

November 5, 2023
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 23:1-12

Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation 'Rabbi.' As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.' You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. Do not be called 'Master'; you have but one master, the Messiah. The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Background:

In last Sunday's Gospel text, Jesus was asked by one of the Pharisees what was the greatest commandment. He responded citing two familiar texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, making love of God and love of neighbor the two most important commandments in the whole law.

Following that Gospel text, Matthew describes an incident where Jesus asks the Pharisees a question. Jesus takes their answer and uses another passage of the Hebrew scripture to demonstrate that their answer is not correct. The text ends "No one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare to ask him any more questions." (Matthew 22:46)

Scripture scholars believe that the hostile relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees is more representative of the community for which Matthew is writing his Gospel than Jesus' own relationship with them. Some even believe that Jesus never delivered this address against the scribes and the Pharisees but that it represents the early Christians' relationships to the scribes and Pharisees after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In Luke's Gospel Jesus seems to enjoy a good relationship with at least some of the Pharisees. Even here in this text, Jesus' statement that his disciples should observe the teachings of the Pharisees is a compliment that indicates that Jesus believes they know the scriptures and approves of the way they interpret them. The more critical attitude toward them is reflected in Jesus' statement that they are not to be imitated because they do not live by their own teachings. Jesus calls them "hypocrites" or actors eight times in the course of Matthew's Gospel.

Among the Pharisees, there were those who believed every law was important and must be observed. Others taught that some laws were heavy (serious) and other were light. The text indicates that following every law could be "heavy" burden. In a culture where one's worth and existence is dependent on the community, some recognition of the community is vital. Jesus' criticism of the scribes and the Pharisees can be best understood as excessive seeking of esteem and recognition. Even in this culture where maintaining honor and status in the community was important, there was also a sense of never wanting to appear to be expecting or wanting recognition.

Toward the end of the text, Jesus addresses the disciples directly. Here his concern is about the scribes and Pharisees' use of titles. To call someone "rabbi" was a title of honor, which could be translated as "my Lord." "Father" was a term of respect given to elders. In Matthew's Gospel, it is used only in reference to God. Jesus taught his followers to call God "Father" (Matthew 6:9). In this section of the text, Jesus is asking his followers to forgo the search for the esteem of others. Rather, they should be people who practice what they preach, lighten the burden of the law for those who are trying to be faithful to God, and prefer positions of service without status.

Reflection Questions:

1. Do you strive for holiness? How is that expressed in your daily life?
2. Are there others around you whose dedication to holiness you admire? What is it about their life that seems authentic?
3. Are there also others whose striving for holiness does not seem to be authentic? Why?
4. Are there people in your community who lighten those whose lives seem to be heavily burdened?
5. Are there people in your community whose sense of holiness creates burdens for others?
6. When you think about Jesus in the Gospels, does the Jesus in this text add a facet that is less familiar or overlooked?
7. Can you take some time to talk to God about your efforts to be holy and how that affects you and those around you, or some other aspect of your relationships with God or your neighbors that arose within you as you reflected on this Gospel passage?

The Gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscs-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for November 5, 2023, the Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

A great King am I, says the Lord of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.
And now, O priests, this commandment is for you: If you do not listen,
if you do not lay it to heart, to give glory to my name, says the Lord of hosts,
I will send a curse upon you and of your blessing I will make a curse.
You have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to falter by your instruction;
you have made void the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts.
I, therefore, have made you contemptible and base before all the people,
since you do not keep my ways, but show partiality in your decisions.
Have we not all the one father? Has not the one God created us?
Why then do we break faith with one another, violating the covenant of our fathers?

In you, Lord, I have found my peace. O Lord, my heart is not proud, nor are my eyes haughty;
I busy not myself with great things, nor with things too sublime for me.
Nay rather, I have stilled and quieted my soul like a weaned child.
Like a weaned child on its mother's lap, so is my soul within me.
O Israel, hope in the Lord, both now and forever.

Brothers and sisters: We were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children. With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you not only the Gospel of God, but our very selves as well, so dearly beloved had you become to us. You recall, brothers and sisters, our toil and drudgery. Working night and day in order not to burden any of you, we proclaimed to you the Gospel of God. And for this reason we too give thanks to God, that, in receiving the word of God from hearing us, you received not a human word but the word of God, which is now at work in you who believe.

Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, saying,
"The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses.
Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. They love places of honor at banquets and in synagogues, greetings, and the salutation 'Rabbi.' As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.' You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. Do not be called 'Master'; you have but one master, the Christ. The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Excerpts from Malachi 1:14-2:2, 8-10; Psalm 131:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 2:7-9, 13; and Matthew 23:1-12

Friends,

Here are the Gospel background and reflection questions for November 5th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. In the Gospel from Matthew, Jesus tells the people to do as the Pharisees and scribes say, but not as they do. "Do all things they tell you, but do not follow their example. They preach but they do not practice. They lay heavy burdens on people's shoulders. They love places of honor. Do not be called 'Rabbi.' You are brothers; the greatest among you must be your servant."

The other readings also refer to improprieties of religious leaders, the need to share the word of God with gentle care, and the need to unite in faith, with humble hearts. In the first reading from Malachi, the Lord says, "O priests, you have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to falter by your instruction. Why do we break faith with one another, violating the covenant of our fathers?" Psalm 131 proclaims, "My heart is not proud, nor are my eyes haughty, my soul is quieted within me." In the second reading, from the first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes, "We were gentle among you, with such affection, determined to share not only the Gospel, but our very selves, so you received truly the word of God."

At least three references in this Gospel are repeated in other places in the Gospels. The reference to the burdens placed by the scribes and Pharisees recalls the earlier one where Jesus refers to these same burdens, "My yoke is easy. Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28). "Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant" also comes earlier (Mark 10:43 and Matt 20:26) where James and John ask to be at Jesus' left and right in his kingdom. The last verse of this Gospel, "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted," comes up two different times in Luke. The first is regarding taking the lowest place at a wedding banquet (Luke 14:11), and the other is in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:14).

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!