

To Be Seen

Matthew 23:1-12

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I saw this text coming a few weeks ago and thought maybe this year I should choose a different one. Its themes about humility and servant leadership and the temptations of hypocrisy are always timely, but I tend to preach on it every three years when it shows up in the readings.

But then I also noticed that this passage would be showing up two days before the US Election. And you could hardly ask for a timelier passage.

Whatever you might make of the American president's policies or politics, it would be hard to find many people who wouldn't acknowledge that when it comes to his personal character, Donald Trump is the active embodiment of what Jesus criticizes in this text.

Everything they do is done for people to see... See his constant bragging about the size of his rallies. Or his Twitter account.

They love the place of honour and the important seats... They love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces... Trump seems to have an almost pathological need to be praised and to be popular.

For many, it's hard to imagine *anyone* who would be more obviously interested in exalting themselves and more uninterested in humility than the current American president.

And whether we like it or not (and I don't particularly like it), Mr. Trump is dominating the headlines and our collective consciousness during these last days as the American election cycle lurches to its conclusion.

It's been on my mind this week, not least because I had a lot of people sending me a lot of articles about Trump. Many were what you would expect from more progressive wings of Christian thought. A lot of handwriting and angst and moral outrage.

But one article surprised me. It written by someone that I ordinarily do not see eye to eye on.

John Piper is a very conservative evangelical Christian with strong views on Calvinism and predestination and God's specific and active role in the suffering that people endure.

He has made international headlines in the past for interpreting natural disasters (tornados, floods, hurricanes) as God's judgment on specific sins (always other people's sins, not his own).

I have written articles in the past criticizing Piper for a theology that I think impugns the character of God. Ordinarily, John Piper and I do not see eye to eye on many things.

But this article was different. It was called "Policies, Persons, and Paths to Ruin."

Piper wrote it in response to being asked what the right Christian way to vote in the US election is. He wrote it to address the question of whether American Christians were justified in separating the *person* of Donald Trump from the *policies* that he might implement.

Here's what Piper says:

When a leader models self-absorbed, self-exalting boastfulness, he models the most deadly behavior in the world. He points his nation to destruction. Destruction of more kinds than we can imagine.

It is naive to think that a man can be effectively pro-life and manifest consistently the character traits that lead to death — temporal and eternal.¹

This, again, from the pen (or keyboard) of a very conservative American evangelical Christian.

I'm not on Twitter and I left Facebook last week, but I was told by the person who sent this article that Mr. Piper was taking a lot of heat on social media for this.

I don't doubt it. His is an argument that few conservative evangelicals are making these days.

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/policies-persons-and-paths-to-ruin?fbclid=IwAR04Whfwl-B8sNJf00Xtw-uSRWi8deAfnlPaVQxdCtIDb2HyyxtByg6S3c0>

Yet, I think Piper is absolutely right to insist that personal character in leadership matters and it can't be neatly separated from the policies one makes. Character affects the culture of any system, whether that system is a family, a community organization, a church, a city, a nation.

In many ways, I find it a sad indictment on our times that Piper's is an argument that has to be made at all.

That's probably more than enough politics—American or otherwise—for one sermon.

But I want to refer to one more politician. I came across these words from Winston Churchill from a speech in 1909. I think he was a journalist not yet a politician at this point:

Someone—I forget who—has said: “Words are the only things which last forever.” That is, to my mind, always a wonderful thought. The most durable structures raised in stone by the strength of man, the mightiest monuments of power, crumble into dust, while the words spoken with the fleeting breath... endure not as echoes of the past, not as mere archaeological curiosities or venerable relics, but with a force and life as new and strong, and sometimes far stronger than when they were first spoken, and leaping across the gulf of three thousand years, they light the world for us to-day.²

As someone who spends a lot of time on words, I obviously couldn't agree more. 😊

Kingdoms rise and fall, empires are built and crumble. But words remain.

The words from our gospel text this morning have been around for roughly two thousand years. A lot of durable structures and mighty monuments have come and gone in our world over that time.

But the words of Christ are as powerful, as relevant, as indicting, as devastating, and as truthful today as they no doubt were when he first uttered them:

The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted (Mat. 23:11-12).

² Quoted in Alan Jacobs, *Breaking Bread with the Dead: Reading the Past in Search of a Tranquil Mind* (London: Profile, 2020), 69.

These words have lodged themselves deep into the collective souls of the broad Christian tradition and the cultures that emerged out of it.

What you say and what you do should match. Greatness comes from serving. Humility leads to exaltation.

We expect this, on some level from all of our leaders. This is why we hear howls of protests when leaders behave arrogantly and selfishly and hypocritically (which, sadly, many Christian leaders have done over the years).

Our moral compasses, whether we claim to be Christian or not, have been profoundly shaped over the last two thousand years by these words of Christ

Few people would have expected humility and servant leadership from emperors in ancient Rome. We expect it, however inconsistently, from our leaders today, because of Jesus and the words he spoke.

And of course, it's not just about the words. This was the pattern of our Saviour's life and death.

In serving the lost and the least—even his enemies—unto death, Jesus demonstrated his greatness. In humbling himself to the fate of a despised criminal, he was exalted to the right hand of the Father.

Jesus practiced what he preached; unlike the religious leaders he was criticizing.

Jesus didn't load people up with religious burdens they couldn't carry. He said, "Come to me, you who are burdened, and I will give you rest."

Jesus didn't do things to be seen. He often told people to keep his healings a secret. He withdrew to quiet places for prayer and solitude. He was suspicious of crowds and their fickle approval.

Jesus didn't seek places of influence and honour. He dined with tax-collectors and prostitutes. He touched lepers. He hung out with the wrong crowd. He was accused of being a friend of sinners, a drunkard and a glutton.

And people were drawn to him.

They saw in Jesus a power, an authority, an integrity, and a deep compassion that was so compelling, but that seemed absent in the religious and political leaders of their day.

Well, it's all fine and good to wag our fingers at the world of politics with its examples of bad character in leadership. It's fine and good to be reminded of the clear teaching of Christ and about the importance of humility and servanthood.

This is fairly safe and impersonal terrain. What about us?

It will not do to peak over Jesus' shoulder, as it were, cheering him on while he rebukes the Donald Trumps of the world, if we do not hold up the same mirror to ourselves.

Jesus' words at the beginning of our text were addressed to the crowd, after all, ordinary people like you and me.

Do not do as they do, Jesus says. Which implies that we are eminently capable of doing *precisely* as they do.

None of us are immune from the temptations of hypocrisy, arrogance, self-exaltation or failing to practice what we preach. We all want to be thought well of, on some level. And we certainly all like our good deeds to be noticed.

This is particularly so in the age of the Internet, where social media has given us this vast canopy upon which to broadcast our goodness to those in our orbits.

The technical term for this is "virtue signaling"—the "expression or promotion of viewpoints that are especially valued within a social group, especially when this is done primarily to enhance the social standing of the speaker."

It doesn't really matter what is being shared or promoted or where it fits on the political or theological spectrum. The vital thing is that others see us doing so.

We want the right people to see us thinking and doing and sharing the right things and being against the wrong things. It could be about politics or about adherence to COVID guidelines or any other number of things.

I suppose one could even signal one's virtue by preaching a sermon criticizing Donald Trump. ☺

At the risk of being melodramatic, I think that the temptation to do our good deeds to be seen might be one of the most significant obstacles to becoming spiritually healthy, generous, and open people who are capable of truly loving our neighbours (even the wrong ones!) as ourselves.

I think we are in more desperate need than ever of heeding Jesus' words about the importance of not doing our deeds to be seen before others—of cultivating a private righteousness in a hyper-public world.

To paraphrase what Jesus says in Matthew 6, "Don't pray or fast or give or serve or do anything just to be noticed. If being seen/admired/praised is what you are after, then that is what you will get. But that is all you will get. You will have your reward, and a meagre and fleeting one it is and will be."

A final word. The title of my sermon this morning is "To be seen." I have focused on Jesus' command to *not* do our good deeds to be seen.

But there is an important sense in which the hunger to be seen is among the most fundamental aspects of who we are.

Naomi and I have Danny this weekend. Some of you know that Danny is a young man with Downs Syndrome that we provide respite care for a few times a month.

Often when we're watching a movie with Danny, he'll stand up and announce that he's a character in the story that we're watching. "I'm that guy! I'm a cowboy! I'm a race car driver! I'm going to be famous!" He'll sometimes assign Naomi and I roles in the story as well.

Last night, it occurred to me that this is Danny's way of expressing something that we all long for. We all long to *matter*. To know that we are a part of a good and meaningful story. To be seen as unique and valuable. To have our unique talents and gifts recognized.

There is a sense in which the desire to be seen expresses something true and vital about the human experience. We long to be *known*.

The posture of servanthood and humility that Jesus commands here requires a trust that we *are* seen. But not by others, whose praise and admiration we so desperately want and think we need.

By God.

To live this in the way that Jesus commands requires a trust that our attempts at goodness are seen by the only One whose evaluation matters in the end. The God who created us, loves us, forgives us when do the right things for the wrong reasons or the wrong things for the right reasons.

To live in the way that Jesus commands in this passage is an act of trust that we *are* seen, truly and finally, by God.

In 1 Corinthians 13:12 we read these words:

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Now our seeing is dim and partial and not always clear. *Now* our motives are mixed and our performance uneven.

But *then* we will come face to face with the One who made us, who loves us, who knows us truly. Our longing to be seen will not be a desire for the fleeting rewards of human praise but for the welcome of God.

We have one teacher, as Jesus reminds us in today's passage. May his gaze be all that matters to us in the end.

Amen.

