Matthew 23:1-12

1Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,2‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat;3therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach.4They 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.5They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.6They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues,7and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have people call them rabbi.8But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.[\*](javascript:void(0);)9And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven.10Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.[\*](javascript:void(0);)11The greatest among you will be your servant.12All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

When Piety Isn’t

A question was once asked, “Which person would you respect more: a man who didn’t smoke, didn’t drink, was a vegetarian, and who was faithful to one woman for his entire life or a heavy drinker who smoked cigars incessantly, was a womanizer and quite overweight?” By these outward practices, we would of course choose to follow the former (sober, healthy, faithful man). Yet if I gave you the names of two men who had such opposite lifestyles, their names being Adolph Hitler (the sober, healthy, monogamous vegetarian) and Winston Churchill (the smoking, drinking, overweight womanizer) you would change your allegiance. Simply stated, appearances can be deceptive.

Not that there is anything wrong with sobriety and health. In fact it is the goodness of such behavior that causes the conundrum – how can a person do good things and at the same time be doing bad things? The very word *piety* according to Merriam Webster Dictionary has two opposing definitions – first it means behavior that shows reverence to God, but second it can mean hypocritical behavior. The Pharisees were doing things that seemed fine on the outside but their motivation was wrong. This is the issue that Jesus confronts in today’s lesson, and his teaching should serve as a warning to all of us – what appears to be piety, behavior that is intended to glorify God, can so often be the opposite, behavior that depreciates God.

Not all Pharisees were bad people. The Gospel of John mentions Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee and who Jesus declares was “not far from the kingdom of God.” Pharisees were often men of good intent: God had given the people of Israel His Law with the understanding that God would dwell with His people as long as they kept His Law. The problem was that not everyone agreed on how the Law was to be kept. What was entailed in “keeping the Sabbath holy?” Furthermore transgressing the Law could have dire consequences; Nadab and Abihu, Aaron’s sons, died when they made an offering with “unauthorized fire.” And so it was a worthy, righteous endeavor to determine how to interpret the Law in detail. Your life could depend upon it.

So Jesus tells his disciples to follow the teachings of the Pharisees, but don’t do behave as they do, or “do as they say; not as they do.” The Pharisees are absolutely right about following the Law. The problem is that they themselves don’t grasp the spirit of the Law; the problem lies in the heart.

To give an illustration, there is an episode of Spongebob Squarepants where Spongebob becomes a hall monitor at boating school. If you know Spongebob, he’s a very compulsive character – always neat, well-groomed, on-time, a bit of a perfectionist when it comes to making Crabby Patties - he always wins “employee of the month,” always does his homework, and strictly follows rules. Well, what often happens when one who is very good at following rules is given the authority to enforce the rules, you end up with a tyrant. Spongebob begins to enforce the rules strictly according to his own interpretation, handing out citations to anyone who fails to abide by the rules. He quickly angers his friends and isolates himself. Seeing what a monster she’s created, Mrs. Puff, the boating instructor, relieves Spongebob of his authority. In a sense, the Pharisees were acting like Spongebob, interpreting then strictly enforcing the Law of God. According to Jesus, they would “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others” (verse 4)

God gave His people Laws to strengthen relationships, not to segregate and isolate. Laws were meant to create an environment where people could dwell in peace with one another and with God. But when we use the Law as a measure of our own righteousness and we compare our abidance with that of others, the Law no longer serves its purpose – we start to compare ourselves to others who are not as compliant or obedient as ourselves. We use the Law to elevate ourselves, which creates distinctions rather than community.

And where do get this need to elevate ourselves? It comes from fear. It comes from feeling insecure about your status with God or with others. In the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), the brother who runs away and returns home is restored to his status of sonship, but the other brother resents this and is angry at the father for celebrating his brother’s return home. The angry brother thinks that his father is showing preference to his sibling when in fact the father loves both sons equally and completely. When we can grasp that God loves each one of us equally and completely, we are satisfied, and there is no need to compete with others for a love that is perfect. We have no need to feel ourselves better than others; besides, holding such feelings actually demonstrates that we are not better than others.

May God grant each of us a zeal for the Law that is inspired by our desire to love God and neighbor. Amen.