

SIGNIFICANT TEACHING

Sermon for the 4th mid-week Lenten Service, 2021

Matthew 23:1-12

Grace and peace to you all from our risen Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 23:1-12: ¹ **Then Jesus told the crowds and His disciples:** ² **“The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat.** ³ **Therefore, do all the things that they tell you and keep them; but do not do as they do! For they tell others but do not practise it.** ⁴ **They tie up loads that are heavy and hard to carry and lay them on other people’s shoulders but they themselves are not willing to move them with one of their fingers.** ⁵ **They do everything that they do that other people may see them. For they make their prayer-strips broad and the tassels on their garments long.** ⁶ **They love the places of honour at dinners and the most important seats in synagogues.** ⁷ **They love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by other people.** ⁸ **However, you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’! For you have only one Teacher, and you are all brothers.** ⁹ **Do not call anyone on earth ‘Father’! For you have only one Father, He who is in heaven.** ¹⁰ **Do not be called ‘teachers’! For you have only one Teacher, the Christ.** ¹¹ **He who is the greatest among you shall be your servant!** ¹² **He who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

You and I can learn a lot by *listening* to others teach us. It doesn’t matter whether we are at school or out in the workforce - even at church. We can listen to others who have accumulated a lot of knowledge and wisdom that can be of much benefit to us.

You and I can also learn a lot by *watching* others. Some of what we learn by watching others can be good and beneficial, but some of it may be negative and harmful. In such cases, we ought to learn not to act that way.

For example, we can learn valuable lessons in humility by watching how a humble person responds to praise and accolades when they come his or her way. They may deflect them or make sure that they direct praise to others who helped them. We can observe how they always consider the needs of others to be more important than their own.

On the other hand, we can learn how not to conduct ourselves when we observe the actions of an arrogant, conceited person. We see how he or she is always self-promoting and always considering others and their needs less important by comparison to their own. We see how they walk around with a sense of smug superiority.

In our Scripture lesson for today, Jesus, always the Teacher, refers to both types of learning - listening and watching - when He speaks to the crowds and His disciples.

It is Tuesday of Holy Week, and Jesus was only three days away from being arrested, tried, convicted, crucified, killed, and buried. Jesus called attention to **“The scribes and the Pharisees (who) sit in Moses’ seat.”**

Now, we must admit that we do not know anything about this “Moses’ seat” to which Jesus refers. Some speculate that it was a specific piece of furniture in a synagogue. Others speculate that it was not a physical piece of furniture but a figurative position or way of teaching that aligns with the teachings of Moses. In the end, we don’t know, but it does appear to be an honoured and authoritative position of teaching to say the least.

Jesus cautioned the crowds and His disciples by saying, **“Therefore, do all the things that they tell you and keep them; but do not do as they do!”** Insofar as the scribes and the Pharisees were in fact reading and transmitting to the people the actual words of Moses, Christ is fine with the crowds and His disciples following them - He does not deny that the scribes and Pharisees are Moses’ successors and teach with His authority. However, Jesus also makes it clear that the *actions of the scribes and the Pharisees do not match their words.* They say one thing and do another - the definition of a hypocrite.

Jesus goes on to teach about some of those arrogant practices of the scribes and Pharisees. He says, **“They do everything that they do that other people may see them.”**

It was public recognition and smugness that they were seeking. They wanted the praise of others for the pious practice of their religion. They wanted to be recognised as an example by all who saw them. Jesus said, **“For they make their prayer-strips broad and the tassels on their garments long.”** The prayer-strip was tied around a person’s forehead or arms in obedience to Deuteronomy 6:8, *“You shall tie them as a sign on your wrist, and they shall become headbands on your forehead!”* The tassels were blue strands that attached to the corners of their garments to

remind them of the Ten Commandments. This was in obedience to Numbers 15:38-40, "*Speak to the Israelites and tell them to make tassels for themselves on the corners of their garments throughout their coming generations and to attach a cord of purple wool to the tassel on each corner!*"³⁹ *They shall become your tassels! You shall look at them and remember all the Commandments of the LORD, that you may obey them and may not eagerly go after what you desire in your hearts and what your eyes see! You used to run wantonly after these things.*"⁴⁰ *Do this, that you may remember to obey all My Commandments and may be holy to your God!*" Again, by making their "**prayer-strips broad**" and their "**garments long**," the point was to draw attention to themselves, to make them be seen as being superior. It was all self-focused and self-centred.

Again, Jesus said, "**They love the places of honour at dinners and the most important seats in synagogues.**" The scribes and Pharisees loved to be seen and loved the privileges that came with their positions. The best seats were the seats that allowed them to be seen and heard by all. A lowly seat off to the side? That was for others, not them! They also loved their public recognition. Jesus said, "**They love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by other people.**" Apparently, in some circles, they were quite popular. After all, they were receiving public recognition and greeting.

Jesus taught the crowds and His disciples, "**do not do as they do!**" The very fact that Jesus warned the crowds and His disciples about such pride-filled behaviour should serve to warn us as well. It is the very nature of sin and the sinful nature with which we are conceived and born to focus on ourselves and to promote ourselves, and how easily sinful pride can rear its ugly head in our midst! We spend much time and effort working towards the upkeep of the church, and nobody says anything in the way of praise. So we decide we're never helping out again. Others get their names mentioned for things they've accomplished, and we resent it because we think we're more deserving of that recognition. Or worst of all, we begin to believe we are a little more worthy of God's blessings than are others because of all we've done or all that we know about the Bible or how often we're in church worshipping and studying the Scriptures. A feeling of spiritual superiority is so easily obtained when we take our eyes off our Saviour and focus them on ourselves.

Jesus goes on to teach His hearers that "**He who is the greatest among you shall be your servant!**" How ironic when we stop to think about the events in our text from Tuesday in Holy Week. The One who is speaking these words in our text, the Teacher, is the God-man, Jesus Christ. He is the One who actually is deserving of glory, honour, and worship, and yet, as Paul writes in Philippians 2, Jesus is the one "*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.*" Ultimately, "*He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*" (Phil. 2:6-7, 8).

That "death on a cross" covers all of our sin - even our own misguided, excessive pride and arrogance. The slate has been wiped clean, and no sin and guilt remain. God has removed them "*as far as the east is from the west*" (Psalm 103:12). The One who has humbled Himself has taken care of it all for us and in our place.

It is that same Jesus who says near the end of our text, "**He who is the greatest among you shall be your servant!**" How true in His case. He is the greatest ever to be among us... and how He has served all of us by His life, death, and resurrection!

We can learn a great deal both by listening to our Saviour's teaching and by watching His example. May God be at work in us daily to keep our eyes focused on Jesus, not on ourselves, to serve God and our neighbour in all humility. For as Jesus has said, "**He who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.**" Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.