

McCabe United Methodist Church  
October 11, 2009  
“Beyond Scribes and Pharisees”  
Matthew 23:1-12  
by Pastor Gary Walters

I'm reading this morning from Matthew 23:1-12. “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.' "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

There is a book that came out entitled "Image is Everything." Some of the statistics or numbers from that book caught my attention. Here is one, I question it's accuracy, but I found it amusing at least; it said for every inch that a male is over average height they found that there was a \$600 a month increase in salary. Well I was really glad to hear that because I worked out the math and I'd be paying the church to work here if I wasn't 6'4". (just kidding.). I'm not so sure of the accuracy of that. But, my apologies to those of you who are shorter, but this is their numbers--again I don't know how accurate they are but it's worth a laugh. They did measure a few other characteristics and they found attractive people had some benefits. I don't know how they determined who was attractive or not, but they said that attractive people were four times more likely to be hired, that on average, they earned 14% more and that they were five times more likely to make friends. They did find that it wasn't just physical attractiveness or height, they did research among high school students, comparing grade point averages. What they found is that looks did not directly affect their GPA. What they did find was that for males grooming was a very significant factor when laid aside grade point average and that for the females it was personality, if they tended to be more outgoing and charming they tended to have a higher GPA.

I bring all of that up because the scribes and the Pharisees are having a bit of an image

problem in today's scripture passage, but not as we would normally think of that phrase. When somebody who is prone to lose their temper goes off on a tirade and is mad about something, we might humor them but we take it with a grain of salt. It's like "Oh, he's just spouting off again, we understand", consider the context. On the other hand, if somebody who never loses their temper or rarely loses their temper gets really, really mad about something, we tend to pay attention. Well, Jesus really loses his temper in today's passage. Jesus was one of those people who, well scripture describes him as cross. That's the Greek work for meek. Although, it doesn't translate well into English. Paul uses it when he describes the qualities of the Christian and it's the same word that Jesus uses in the Beatitudes. But cross has this idea of not being just submissive and quiet even in the face of loud, obnoxious, aggressive people, although that might sometimes be the case, but it really has with it the idea of always having the appropriate response. So, never angry at the wrong time, might translate well to our meek, but another part of that is always being angry at the right time and so, the appropriate response. That's just bonus material but it kind fits in with that whole idea that Jesus loses his temper. This is the longest sustained condemnation or argument that Jesus has in the entire gospels against any one person or group. He is mad., very mad. It's worth taking note of just what it is that sets him off.

The scribes and the Pharisees, he starts by honoring their position, after all, they are the inheritors, of the teachers of the law of Moses so pay attention to what they teach, he tells his audience, but don't do as they do. Then he goes on to described, in the next 10 versus what it is that they do that you're not supposed to follow. He actually goes on for the next chapter or so to describe it in even more detail. The contemporary English version, the Bible that we have out in the pew, unfolds this pretty clearly. For them, the law was an end in itself. It's worth noting that the scribes and the Pharisees in Jesus day were very meticulous followers of the law. In fact, in terms of outward appearance, this was the group that most resembled Jesus and his disciples in terms of their practice of faith and religion. And yet it's this group that he has the most conflict with and has the strongest words against. It's because they took the laws an end in itself so that the observance of the letter of the law was their goal rather than the intention and the purpose, the principles, behind those laws. So while they followed the letter of the law they lived very gracelessly toward their fellow Hebrews and the Gentiles and their communities and even the world at large and even really toward God. They followed the law and so they were right! Far be it for any other man or God to challenge their brand or their way of following the law. All that they did really amounted to putting on a very good show on the outside, but as long as you followed the letter of the law, it didn't matter what was in your heart or your mind, as long as you followed the letter of the law because that was the law of God and that's the way you were supposed to follow it!...end of story. For that, to that, Jesus has a very harsh response.

There are some interesting things going on in that passage, that is a topic for another day. The CVE breaks it down a little for us but in my NIV it describes that Jesus tells the crowd that your goodness should exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees. It is kind of a startling statement when you think of the scribes and the Pharisees and the meticulousness with which they followed the law. In fact it wasn't just enough to follow the law, but then they had rules about how to do that and they turned the 613 commandments of the Old Testament into thousands upon thousands upon thousands of rules in terms of what that meant and we've have talked about some of that so I won't go into it.

But it is worth noting that the scribes and the Pharisees, most of them had to be independently wealthy in order to be scribes and Pharisees, because the rigors of following the law were so demanding it made it nearly impossible to conduct your daily life in terms of making a daily living and so it was a pretty exclusive crowd. They were pretty proud about it and they let it be known that they were a step above everyone else, at least in their own eyes. When Jesus says your righteousness, that's doing what's right, need to exceed theirs, that's a pretty tall order. But we need to understand that Jesus wasn't talking about the quantity but the quality. About getting to the heart or the purpose of those laws, about that pattern of living that he had laid out for his people.

Maybe a way for us to get at it, let me describe it this way. I think we understand that Christ meets us wherever we are at. That moment of salvation we don't need to draw close to God, God is everywhere and no matter how godly or ungodly our lives look, the moment we acknowledge God, repent of our sins and cast ourselves upon his grace and mercy, he is there. He meets us wherever we are at, no matter how good or bad our lifestyle might look. But, no matter where we are at on that spectrum, God doesn't leave us there. His grace saves us, but then his grace also transforms us. So that bit by bit he draws us closer to himself and drawing us closer to himself our lives will more and more resemble or bear the fingerprint of God. But, Jesus works from the inside out. He transforms our hearts and our minds so that our words and our actions will more resemble that lifestyle that Jesus lived, that lifestyle that God presents. The scribes and the Pharisees said if I do what's right out here, if I put on a good show, then obviously everything else inside is fine, but, we know better.

That whole thing about image is everything, we are kind of born into it. Pretense comes naturally to all of us. Maybe I'm speaking about myself, but I'm really glad that there isn't a computer monitor on the side of my head revealing to you my every thought and desire. For the most part I think it would be fine, but on the other hand I'm really glad it's not there. Because, there are parts about who I am and my thoughts and where it goes sometimes that I don't want you to see. There was a challenge, or a story, that one of my seminary professors told, Dr. Tuttle, he was the evangelism professor and he gave

us this story about he and a group of his fellow students when he was in seminary. They made a pledge with one another that they would strive to work on their inner life, their thoughts and desires, so that no thought or desire would occur to them that they would not want to speak or act out in front of others. That's pretty challenging, its' very challenging. He made a comment to that, he said "You know, my behavior hasn't changed very much in 25 years but my heart has changed a lot." That's exactly, I think, where Jesus is going with this passage this morning.

In terms of how we get there, a couple of thoughts occur to me. Obviously in our lives there are things that are not very helpful for cultivating a Christ likeness. They aren't necessarily wrong but they aren't helpful. For example, not everything that we see on TV is helpful. It might not be wrong, but it definitely isn't helpful. The same could be said for what we read, conversations we end up into, where we let our thoughts wander or linger....there are a lot of places we could go with that. It occurs to me that we need to do more than just say "nope, that's off limits for me", because, I think we need to fill ourselves with Christ. The absence of sin does not produce holiness, it's the presence of God that produces holiness.

We know about coming to worship and reading our Bibles and prayer, but really just a lifestyle that will resemble or help us to reflect that love, that grace, that pattern of Christ, so that the thumbprint of God is upon us. It's not just about the prayer and the bible study, because we can do those things to the letter and it would make no difference, we need to do them in such a way that it's a part of who we are so that we adopt, we absorb, that we are transformed, so that we become the kind of people for whom that pattern of God, those the kinds of things of God come naturally. So, rather than just putting on a good show, it is our hearts and minds that are transformed. Because God isn't worried nearly as much about that outer life as he is about the condition of our hearts. Because the book may say image is everything but we know better. In fact, image is not everything. But it is, where do our hearts stand before God? The challenge then, is take Dr. Tuttle's challenge this morning, to live our inner lives in such a way that we would say or do those things before everyone and we all have places where we cover over what's in our hearts. So, go with those thoughts and live in that challenge. Would you pray with me?

Lord, continue to transform us, heart and mind and soul, into the image of your son Jesus, in Christ's name we pray, Amen.