

The Rise of the Servant Leader

Communion

November 1, 2020

Matthew 23: 1-12

¹ Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ² "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; ³ therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. ⁵ They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. ⁶ They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷ and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. ⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. ⁹ And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.

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



Welcome to our next worship series, "Entrusted". During the month of November we will dive into Matthew's gospel, exploring the call to accept the mantle of

responsibility that God has entrusted us with as we seek to do the work that God has given to us as a church and as a Christian. I chose this image for this series as we all have a part to play, we are all part of the puzzle, so to speak. Each are unique, but together we paint a picture of faith and love for the world to see.

As we start this worship series, we begin this morning with “The Rise of the Servant Leader”. I chose this image for this morning because, to me, the image of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet represents what true servant leaders are all about – placing others before themselves. As servant leaders called to follow the example of Jesus Christ, we each need to find our place, to complete our small part of the puzzle, for the building of the kingdom of God. Let us pray...



When I was fourteen, I took a job at the Welles-Turner Memorial Library. During the school year, on most days, I would walk the 1.5 miles from the high school to the library. My Mom or Dad would pick me up later, when my shift was over.



Growing up in Connecticut, you could not get your driver’s license until you were sixteen. To get a “regular job” you also had to be sixteen. Before they turned sixteen, many of my friends worked in the tobacco fields or orchards during the summer. It was legal to do agricultural work after your fourteenth birthday, but that was only available during the summer. I wanted a job that paid year-round, so I found a job at the only place where you could work year-round as a fourteen-year-old – the public library. Well, I was the only male employee at the library. Yes, my friends were not shy about pointing that out. I worked and saved; I was able to buy a car and my first guitar and amp, some of my own clothes. In my circle of friends, no one wanted to work at the library. But there I learned how to be responsible, how to put in a good day’s work, and how to manage and save money. Many of you here and tuning in at home probably also have a story about your first job and the lessons that you learned from that job.

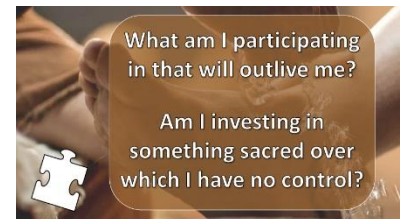
I begin with this story today because it reminds us all that life, like faith, takes some hard work and that it comes with some responsibilities. If we are each



going to truly be servant leaders in our church and in our communities - and places of work and classrooms and neighborhoods... - we must first understand that we are not simply consumers or passive participants. We

are called to be active participants. Church is not just a place we come to be entertained or to be made to feel better – although it can do both. Faith is not just something we practice just to make our own lives better – although it most certainly does this. Our church and our faith are not just for our own personal benefit. We are a part of a church and we are people of faith not only because these make life better, but also because they help make other people’s lives

better too. Here we connect into the two questions that I focused on in the message last week: *What am I participating in that will outlive me? Am I investing in something sacred over which I have no control?*



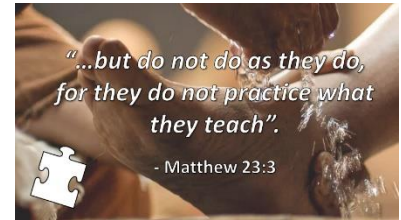
When we are willing to invest of ourselves in things bigger, sacred, forever, then we will be giving to the world instead of taking from it. This is the way of Christ. This is one of our responsibilities as followers of Christ. Turn with me to Matthew



23 as we begin to explore the call to be a servant leader in the kingdom of God. Jesus has just finished the interaction from last week – naming the two greatest commandments (to love God and to love neighbor). In

today’s passage, Jesus begins to speak about the scribes and Pharisees. It is almost as if they are not there anymore, but they probably are still present.

Jesus begins by acknowledging their authority to speak – *“they sit on Moses’ seat”*. Because of their place of authority, Jesus tells the people that they should listen to and do what the scribes and Pharisees teach. However, in verse three there also comes this stern warning: *“but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach”*.



There is a disconnect between what the religious leaders teach and what they do. You know what we call people like this today, right? Hypocrites. People who say one thing and then go out and do another. Today these are the folks that agree that we should love God with all that we are but live a greedy, self-centered life. These are the folks that nod in agreement with the Biblical principle of loving our neighbors yet do nothing to express love for those living around them.

As we continue on in Matthew 23, Jesus gives a few examples of how the religious leaders are failing to practice what they teach. The first is laying heavy burdens upon the people. The scribes and Pharisees have compiled a long list of laws to follow – so much so that they have become impossible to bear. And yet the religious leaders do nothing that would actually help the people to keep all of these laws. The second is their love of prestige – of being seen. All of the good they do is covered in pomp and circumstance – for all to see. Devout Jews wore small phylactery boxes – boxes strapped to the forearm or forehead that contains paper with scripture written on them. Many still do today, as shown in these images.



Rabbis, young women, even soldiers wear these as tangible reminders of God’s word and presence with them. Today, many Christians wear a cross or have one on their cars to remind them of their faith.

The phylacteries worn by the scribes and Pharisees were extra-large so as to be on full display. They wanted people to notice the size of the box. The religious leaders also wore extra-long tassels. The fringes or tassels on their robes was a symbol of the Jew's connection to God. Each tassel had a blue strand – reminding them of the robe of the high priest. This strand reminded them that they were all priests in service to God. Each tassel had eight threads and five knots. When the tassels were totaled up, they would add up to 613 – the number of commandments in the Torah. Wearing longer than normal tassels would draw attention to one's apparent holiness. Today, tassels are worn mostly on prayer shawls used during the daily times of prayer, as shown in this picture.



The scribes and Pharisees wanted the prime seats at gatherings and wanted everyone to call them 'rabbi', a title that set them above and beyond the rest of the people of God. While the Pharisees did have down pat the correct performance of outward rituals and rites, and while they clearly knew the orthodox teachings of the Old Testament, these things had become an end unto themselves. Today it would look something like this: after sharing in the words for holy communion, as I ask you to bow your heads in a time of silent prayer and confession, I ponder what I might be having for lunch later in the day. If I only model the behavior but do not actually confess my sins to God, then what good is it really? I can stand up here and encourage you to read your Bibles and to pray every day. But if the only time I look at my Bible is when I am preparing the message, then am I really practicing what I teach?

This part of the passage reminds me of a lesson that my oldest son taught me. For many of my teaching years, I led a small group of students one morning each week that met before school to study the Bible and to pray together. As Matthew was just entering high school my involvement in the youth program at the church had connected me to a group that met at the high school called "Allies". This group that met at Central was the forerunner of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes group that would continue to meet one morning a week before school. I thought it important for Matthew to continue to have this weekly faith connection as he transitioned to the high school. After much back and forth, I finally got him to go to the FCA group for a couple of weeks. But, after just a few times, he refused to go any more.

Now, Matthew was not anti-faith or even struggling with his faith. He came to church each Sunday without a fight, he was a leader in the youth group, and even had a role on the conference level through CCYM. During one more go-round of trying to get him to go to the FCA group at school, Matthew finally admitted why he did not want to go. He said that most of the kids that came, yes, they wore their Jesus t-shirts and their crosses – the modern phylactery and tassel – and, yes, they wanted to look all spiritual. But they would turn around later in the day and brag about how they drank and partied and had sex every weekend. They were arrogant and condescending towards others at school who were not part of their "in" crowd. Matthew did not want anything to do with that kind of Christianity. I could not blame him. That is how Jesus sees the actions of the scribes and Pharisees when compared to what they taught the people.





In our passage today, Jesus is also making sure that we understand that God's blessings are not just for our comfort or for our fame. Through study and hard work, the religious leaders had become scribes and Pharisees.

They were blessed by this position – respected, cared for, protected. But they got comfortable, they got lazy. They wanted others to be impressed by their words, by the things they did in the temple, by their outward appearances. But they did not want to live out what they preached. That was much harder work. They were okay with the "leader" part, not so much with the "servant" part. Sometimes we can fall into that trap.

To be honest, this can be a temptation or struggle today for me. For a pastor, the "work of the church" can easily take up more and more time. It feels so important. But when that happens, soon the time for Sabbath rest and the time for individual study and prayer can take a back seat. Family time and relationships then begin to suffer as well. This is true for us all, no matter what our occupation or place in life. Work or a new interest or hobby or sport or whatever can grab our whole attention. Soon enough we are giving lip service to the other areas and parts of our life, if we give them any time at all. Trying to be who or what others think we should be can also draw us deeper into trying to appear to be what we are not. Church can even become this. We can be here on Sunday, but we are not really engaged, we are not really being changed. When we walk down these roads too long, we forget who we really are. For the Pharisees, all of this is what led them to be purveyors of religion instead of people of actual faith. In their role, they were performing their duties and speaking the right words. They were just not living out their faith.

Moving into verses eight through ten, Jesus focuses us in on the correct authority. Here Jesus directs his listeners then and us today to be students of the one teacher, the one instructor, the Messiah. Jesus was the embodiment of loving God with all of one's heart, soul, mind, and strength. He was the personification of loving neighbor as self. Here Jesus is calling us to follow his example alone. In verse eleven, he speaks of himself. Here Jesus says, *"The greatest among you will be your servant"*. In just a few days Jesus will kneel at the feet of each disciple, lovingly washing their feet. And then he will kneel to take the whipping, to endure the pain, to walk the road that leads to the grave – all in service to you and to me. In the next verse, verse twelve, Jesus adds the warning, *"All who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted"*. Here he is speaking as much to the scribes and Pharisees as he is to his followers there that day and to us here today.



The scribes and Pharisees loved the title "rabbi" because it set them apart from and above the common people. Today some use the term "Christian" to try and set themselves apart from or above others. Jesus' followers would never attain the title of "rabbi". It was never in the cards. Many who followed Jesus would indeed be teachers. Since the time of Jesus, in fact, many people have taught and modeled the ways and teachings of Jesus for others. Today, in our church, we will remember some of these saints. The warning about exalting oneself is a warning not to be like the scribes and Pharisees. It is a warning not to practice a superficial or shallow Christianity. It is a call to humble servant leadership.

In the days and years and centuries since Jesus first set the example of servant leadership, many have faithfully accepted the call to "*come and follow*". The rise of the servant leader is what took the good news from Jerusalem and Israel out to all of the known corners of the world, establishing the first churches. God continues to call up servant leaders, Christians who are willing to rise up and go forth to continue to share the good news of Jesus Christ, to be hope for the world, to be light in the darkness. In the time that we are now living, there are people all around us who are struggling – they feel hopeless or helpless. Because of the pandemic, many people feel a lack of control. They feel stuck, they feel unable to gain any positive motion. The world is spinning, and they cannot find a way to be grounded, to be connected to life. As people of faith, we can offer hope as we speak words of light and love, words of value and worth and belonging. As people of faith living out our faith, we can offer help to those who are struggling. We all have gifts and blessings to share with those who are feeling helpless or hopeless. We can each make a difference in another's life.

As we consider this call, may we each seek to find our way to be the light and love of Christ in the world. In humble service, may we each go where the Lord leads us this week – washing feet, caring for needs, offering comfort, being his presence. May it be so for each of us. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. How have you followed Jesus more closely over the last few months or years? What is your “growing edge” that you can work on next?
- 2) *Pray*. Where/when do you tend to be more Pharisee than disciple? Pray for a Holy Spirit intercession to guide you in a more faithful walk of faith.
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 23: 13-36 – Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes. Where do you find conviction in these woes? Where are you faithful?