

Hypocrites!  
Matthew 22:41-23:12

“Can you believe that governor? He made everyone else wear masks during the COVID outbreak, and then he went to a party where no one had one on – including him! What a hypocrite!”

“Can you believe that representative? She makes all those speeches about how dangerous greenhouse gases are for the environment, but takes a private jet everywhere she goes. What a hypocrite!”

“Can you believe that senator? He supported all those bills promoting family values – and now he’s been caught cheating on his wife. What a hypocrite!”

We’ve all heard comments like these. In fact, politicians have been using such accusations of hypocrisy against their opponents for years. It doesn’t matter what party you favor or where you stand on the important issues of the day – no one likes a hypocrite, especially not one that tries to tell the rest of us what to do.

But politicians haven’t cornered the market on hypocrisy, have they? No, we’ve heard the stories about priests who pretend to be so holy, only to be caught molesting altar boys. We all know pastors who preach about the sanctity of marriage, only to leave their wives and take up with someone on the church staff. And not even the most orthodox of denominations, not even our own Evangelical Presbyterian Church is immune from these kinds of problems.

But have you ever wondered why? Why do so many leaders in both church and state fall into such flagrant hypocrisy, teaching and perhaps even believing one thing, but practicing another instead? Well, Jesus gives us a clue in today’s passage, as He leveled His guns on the religious leaders of the day. For why did He say that the scribes and Pharisees taught the Law of Moses but refused to observe it? Why did they exaggerate God’s rules for living while refusing to follow those same rules themselves?

Pride. Jesus said that, no matter how holy they may have appeared to other people, they weren’t really trying to please God at all. Instead, they were just putting on a show of piety not only to try to impress other people, but to demonstrate their superiority to everyone else. And their pride led to their hypocrisy because they came to believe that the rules were only for followers, not for leaders like themselves.

And to prove this, Jesus pointed to what they wore – to their phylacteries and the borders of their garments. Now, the Law of Moses said, “And it shall serve as a sign to you on your hand, and as a reminder on your forehead, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth” (Exodus 13:9). And so pious Jews wore phylacteries – little boxes containing tiny scrolls of God’s law, tied on their left arms and foreheads.

But that’s not all. The Law of Moses said that God’s people should wear tassels on the borders of their garments – “to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, so as to do them and not follow after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you played the harlot, in order that you may remember to do all My commandments, and be holy to your God” (Numbers 15:39-40). And the religious leaders of the day obeyed that law as well. In fact, they made sure that the tassels they wore were long enough for everyone to be able to see them.

For that, you see was the problem: they turned two items of clothing that were supposed to be reminders to keep God’s Law into reasons to be proud of themselves – and perhaps even reasons to look down on those who didn’t wear such things, those they doubtless considered to be “common,” or even “sinners.” Instead of allowing what they wore to remind them of their need for holiness, they

allowed their tassels and phylacteries to become points of pride, thus leading them into the very sin they were supposed to be avoiding.

But they weren't just proud of their clothing. No, they were also proud of their learning and the respect that other people gave them because of it. They were proud of how much they were able to explain about the Scriptures when they sat down in the synagogues, and how people called them "Rabbi," or teacher, as a result. They were proud of the way that people gave them respectful greetings and even dinner invitations because of their outward obedience to God's Law – even though that same Law condemned their pride, their self-focus, their self-worship on every page.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength" – that was the Great Commandment that Moses gave us in Deuteronomy 6:4. But the scribes and the Pharisees were so in love with themselves that they didn't even notice they were breaking that Commandment – and all the rest of God's Law – by the pride that oozed out of all their thoughts, words, and deeds.

But did they really have any room for such pride? For remember – Jesus was standing right in front of them, the man Whom the Palm Sunday crowd had hailed as the Son of David (Matthew 21:9). Even if the Pharisees and scribes had their doubts, there were lots of people at the time who thought that Jesus was in fact the long-awaited Messiah, the Christ, the One God had anointed to rule over His people. So, if the crowd was correct, then Jesus was their rightful king. Jesus was therefore the One Who deserved all the glory – regardless of how proud the scribes and Pharisees might have been of themselves.

But as Jesus points out at the end of chapter 22, He was actually much more than the mere mortal the crowd expected to drive out the Romans and rule over a Middle-Eastern kingdom. That's who they thought the Son of David would be – but David Himself had much bigger ideas, ideas that Jesus says were given to him by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as he wrote Psalm 110.

Now, we cannot doubt that the psalm is talking about the Christ, the Messiah. For He wields his royal scepter on Mt. Zion, the location of David's capital city of Jerusalem. And the Lord gives Him authority to rule in the midst of his enemies, shattering kings in the day of his wrath and sitting in judgment over all the nations. Oh, yes, this psalm of David is obviously a prophecy of the Son of David.

And yet at the same time, David calls the Messiah, "my Lord." And David sees the Messiah seated at the right hand of God, the position of greatest power and influence in any royal court. In fact, the Son of David in Psalm 110 is a whole lot like the Son of Man we see in Daniel chapter 7 – the One to Whom was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him, the One Whose dominion is everlasting, the One Whose kingdom will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:14).

The Son of Man – that's who Jesus claimed to be when He stood before the religious leaders on the night He was arrested. But instead of believing Him, they persuaded Pontius Pilate to have him crucified as a threat to the Roman peace. Because of their pride, they rejected the Son of Man, the Son of David, preferring instead to go on living in their hypocrisy rather than bowing the knee to Him as their Lord.

So, what about us? After all, we know Who Jesus is. We've celebrated His resurrection from the dead, which proves that everything He said about Himself is true. We know without a doubt that He is the Son of David, the Son of Man, the Son of God.

Moreover, as we saw from the last paragraph of Matthew's gospel last week, we know that, by virtue of His death and resurrection, Jesus holds all authority in heaven and on earth, all authority over everyone and everything throughout space and time. And we know what that means for all of us –

politicians, pastors, and people alike: we owe Him not only our total allegiance, but also all our love and devotion. Yes, as Jesus makes clear in today's passage, just as we know that the only true God is our Father, we know that Jesus Christ is our one teacher, our one leader, the one source and measure of truth and justice, of right and wrong.

So if all that's true, do any of us have any room for pride? We preachers certainly don't: just because I've been to seminary doesn't mean I know everything about the Bible – far from it. And the same thing is true for all of us ruling and teaching elders: just because we've been ordained and installed by the session or the Presbytery doesn't make us somehow better than anyone else. None of us are anything more than the students and the followers of Jesus. And no matter how long any of us have been walking with Him, there's always more that we can learn from Him.

And do any of us Christians really have any room to look down on anyone else? After all, none of us are anything more than forgiven sinners, recipients of grace we could not earn and did not deserve. So, do we imagine that, just because we come to worship regularly, or just because we put offerings in the plate we're better than those who don't? Do we imagine that, just because we condemn racism and abortion or just because we avoid the spectacular, socially unacceptable sorts of sins that are increasingly common in today's society, that we have somehow earned God's favor?

Look, it's fashionable for Christians to put a fish symbol on our cars, or to wear a cross around our necks, or even a "WWJD" bracelet on our wrists. And just like those ancient Pharisees with their tassels and their phylacteries, we might tell ourselves that such symbols are only supposed to remind us to live holy lives – to ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" before making any decision.

But if we become proud of any of these outward things, if we are proud of our political beliefs or even our profession of faith while we go on doing what we know good and well is wrong, are we really any better than those ancient hypocrites that Jesus so rightly condemned? And unless we reject such hypocrisy, unless we bring our lives, our thoughts, words, and deeds, into line with our profession of faith can any of us possibly hope to obey our Lord, fulfilling the Great Commission that He gave us in last week's passage? For unless we are actually living out what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, how can we possibly hope to make other disciples, encouraging others to come to know Christ or to know Him better?

So, how can we avoid the legalistic pride and the hypocrisy of the Pharisees? How can we truly live the life of Christ before our friends and neighbors? Jesus tells us in the last two verses of this passage, doesn't He? Instead of puffing ourselves up, instead of pretending that we have it all together, instead of expecting others to listen to us because we know more about Jesus than they do, we have to lead others to Christ the same way that Jesus led us: through humble service.

For Jesus was no hypocrite, was He? After all, He really was as perfect and holy and righteous as all those Pharisees and scribes pretended to be. But instead of pushing people around or looking down on them, he didn't just preach humility in verse 12 – He lived it out on the cross.

For didn't Jesus humble Himself before the Father, saying, "Not my will but thine be done?" Didn't He humble Himself before all of us, taking on the burden of our sin, paying the death penalty that we all deserve? In fact, didn't He die even for those who despised and rejected Him, even for those who denied Him and abandoned Him, even for proud, pushy, hypocritical sinners like you and me?

But because He humbled Himself in this way, the Father exalted Him as David predicted in Psalm 110, giving Him all authority in heaven and earth. And by His resurrection, Jesus gained the greatest victory over our worst enemies, even over sin and death itself. Yes, it was because He became a servant

that He became the greatest of all. It was because He humbled Himself that He has been highly exalted, and given a name that is above every name.

So, even while we proclaim our faith, and even while we seek to follow its dictates and wear its symbols, let's put aside our pride in those things. Instead, let's seek only to glorify the One we worship, our teacher and leader. And let's follow His example of living out our faith with integrity and humility through loving service – even for those who don't deserve it.