amen.