

FOR WHOSE GLORY? MATTHEW 23:1-12

In 2002 the Boston Globe published the results of the Spotlight investigation, which revealed a tragic trend of abuse and cover-ups in the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, Massachusetts. Similar trends were subsequently discovered in other dioceses across the United States, and eventually the world. For years, the issue of abuse within the Catholic church was a regular part of the news cycle.

To my shame, my young, proud, and Protestant perspective was less than gracious, to say the least. The Lord began to correct this attitude in me in the years that followed. As the Catholic church has taken steps to repent and heal, there has been plenty of scandal in the protestant church, and its associated parachurch ministries.

In just the last couple of years there have been abuses and scandals from one of the largest and most popular churches in New York City to the largest denomination in the United States; from children's camp ministries to the scholarly apologetic ministries. Each of those examples bears the telltale sign of truth suppression that allowed sin to run rampant to the detriment of many victims and the witness of the Church. And each of those organizations adheres to a set of Christian beliefs and practices that much more closely resemble our own than those of Catholicism. These churches and ministries are our people, our family.

Please know, I do not bring any of these examples up to disparage the Catholic church or any other church or ministry, but rather to show the severity of a sin that resides in us all and which we are often tempted to take lightly. A sin we even popularly regard as a virtue in the United States. The message this morning causes me great anguish because I cannot help but see the error Jesus calls out in the scribes and Pharisees, operating in our own religious context. This morning may be painful as we consider our collective selves honestly. This morning we examine the plank in our collective eye, and I pray make some small progress in removing it. For only by removing, it will we be able to see clearly enough to help those around us. While the causes of the scandals and abuses I just mentioned are many and complex, I believe our passage in Matthew this morning speaks to perhaps the deepest root of such failures.

Let us walk through the passage beginning with verses 1-3. "Then Jesus said to the crowds and to His disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.'"

Allow me to remind us of the context briefly. Our passage is set in the midst of Holy Week. If you recall, Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly and immediately proceeded to the Temple, which He then cleansed, declaring it to be a house of prayer. The next day the religious leaders ask Him, "By what authority are you doing these things?" or, in other words, "What gives you the right to disturb Temple worship the way you did yesterday?" Jesus refuses to answer their question by asking His own question of them, knowing they would not be able to accept the honest answer, and instead tells parables about disobedient sons and servants, and disrespectful wedding invitees, all meant to implicate the religious leaders in unfaithfulness. They then respond by testing His authority by asking him a number of questions, mostly meant to entrap or entangle Him. But through this questioning, Jesus' authority becomes clear, culminating in a complete silencing of His opponents. And this brings us to our passage.

Here, Jesus turns to the crowd and His disciples. This is a powerful image. You can just picture Jesus turning His back on the unfaithful shepherds of God's people to address the sheep for whom they were supposed to care.

And He tells the crowd to do as the religious leaders say, but not as they do. The people are to respect them because they sit on the seat of Moses. The “seat of Moses” is symbolic of the authority Moses commanded as the Lawgiver of Israel. And the scribes and Pharisees deserved a certain amount of respect as teachers of the Law. And yet, Jesus says they do not practice what they preach.

Because of their reputation at the time, this would have been a surprising statement. However, Jesus goes on in Matthew 23 to describe some of the ways in which they did this. Without giving too much away, in verses 13-36 He calls them hypocrites, guilty of tithing spices but neglecting more important things like justice and looking good on the outside while being inwardly despicable.

Verse 4 offers a further indictment of their leadership. “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.”

By their extra-scriptural traditions, the scribes and Pharisees heaped a heavier burden than God ever intended onto the backs of the people, but never showed them how to be free of that burden. Contrast this to Jesus’ words earlier in Matthew 11:28-30 when He calls, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” While Jesus offered to carry them, but the religious leaders just heaped burdens on.

Verses 5-7 explain the motivation behind such religious oppression. “They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.”

The beginning of verse 5 offers the general criticism, on which Jesus goes on to elaborate: they do everything for the praise of man. They have an interest in loading people up with crushing burdens. It enables them to appear like they are uniquely righteous (though Jesus has already said and goes on to elaborate on the fact that they aren’t really), which in turn gives them prominence and power. Jesus continues on to list specific ways they seek the attention of other people.

Phylacteries were cases containing Scripture that they fastened to their left arm and forehead. These men made their phylacteries big, so that they would not be missed. This way people would know how seriously they took Scripture.

The fringes mentioned, were tassels at the corners of their garments that were meant to remind Israelites of the commandments of God, which was actually commanded by God in Numbers and Deuteronomy. The scribes and Pharisees made sure their fringes were long and noticeable. This way people could not miss how seriously they took their Law-keeping.

They relished being noticed and honored in public. They wanted the best seat at feasts and synagogue meetings, so that everyone would know how important they were. They loved walking through the crowded marketplace, where people were compelled to greet them as “rabbi”, which means “teacher” or “master”. For a commoner to pass a teacher without offering such a greeting would be seen as a great offense resulting in a loss of honor for the commoner, and so they were compelled to draw attention to these teachers by calling out to them. In short, these religious leaders did what they did for their own honor and notoriety.

Jesus goes on in verses 8-10 to tell His followers they are not to emulate this behavior. “But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ.”

Jesus' followers are not to seek the title of teacher. The implication here is a teacher of unimpeachable authority, like a combination of master and teacher. Such a title may lead one to believe they no longer have anything to learn, which is a deadly and destructive delusion for a follower of Jesus. For Jesus is the one teacher who has nothing to learn, and the rest of us are a brotherhood of equals who both have things to offer, and things left to learn.

Jesus' followers are not to call another person "father". Notice the switch from "you are not to be called..." to "you are not to call...". Jesus is not telling us we cannot call our dads "father" here, although what He is saying might apply to our biological or adoptive fathers. He is referring to the practice of calling another human "father" in the sense of our ultimate spiritual authority, as fathers exercised absolute authority over their children in this day. The implication here is the opposite of that in the previous verse: just as we are not to consider ourselves or allow others to consider us as infallible, neither are we to consider someone else infallible. God alone is our Father, the sole infallible and absolute authority for those who follow Christ.

And finally, Jesus' followers are not to call anyone instructor, or guide, or leader. It is hard to know exactly what Jesus means by the Greek word "καθηγηται" here, since its only three New Testament usages are here in Matthew 23:8 and 10. Translations agree on its meaning in verse 8, as "teacher". However, it seems clear Matthew is using it slightly differently in verse 10, and translations are divided on how to render it.

I would suggest it carries an idea akin to "ruler" or "leader". Reason being, Jesus goes on to say the proper "καθηγηται" is the Christ, which means "the anointed one" which in the Old Testament referred to the anointed king of Israel. Of course, Israel did not have an anointed king in Jesus' day, but a puppet king appointed and controlled by Rome. But it was hoped that the Messiah or Christ would come and restore true kingship.

So, I think what Jesus is addressing here is the human tendency to create saviors for ourselves. It is not hard to see how we do this today with political and cultural leaders. Virtually every political campaign includes the implied thought, "If we can just get this person in office, then *everything* is going to be okay." It seems likely the people of Israel would do this with their national leaders as well, even if it did not amount to a true kingship. In effect, they, as we all are prone to do, were manufacturing "christ's" for themselves, and Jesus is reminding His followers that there is one true Christ, and He alone should be regarded as such. Therefore, *Christ followers* ought never allow people to regard them as salvific figures. In short, Jesus' followers are not to seek positions of prominence that belong to God alone, nor are they to regard others as filling those positions of prominence.

If Jesus' disciples are not to seek titles and position, what are they to seek? We find the answer in verse 11. "The greatest among you shall be your servant." Greatness for Jesus' followers is not found in prominence, position, or the praises of men, but in humble service to their fellow brothers and sisters.

This is a well-established rule of the Gospel Kingdom Jesus came to proclaim in Matthew. The blessed of the beatitudes smack of this servant spirit. As do those who seek to be salt to the earth and light to the world. In fact, many of the calls in the Sermon on the Mount require such a servant-like identity. Jesus tells His disciples in Matthew 20 that they are not to seek positions of power as earthly rulers do, but positions of service. And a couple chapters after our passage, Jesus will make it clear that it is those who serve others that will inherit the Kingdom on the final day, over those who had flashy ministries.

The surprising twist of that final day is summed up in verse 12, which is the key to the whole passage. "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

This is a concise summary of the pervasive biblical truth that God loves humility and hates pride and will recompense each accordingly in the end. I mentioned earlier the theme of humility throughout Matthew. Twice in Luke, Jesus repeats this phrase almost word-for-word, saying, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." Apparently, this was a recurring theme of Jesus' preaching ministry.

Then Psalm 18:27 says, "You save a humble people, but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them down." Psalm 25:9, "He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble His way." Psalm 147:6, "The LORD lifts up the humble; He casts the wicked to the ground." Psalm 149:4, "For the LORD takes pleasure in His people; He adorns the humble with salvation." Proverbs 3:34, "Toward the scorers He is scornful, but to the humble He gives favor." And Peter later paraphrases this proverb saying, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Proverbs 29:23, "One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor." Isaiah 57:15 reads, "For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, *and also* with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.'" Then there is the simple observation that God blesses the humble throughout the story of Scripture but humbles the proud. "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." With this Jesus concludes His instruction to His followers and sets up His rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees that follows.

Humility is what Jesus' followers are called to, and it is what the scribes and Pharisees were missing. Their righteousness was not about loving God and loving their neighbor, as the great commandment Jesus had just mentioned called them to do, it was about their egos. Everything they did was for the purpose of building up their image. Insofar as religious observance served that end, they were diligent in their observance. But the demise of these leaders was that they believed their own myth. They came to occupy the center of their own religious practice.

I want to say, these religious leaders get a bad rap from preachers and the average Bible reader, but their actions are really quite understandable and relatable. Because for them to admit that Jesus was the Christ would be to relinquish the seat of honor they had come to love. It would mean accepting His many rebukes and corrections of their leadership. It would mean repentance and submission. It would mean giving up power and prominence they had worked their entire lives to obtain. In Jesus' words, it would have meant losing their lives in order to find them. And the religious leaders of Jesus' day are hardly the only ones to fail that test of humility.

I see this same failure in every single one of the examples I mentioned at the beginning and countless other examples like them. And I see the threat of this failure in my own heart that wants everything to be about me. I struggle against pride every day, and never more than on the days I preach.

Underlying every moral failure and abuse, indeed underlying every sin, is the basic attitude of pride, the basic belief that the pastor, apologist, leader, or anyone else is the center of a ministry. In the examples from the beginning, this attitude manifested itself in strange ways like people being told not to make eye contact with the leader. And in sickening ways like justifying sexual coercion by saying it was needed to cope with the stress of being such an important ministry leader. The Bible was quoted, and the judgement of God invoked to justify sin, silence victims, and protect dynamic leaders. Such a reality should sicken us all and cause us to consider the culture in which these things occurred with sober judgement.

This is why the "celebrity pastor" culture that is prevalent right now is so dangerous. Because every pastor or leader is fallible and at times makes errors. And it is the rare person who can resist the push to occupy the central place of honor, when voices all around you are suggesting, whether implicitly or explicitly, that you belong there. This is the danger of being called "rabbi", or calling

someone “father”, or being called “leader”. Such titles are a lie when they represent a belief that some leader or another can do no wrong, and we generally believe any lie that is told to us often enough.

And the ultimate tragedy is that perpetuating such lies causes the Gospel of the true Rabbi, Father, and Christ to be obscured every time a false gospel built around a false savior propped up by lies collapses leaving devastation in its wake. As Jesus goes on to say of the ministry of the scribes and Pharisees, those suffering such a delusion of pride shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. Because every time it happens people think, “That’s Christianity.” It is not; it is idolatry. And what becomes of the Gospel in the eyes of the victims of those idolatries? It very often shuts the door to the Kingdom in their faces. I can think of nothing worse to do to a person than that.

Jesus will spend the rest of this chapter cursing and lamenting such a religious system. God, forbid we support such a system in our culture. The way to guard against it is simply to take Jesus’ words seriously. Do not look to anyone and do not let anyone look to you as the ultimate, infallible authority. Jesus alone occupies that position of prominence. Do not let anyone make you, and don’t you make anyone else the center of your faith or religious practice, because Jesus alone is the object of our faith, and the essential cornerstone.

Beware of emulating or encouraging people who seek the limelight. By all means, obey what they teach insofar as they are faithful to the Word of God. Enjoy good YouTube and podcast sermons. By the grace of God, He brings good even out of prideful intent, and the Gospel is preached even by those with selfish ambition. But do not seek the honor of men, or your own honor at all, and beware of those who do, because such pursuits inevitably conflict with seeking the honor of God, if given enough time. In short, be a humble servant, and emulate other humble servants. We serve for the glory of God, and not our own.

As we prepare to celebrate the Lord’s table, let us remember that no one exemplified this humility better or more radically than Jesus “who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, began born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted in the end.