

19th S after Pent (reading for 22nd) (10/8/23 - SJ SM)

Matthew 23:1–12 - Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ²“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. ³So 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. ⁴They 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. ⁵“Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; ⁶they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; ⁷they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others. ⁸“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. ¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant. ¹²For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

In the name of the one who came to share his eternal glory with us, Jesus Christ our Savior, dear fellow redeemed:

First of all, this isn’t really the normal reading for today. I took it from the last Sunday of the month, in part because by my calculations, it will only be used about once every 10 or 12 years, and it deserves to be used more often than that. (If you’re wondering about the years, it’s because of the three year cycle and that almost all the time it will fall on the Sunday we celebrate Reformation on) – and to be honest, it deserves and needs to be heard more often than once every decade or so.

So we turn our attention to how we are to:

Give Glory to God by Your Life

1. By doing what is right
2. By doing it for the right reasons

1. By doing what is right

Time and again, the pharisees and teachers of the law (also sometimes called the scribes or experts in the law) showed themselves to be the enemies of Jesus. They criticized him. They accused him of ignoring Moses and the prophets. They came to him with trick questions to embarrass him and destroy his popularity.

So we might be a bit surprised when Jesus says today: **The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. ³So you must be careful to do everything they tell you.**

Despite everything else, they still were God’s representative. God had placed them in their positions and they were still to give them the obedience they deserved. They were especially to listen to them as they taught them God’s Word.

Yet Jesus also warned, **But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.** They were hypocrites, literally as we say, “not practicing what they preached.” Their “righteousness” consisted in freedom from huge sinful acts like murder, robbery and adultery and in rigorously and following the law to the tiniest and most ridiculous extremes.

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. They took God’s commands to extremes, such as actually counting out seeds to make sure they gave they gave exactly 10% or counting every step on the Sabbath day.

We recognize that the pharisees failed to understand the all-important point that a person cannot save themselves by their own efforts. No matter how hard anyone tries, they will always fall short. As Isaiah taught, **All our righteous deeds are like filthy garments.** (Is 64:6) Jesus also warned us: **unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.** (Mt 5:20).

Of course the real problem with the pharisees and scribes is they were trying to do the impossible. No matter what you do, no matter what you do, you cannot save yourself. Only Jesus can save us. God wants us to do what is right and as God’s children we want to do what is right, but not to save us. We want to give to God by our lives by doing what is right, because it is right and because we know it is pleasing to God.

2. By doing it for the right reasons

As Jesus speaks about the Pharisees and scribes, it becomes obvious that although it looked like they were giving glory to God, that wasn’t really the case and Jesus explains why: **Everything they do is done for people to see.**

One thing that can be hard, sometimes very hard, for people to understand is that two people can do the exact same thing and for one of them it is pleasing to God and yet the actions of the other person – doing exactly the same thing – is not

pleasing to God, even sinful in the eyes of God.

In our text, Jesus points out how the scribes and pharisees managed to turn ordinary things into sinful activities. Sitting at a meal or calling someone a respectful name like pastor, teacher, or judge can become sinful if all someone cares about is the honor and praise of other human beings.

Jesus talks about the religious way that many Jews dressed. They wore religious jewelry, boxes with Bible passages written inside. They wore religious clothing to make sure everyone could see their religion. Don't we see the same thing today? Some people wear a cross as a precious reminder of their Savior, wanting a reminder of the cost of their salvation. But others wear a cross for it to be seen by others, not as a confession of faith, but pretty much merely as a fashion statement. I'm sure we've all seen famous people who wear huge crosses, but they aren't Christians. They think it looks good, but it certainly isn't god-pleasing.

Remember that nothing done without faith is pleasing to God. Nothing done in unbelief is acceptable to God; it is always tainted by unbelief. The sacrifices that Cain and Abel brought to God weren't fundamentally different, yet Abel's was accepted because of his faith and love for God, while Cain's sacrifice was rejected because of his unbelief.

Even coming to church can be sinful, if we do it for the wrong reasons. I once was shocked when a lifelong member dropped by and announced he was leaving the church. He explained that he had only become to church because of a promise he had made to his parents to stay a member as long as they were alive, but now they were both dead, so he didn't have to go anymore. All those years, all those years sitting through services, he wasn't there to worship God, he was there merely to make his parents happy. He was doing something we would think of as right, but his motivation was all wrong, and as a result, it was not pleasing to God.

Some people have wanted to buy something for church as a memorial. But they insist on something in front with a plaque that everyone will see. It's impossible to read people's minds, but when the gift has to be something front and center that someone will see every Sunday, you do have to kind of wonder about the motivation. Is it given to honor a person or to honor God?

On the other hand, years ago I was filling in for a pastor on vacation and I happened to notice the cross on the altar. In huge letters it proclaimed on the base: "Given to the glory of God!" In small letters underneath that it mentioned that it was a memorial for someone.

I'm not suggesting that those words "to the glory of God" have to be printed on every memorial; they don't. But that is exactly the attitude Jesus wants us to have. Do you remember what God told the prophet Samuel when he was impressed by David's older brother? **Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.** (1 Sam 16:7)

Why? Because not only are we to live to the glory of God but we are to be motivated by the love of God! Let all our lives, all our words, all our actions, all our thoughts be always motivated by our love for the Savior. In all we do, we do it to the glory of God! To God alone be the glory! Amen.