

YOU HAVE ONE TEACHER (AND HE IS A SERVANT)

MATTHEW 23:1-12
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
BY: RYAN DUECK
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We've been eavesdropping on a long conversation between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel for most of this fall.

The conversation has taken many twists and turns, but more often than not it's been fairly confrontational.

Why?

Jesus represented a threat to these leaders and their carefully designed and managed religious systems.

Quite simply, he refused to speak and act as a prophet was supposed to speak and act. He consistently associated with the wrong sorts of people, flagrantly flouted Sabbath laws (and others), and, most worryingly for them, seemed to have little regard for the institutions and titles and privileges that they had built up over the years to fortify their identities as God's special people.

He was a threat, and threats must be dealt with.

We've been observing a kind of serve and volley dynamic at work: the religious elites ask questions, attempt to trick Jesus or trip him up, and Jesus parries their efforts with answers that they were not expecting, answers that forced them to reconsider their assumptions, answers that sometimes just plain confused them.

Often, he has responded with *stories*—stories about wedding banquets with unexpected guests and vineyards that produced the wrong kind of fruit.

Always, Jesus responds to the attacks of Israel's leaders on his *own* terms. He does not defend himself, he does not uncritically buy into their categories, he does not try to climb

over them to the top of the pile where he will supplant them as the voice of religious authority that everyone has to listen to.

He does not play the game that they want him to play.

And in *today's* text, the conversation begins to change. Jesus begins to go on the offensive. He has been reacting and responding to challenges and questions from Israel's religious gatekeepers for long enough. Now he has some questions of his own. Now he has some things that *he* wants to say.

And if the gatekeepers were uncomfortable when *they* were the ones asking the questions, things are about to get even *more* unpleasant for them.

Let's take a tour through this text, both to see what was going on in the text but, more importantly, to ask how it applies to our lives as well.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 2 "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

Practice what you preach. Let your words be backed up by your actions and let your actions spring out of your words.

These are very basic words that we all understand to be right and good at a deep and intuitive level, but they are oh, so hard to live out sometimes, aren't they?

The last few weekends have been full of volleyball tournaments. Like many parents, I have been known, *at times*, to take my kids' athletic pursuits just a *bit* more seriously than they do.

Rarely. Well, occasionally. Okay fine, almost always!!

I think both of my kids have quite likely been embarrassed by their dad once or twice at the pool or the volleyball court or the soccer pitch ☺.

At any rate, I have spent the past three weekends at volleyball tournaments.

And, *occasionally* at these volleyball tournaments, junior high boys miss their serves. And *occasionally* the fathers of junior high boys have been known to offer up some

rather enthusiastic “encouragement” or “advice” to these boys on the occasion of their missing said serves.

Well, last Tuesday night I played volleyball myself at a drop-in game in Coaldale. The second time I stepped up to serve, the ball dribbled meekly off the ends of my fingers and landed straight in the net.

One of the players on the other team—a player who also happens to be a parent of our boys’ volleyball team—bellowed across the net, “Hey Ryan, what do you think that you and I would be yelling from the stands if one of our sons did that?!”

Practice what you preach!

This is a relatively trivial (and safe) example. There are others, I’m sure. And I’m sure that you can think of some from your own life. We all have moments where our words don’t line up with our actions.

But the Pharisees seem to have taken this to a whole new level. Indeed, they seem to have almost made a *religion* out of it!

They were quite eager to let the words flow about how others should follow God, about what obedience to the law of Moses looked like, etc., but their own lives did not reflect the intentions of the law.

Which is a problem.

And Jesus calls them on it.

4 They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

The Pharisees were very good at keeping others busy with the demands of the law.

What about the Spirit of the law? What about mercy, justice, and faithfulness, which were the *point* of the law?

When was the law *ever* for its own sake? When was the law ever not for the point of helping the people of God become what they were made to be for the sake of the world?

Jesus was angered by the way that the law had come to be abused, how rather than being a gift and a source of life, it had become a crippling, heavy weight for his people.

Listen to what he says in Matthew 11:28-30:

28 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.
29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

5 “Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; 7 they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.

The Pharisees *loved* for their piety to be *seen*.

Our text today is followed by one in which Jesus uses some of the strongest language in the entire NT. Listen to what he says, in verses 14-36

- Woe to you...
 - Hypocrites! Blind guides! Fools!
 - “You are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside look beautiful but inside are full of the bones of the dead and all kinds of filth” (v. 27).
 - “You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to” (v. 13).
 - “You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are!” (v. 15)
 - “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.” (v. 23) [Reference to spices = tithe of agricultural produce.]
 - “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (v. 33)

Jesus feels very strongly about hypocrisy, about religious self-righteousness, about the human tendency to exalt ourselves.

Jesus is not just some anti-establishment preacher who takes pleasure in pointing out the hypocrisies of those in power. He knows exactly how toxic the kind of self-love and arrogant clinging to power and status is to our souls.

Listen to how Francis Spufford puts it in his book called *Unapologetic*:

[Jesus] has a *lot* to say about self-righteousness, which he compares, not very tactfully, to a grave that looks neat and well cared for up top but is heaving with ‘corruption’ down below. Maggots, basically. And the point of this repulsive image is not just that the inside and outside of a self-righteous person don’t match... [I]t’s also that, for him, being sure you’re righteous, standing on your dignity as a virtuous person, comes precious close to being dead...

If you won’t hear the bad news, you can’t begin to hear the good news about yourself either. And you’ll do harm. You’ll be pumped up with the false confidence of virtue, and you’ll think it gives you a license, and a large share of all the cruelties in the world will follow, for evil done knowingly is rather rare compared to evil done by people who’re sure that they themselves are good.¹

Could there be a better description of the Pharisees in Jesus’ day?

Could there be a better description of people with Pharisaical tendencies in *our* day?

As always, we make a grave error—and miss the point of Jesus’ teaching *entirely!*—if we hear the words of Matthew 23 or even the words of Francis Spufford that I just read, and think, “Sheesh, that sounds just terrible! What a nasty bunch of misguided people! Thank God *I’m* not like that!”

All Scripture is not only a window into God’s dealings with his people in the past, but also a mirror for how God wishes to deal with us in the present.

8 “But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah.

This is a sobering passage for anyone involved in positions of leadership.

¹ Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 119.

Don't bother with the titles and honorifics, Jesus says. Don't pay attention to all the usual designations and ways of securing status and respect.

Do we as Christian leaders buy into this trap, too? Do we like to be called "Pastor so-and-so" or "Reverend so-and-so?"

Do we like to have letters like "PhD" and "MA" behind our names? Are we eager to secure and display our credentials?

Do we, as *churches*, pay more attention to titles like than we do to things like wisdom, humility, Christ-like character, or servanthood?

A number of you have asked me over the past few months and years about whether or not I plan on being ordained. Thus far I have resisted going in this direction.

To be clear, I am licensed and credentialed through Mennonite Church Alberta. I can legally marry and bury and all these things. You don't have some kind of a rogue pastor who is illegitimately performing all these ceremonies.

But I have paused over the question of ordination.

Part of this has to do with growing up in the MB church. I don't recall formal ordination being done, so it was never really on my radar.

But I have to also say that this passage from Matthew (and its parallels in other gospels) is a *huge* part of why I don't feel comfortable with ordination. I don't like the idea of being called "Reverend." I don't like the idea of communicating that my role is somehow more exalted or worthy of public recognition than anyone else in this church.

Now, I have told people in our church and in Mennonite Church Alberta that I am open to the possibility that I am wrong about this, or at least misguided. I am open to learning more. I know that Christians of various kinds have been ordaining clergy for a very long time.

And I *certainly* don't want to presume to pass judgment on others who have decided to become ordained. That would be the *height* of irony wouldn't it? The decision *not* to be ordained can function just as easily as the decision *to* be ordained in trying to attain status and recognition!

But I take Jesus' words very seriously here. *Don't look for ways to exalt each other with titles*, he says.

You have one Teacher, one Instructor, and you are all students. One Father, and you are all children.

There is no hierarchy in this kingdom, and this ought to be reflected in how we understand and employ titles in the church.

11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

This, of course, is the punch line of the passage.

This is what Jesus wants the Pharisees to see. This is what Jesus wants each of *us* to see, too.

The world has all kinds of way of seeking and approving and bolstering and celebrating status. We have all kinds of ways of honouring the smart, the strong, the rich, the powerful, the popular, the influential.

What Jesus tells us, in this passage as well as in the broad contours of his teaching in general, is *you've got things entirely upside down. That's not what the kingdom of God looks like.*

Those accustomed to being on the bottom will one day be raised up. Those who spend their days climbing over one another to the top will one day be brought down low.

Those who exalt themselves will be humbled; those who humble themselves will be exalted.

The church of Jesus Christ should be characterized by women and men whose view is constantly in the process of being reoriented, recalibrated, refocused... women and men who are coming to think and love and honour the way that Jesus taught us to.

And, of course, the way Jesus demonstrated for us most powerfully on a cross.

Shortly after Jesus speaks these words to the Pharisees, he will humble himself in the most unimaginable way—by being executed like a common criminal on a Roman cross, for the sin of the world, for the love of his friends and his enemies, for the redemption of the entire world that God made and loves.

Jesus shows us that the One who is our Teacher is also the humble servant of all.

There are few passages of Scripture that put this as powerfully as Philippians 2:5-11

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

6

Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

7

rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

8

And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death—

even death on a cross!

9

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place

and gave him the name that is above every name,

10

that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11

and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus redefines the shape of our relationships with one another, and he redefines our understanding of God.

And so, may this Servant God help us...

- To practice what we preach
- To give grace and a willingness to share the load in place of piling on religious burdens

- To resist the temptation of basing our status and worth on the praise of human beings.
- To humble ourselves, that we might be exalted, in imitation of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

