

**Matthew 23:1-12**  
**1 Thessalonians 2:9-13**

**First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ**  
**Sunday, November 2, 2008**

### **Being Accountable**

Matthew's narrative sneaks up on us. Over and over again, readers assume the text is talking about other people, people in Jesus' day who are an obstacle to the reign of God or whose lives are inconsistent with their words. Then with a word or phrase, Matthew pulls us out of our uninvolved solitude to hear our own names being called.

Matthew 23 is our Lord's last public message. It is a scathing accusation of the false religion which is exhibited under the disguise of truth. Some of the common people are possibly shocked at Christ's words, for they consider the Pharisees to be righteous.

Christ's exchange with the scribes and Pharisees begins with a message to the crowd exposing these religious leaders as false prophets spoken of by the true prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Zechariah, and Zephaniah. He then addresses the religious leaders directly and completely un.masks them before the crowd.

We may remind ourselves that not all the Pharisees were hypocrites. There were about 6,000 Pharisees at that time, with many more who were followers but not full members of the group. Most Pharisees were middle-class businessmen (women were not permitted to be official leaders), and undoubtedly they were sincere in their quest for truth and holiness. The name Pharisee comes from a word meaning "to separate." Pharisees were separated from the Gentiles, the unclean Jews who did not practice the law

(also called the publicans and sinners), and from any who opposed the traditions which governed their lives.

Among the Pharisees were a few members who sought true spiritual religion. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathaea are two examples. For the most part, Pharisees used their religion to promote themselves and their material gain. It is no wonder Jesus criticized and denounced them.

So the first blast in our passage today is an attack on the Jewish religious leadership. But Jesus does not address them directly. Instead, Christ speaks to the crowds and to His disciples. The main point seems to be to portray the religious authorities as bad examples and to encourage the followers of Jesus and of Matthew's church, not to imitate their prideful leadership style.

Christ's address begins with Jesus verbally giving His enemies what they have coming to them. Jesus acknowledges that the scribes and Pharisees do, in fact, teach the Law of Moses. He says they "sit on Moses' seat," and therefore, they do speak some measure of the truth.

According to Christ, the basic problem with the religious leaders is not with what they teach. Christ is criticizing what they do – or fail to do! Jesus charges, "They do not practice what they teach." He goes on to cite three specific examples. First, the scribes and Pharisees lay heavy burdens on the shoulders of others; but they do not lift a finger to help. This refers to how the leaders dictate how people should live every day according to the law. The law consists of a tangle of rules, standards, and directives; and the whole process easily degenerates into moral bean counting. There are so

many commandments, 613 of them, no human being could possibly follow all of them. No one could ever hope to keep the full weight of all those laws and carry this heavy burden, not even the scribes and Pharisees themselves. But under the teaching of Jesus, the yoke is easy, the burden light, and the goal is rest for one's soul, as Matthew records in 11:28-30.

Second, Jesus accuses that the scribes and Pharisees are more interested in appearance than in performance. A number of passages in the Old Testament call for keeping the commandments of God "as a sign on your hand...an emblem on your forehead." In strict observance of this, many Jews wear small containers or boxes filled with verses of Scripture (called phylacteries) on their arms and/or foreheads when praying. Other passages in the Old Testament require wearing tassels or fringes on the hem of one's outer garments as a reminder of the commandments. The true purpose of these phylacteries and fringes is to keep the faithful always reminded of the laws of God and to assist the worshipper in prayer. But according to Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees turn them into fashion statements. The question can be raised: Is this faith or flash, praise or pomp?

Third, Jesus criticizes the religious leaders for considering themselves to be superior to others and for consistently insisting on having the best seats at banquets and at worship. They seem to enjoy strutting through the market place and other public areas to be saluted and called by the title "rabbi," one meaning of which is "my lord," small "L."

In contrast, the followers of Jesus are not to be preoccupied with rank and prestige. Because Christ is our one true teacher and we are equals in His

eyes, we are not to elevate ourselves with the titles of rabbi or instructor. Instead, we are to assume the role of a servant, trusting that, in the coming kingdom, it will be humble service, not earthly pride and prestige, which will be rewarded.

While Jesus previously has been debating with Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees, the audience subtly changes to the crowds and the disciples. The mostly third-person language lulls us into thinking the text is still exposing the sins of the Jewish religious leaders, who constitute the hard-core opposition to Jesus. Verse 8 immediately draws the readers into the text, not on the side of Jesus, but on the side of the scribes and Pharisees.

The reason is the narrator wants Christian leaders who read the text not to act like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, but to be servants, to be humbly learning from their one instructor, Jesus Christ. At the same time, the narrator intends that the ordinary membership of the church not fall into the habit of using titles for leaders, but instead to do whatever they teach.

A question we may ask is how these religious leaders serve as negative role models. Basically, they do not practice what they teach. Their lives give no evidence that they take seriously the very law about which they endlessly debate. Consistency and wholeness are missing. The issue is not the content of their teaching, but the living out of their teaching. Jesus holds these religious leaders responsible for their claims in leadership, and holds them accountable to God for integrity in executing their claim of being called.

In a matter-of-fact statement, Jesus tells the crowd that the leaders occupy the seat of Moses; and they are the legal experts and exponents of the law. Jesus affirms respect for their role in representing the law. But Jesus qualifies their leadership, condemns their status seeking, and contrasts their practice with the new community which Christ is creating. The new people of God have one teacher, the Christ; one level, all are brothers and sisters; one Father, before whom we all bow, God in heaven; and one measure of greatness, that of being servants who humble themselves in service. This is a remarkable outline of worship and relationship in the *ἐκκλησία*, or Christian community, among those called by Christ to be His disciples.

Warren Wiersbe, in *Be Loyal*, reminds us that to the Pharisees, righteousness means outward conformity to the Law of God. They ignore the inward condition of the heart. Religion consists of obeying numerous rules which govern every detail of life, including what you do with the spices in your cupboard and on which dishes to eat certain foods! The Pharisees are careful to say and follow the right words, and perform the right ceremonies and rituals; but they do not inwardly obey the Law. God desires truth in our inward parts. To preach one thing and practice another is hypocrisy.

The Pharisees also are harder on others than they are on themselves. Jesus comes to lighten people's burdens. Jesus never asks us to do anything He has not done first. The Pharisees command, but they do not participate. They are hypocritical religious dictators, not spiritual leaders.

To these religious leaders, success means recognition by people and praise from people. They are not concerned about approval from God. They use

their religion to attract attention, not to glorify and honor God. This even means using religious ornaments to display their holiness, like wearing phylacteries on their arms and foreheads and too many and longer fringes on their garments in what they perceive to be literal obedience to Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:8.

Also, the Pharisees seek and request the best seats in the synagogue and at public dinners and events. Where a person sits bears no relationship to what a person is. Albert Einstein wrote, “Try not to become a man [or person] of success, but rather try to become a man [or person] of value.”

Matthew does not allow his readers to remain detached critics of the scribes and Pharisees. Instead we are confronted with the demand for a righteousness with a style of leadership and following which acknowledges one divine source of authority. A true spiritual leader directs the people into freedom and a closer fellowship with Christ, not into bondage to his or her ideas and beliefs. True greatness is found in serving others, not in forcing others to serve us. True greatness is not manufactured; it can only come from God as we obey Him. If we reward ourselves, God will humble us. But if we humble ourselves, in due time God will reward us.

Today we celebrate All Saints’ Day. We especially remember God’s children from this faith community who are living their eternal lives. They are not alone. They are with others who have gone before. All of them rejoice with God and wait for us and for the Second Coming of our Lord. These saints did not rely on the trappings of the Pharisees. They relied on their faith and trust in God through Christ Jesus. They lived humbly and

have been rewarded. May we also avoid the material and other trappings of our worldly lives and live humbly in anticipation of the heavenly reward only our gracious God can give. May we be accountable only to our loving and forgiving God. Amen!