

Matthew 23:1-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 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. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

How do you suppose those outside of the Church perceive us?
And what do those of our community think about 1st Pres. Church?

On Tuesday evening a lot of people were grateful for this church.
Something like 750 hotdogs and almost 20 gallons of hot chocolate
were consumed at our Trunk or Treat, a huge event this year,
and by those efforts, our welcome, generosity and service,
I'd say, by our words & actions we proclaimed the Gospel...

... because we did what we did, we served because Jesus is Lord,
and so we welcomed all, recognizing each person's value and worth.

Our Trunk or Treat was a declaration to families that, they matter,
that they and their children are loved and are precious to God.
That is the Good News message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,
the truth about the Lord that Jesus lived and proclaimed.

In response to God's love and grace, compassion and blessings,
we are called to be dispensers of God's love, grace and blessings,
by reflecting
God's compassion and generosity toward our neighbors,
which is exactly what we were trying to do!

For if we are in an authentic relationship with God through Christ,
as Paul pointed out, love will guide what we do & say, 1 Cor 13:1, 3-4.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant.

And that truth, is where the Pharisees got the message wrong,
because then they focused on outward behavior and looking pious
instead of living toward an authentic relationship with God.

In Matthew 22, Jesus was at the Temple in Jerusalem teaching,
and the religious leaders were attempting to discredit Jesus
by asking trick-questions repeatedly trying to trip him up,
which Jesus turned back on them exposing their hypocrisy.

In chapter 23, Jesus summarizes their failure as religious leaders,
which would eventually drive them to arrest and crucify the Lord.

It's important to realize and appreciate
that the problem Jesus had with the scribes and Pharisees
was not their avid focus on obeying God's commandments,
but that they missed the point, the graciousness of God, vs. 1-3

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on **Moses’ seat**;
therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, **for they do not practice what they teach.**

on Moses' seat is a technical term for teaching from Scripture,
and also may have been an actual seat in the synagogue,
which symbolized the teaching authority of Moses.

Jesus is saying that their teaching of Scripture was fine.
His complaint was the overwhelming hypocrisy of their lives --
in the way their lives lacked integrity and authenticity,
that their life style didn't match their words & teaching.

Jesus was critical of the scribes and Pharisees
because they not only didn't practice what they taught,
but they made up & added more details and demands to God's Law,
increasing the burden on others while seeking public acclaim.

So rather than helping the people along their faith journey,
rather than encouraging them to know, serve and love God,
they focused on minor details and external appearances, vs 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.

Jesus was opposed to the ways of the scribes and Pharisees,
because they were erecting man-made barriers of rituals and rules
that made God's gracious love for humanity less accessible,
just as the prophet Jeremiah had complained earlier, 23:1, 11, 16
Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Both prophet and priest are
ungodly; even in my house I have found their wickedness, says the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts: Do not listen to the
words of the prophets who prophesy to you; they are deluding you.

For the sake of their own pride and to appear more holy than others,
they made holiness and faithfulness to God more difficult,
and they were standing between God and his beloved children,
for keeping the Law without mercy misses the point.

Calling the Pharisees on their hypocrisy and lack of integrity,
Jesus points out how they perverted the truth & purpose of God. vs. 5
They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their **phylacteries** broad and their **fringes** long.

Jesus was referring back to a passage from the book of Deuteronomy,
which describes how to keep God as the focus of our lives, 6:6-9
Keep these words that I am commanding you today **in your heart**. Recite them to your children and talk about them
when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a **sign on your hand**, fix
them as an **emblem on your forehead**, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

During the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament,
upon returning back to Israel from the Babylonian Exile,
scribes & Pharisees would write out God's commandments on paper,
which they put into little black boxes called phylacteries,
which they then tied to their wrists and foreheads...
... and so they looked very pious, to be seen & admired by other people.

But that's not what God really wanted or intended, when he said,
"Keep these words that I am commanding you today **in your heart**"

What God really wanted, intended and desired for them,
was for his people to obey and live by his commandments,
and probably not just wear them in little black boxes.

The fringe Jesus mentioned was supposed to be a constant reminder,
so that whenever you moved, the fringe would catch your eye,
so you would then remember that God is present with us always,
and that all that we do and say does matter to God.

The fringe and phylacteries were to be a reminder to ask oneself,
"Is what I am doing, is what I am saying or thinking,

is it consistent with God's command and love for me?"

But instead they turned this into a public show of religious piety,
with extra-long tassels hanging down to impress other people,
and **it was no longer about remembering grace with gratitude.**

It was no longer about trying to please and obey God, as much as
it became a practice of piety intended to impress other people,
which was soundly rejected by Jesus.

The point is, we are to respond to God's love with our whole being,
heart, soul, mind and strength,
which often takes its form in love of neighbor, **Matthew 22:37-39,**
Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your
mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

This wasn't given to be an onerous requirement, duty or demand,
but to emerge as our natural our heartfelt desire to please
and reflect God's gracious love **that we have received-**
if we get our relationships right,
all the rest of life will fall right into place.

knowing that

Jesus severely chastised and condemned the religious leaders
because their ritual religious practices all focused outward,
and more about making a good impression & looking pious,
than in truly expressing godly-affections of the heart.

Where the Scribes and Pharisees
were concerned with establishing their own honor and prestige,
in contrast, Jesus calls his disciples to a different path,
the critical difference between hypocrisy and integrity.

Integrity describes a life truly grounded in God holy word and will.

Integrity does not mean we are sinless or entirely without fault,
but it's the genuineness and trusting authenticity
that comes from a real and growing relationship with God,
as we are either walking toward Jesus or we are walking away.

When my focus and trust are truly on God's steadfast love & promises,
then that will reshape my life, everything that I think, do and say.

Our call and task is to be responsive to God's love and grace,
and as disciples of Jesus, to look for what God is doing
in this world, in the church and in people's lives,
--- and joyfully joining in with whatever God is up to.

The purpose and point of this text it that **Christ calls us**
to an authentic life of discipleship toward true integrity
by offering ourselves in useful humble servanthood,

in how we live, and in how we love,
in how we work, and in how we play,
in how we give, and in how we forgive,
which in fact, **is the very essence of our Christian faith,**
because our God, is graciously good, loving and merciful,

and because the **Lord will always allow for another opportunity**
to live more fully and authentically into God's grace & healing,
and that is the truth & mystery we celebrate and receive
at the Lord's Table, a sacrament of God's gracious love.

As we as a congregation move toward Communion this morning,
may it have more meaning than just an empty-external act,
and may it be more than just another religious ritual...

...but carry the conviction that God gives grace unconditionally

and that our God simply chooses to love and to bless **each of us**.

When we are aware and accept grace as God's promise and truth **for us**,
that truth of God's unrelenting love and desire to bless us,
that same grace has the power to grow and transform us
into living better, more joyful and meaningful lives.

In the quiet of Communion, we might want to consider today,
What does it mean that God did choose to love and to bless me?,
and how can I best allow that grace to flow freely through me?