

FIRST LESSON: Micah 3: 5-12  
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 23: 1-12  
November 1, 2020

***“Beware the Hypocrisy of Leaders”***  
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Abraham Lincoln rather famously once said, “If I were two-faced, would I be wearing this one?” The prophet Micah and Jesus both had a lot to say about two-faced leaders, none of it good. Micah directed his criticism against two groups. First, he criticized the prophets—those religious leaders who tailored their messages to please the rich people who paid them. Those who did not pay up were condemned and threatened. These prophets were misusing their spiritual office in a deadly way, catering to their supporters and threatening divine retribution on everyone else. The second group were the rulers and priests who held political authority and perpetrated injustice. To them he said, “Hear this, you leaders of Jacob, you rulers of Israel, who despise justice and distort all that is right, . . . because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.” Jesus also condemned both the Sadducees who held political power and the Pharisees whose power lay in their status, wealth and social influence, for the same reasons.

This is an interesting sermon to preach right before an election. We should have a word with those who plan the lectionary readings. Leadership and hypocrisy . . . hmmm, no connection there, right? Unfortunately for us there are more than enough flawed leaders to go around, political and otherwise, some in office, some running for office, some with official political power and others in positions to influence public opinion. And not one of them is perfect.

Jesus recognized the validity of the office the Pharisees held, but he clearly had issues with the men themselves. He told the people that the teachers of the law and Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat, so you must be careful to do what they tell you, but not what they do. It’s not entirely as simple as this, however, because when Jesus came up against the Pharisees in public dispute it was often over *the way* they interpreted the law. So, Jesus was basically telling the people to listen to the law, but not the way these men interpreted the law. The scribes and Pharisees had expanded the law, first by extending regulations originally only meant for the Temple priests to include everyone. The idea was to extend holiness throughout society. This expansion effort grew in strength when the Temple was destroyed and it was the only way to keep those laws. Secondly, they taught what was referred to as the Oral Law, now of course written down, and known as the Mishnah. The Oral Law was an attempt to apply the law to changing circumstances. It was meant to be a living

thing. As society changed the law had to be applied differently. This sounds reasonable, until we realize that the net result of these changes was not to make things easier but in fact made life much, much harder. If you have ever lived next door to an Orthodox neighbor who has had to go and get you to switch on a light in their house during the Sabbath because that constituted “kindling a fire” you’ll know what I mean. The original meaning of the Sabbath laws was to provide rest, not create more work!

At the time of Jesus, the Oral Law was an ever-growing patchwork of laws meant to dictate how the law was to be followed. In practice, the result was that the only ones capable of keeping the law in this manner were financially well off. Ordinary people couldn’t afford one set of dishes, let alone two. They certainly couldn’t afford to deliberately break anything. They didn’t have the leisure time to study the scriptures. Most working people at the time of Jesus could not read. They didn’t have the ability to tithe all of their food. They were going hungry much of the time and they ate everything! The ordinary day laborer couldn’t afford the time or money to complete all of the sacrifices and rituals the Pharisees demanded. But instead of trying to help the poor, the wealthier Pharisees simply wrote them off as unworthy and inferior.

The people Jesus spoke to found themselves in the unenviable position of having to separate out what the Pharisees said that was true, and who the Pharisees were. Jesus basically made a distinction between the office and the person holding it. And as I just said, this could be as clear as mud, because mixed in with the truth was a lot of extraneous material, excess legalism, tangled arguments and added burdens. But most importantly, Jesus told the people to pay attention not just to what their leaders said, but to what they DID, and in the majority of cases, NOT follow their example. Regardless of the type of leadership, political, religious or social, what the person DOES is the true test. Someone can talk a good talk, but do they lie? Do they steal? Do they cheat on their spouse? Do they misuse people as pawns in order to get ahead? In other words, are these leaders hypocrites?

Unfortunately for us politicians haven’t changed. FORTUNATELY for us, we live in a completely different form of government called a democracy. The people in Jesus’ day could not choose their leaders. We can. We know we have a higher standard when it comes to our pastors—or at least most people do, but out of desperation we seem to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to those who influence every other area of our lives, and this is dangerous. God has not divided our lives into two parts, and neither should we. And in addition to the politicians themselves in our society there are some very powerful voices that influence public opinion, voices whose motivation is more often getting ratings, than getting at the truth. Every night on our television sets there are strident voices proclaiming two opposing versions of reality. We should believe neither without question. We should test everything, and pay close attention to the personal integrity of the person delivering the message. Television ratings thrive on intense emotions such as fear and hate, and we are being manipulated so they can make money. Proverbs 29: 8 says, “Mockers stir up a city, but the wise turn away anger.” Jesus told us not to follow the example of those who are doing what they are doing to feed their own egos and line their own pockets.

The biggest kicker of all, according to Jesus, the biggest weakness of those who crave the spotlight of leadership, is arrogance and pride. The Pharisees wanted to be admired and praised. It was all about them. Everything they did, from wearing oversized phylacteries, the leather boxes containing one or more tiny scrolls and tied around their foreheads, to extra-long fringes, was designed to impress. They loved the places of honor in the synagogues and marketplaces. They enjoyed being treated with deference. They craved the titles and the honors. But Jesus tells us, “you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one Teacher, 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 instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

In case you hadn’t noticed, we have completely blown it in this regard. The more complex the denominational hierarchy the worse it gets all the way up to His Holiness the Pope. Technically speaking I’m actually the Reverend Doctor. But I am under no illusion. I am no better than any of you. I struggle just like everyone else. Don’t even think about putting me on a pedestal, because I will fall off.

As we prepare to vote this week (if you haven’t voted already) let us approach this responsibility prayerfully and humbly. Who we put in office **does** matter. We need to beware of the hypocrisy of our leaders, and also aware of it in ourselves. Jesus reminds us that, “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” And Micah reminds us that the fate of a nation is often determined by whether its leaders are just or unjust. Amen.

Micah 3: 5-12

<sup>5</sup> This is what the Lord says:

“As for the prophets  
who lead my people astray,  
they proclaim ‘peace’  
if they have something to eat,  
but prepare to wage war against anyone  
who refuses to feed them.

<sup>6</sup> Therefore night will come over you, without visions,  
and darkness, without divination.

The sun will set for the prophets,  
and the day will go dark for them.

<sup>7</sup> The seers will be ashamed  
and the diviners disgraced.

They will all cover their faces  
because there is no answer from God.”

<sup>8</sup> But as for me, I am filled with power,  
with the Spirit of the Lord,  
and with justice and might,

to declare to Jacob his transgression,  
to Israel his sin.  
**9** Hear this, you leaders of Jacob,  
you rulers of Israel,  
who despise justice  
and distort all that is right;  
**10** who build Zion with bloodshed,  
and Jerusalem with wickedness.  
**11** Her leaders judge for a bribe,  
her priests teach for a price,  
and her prophets tell fortunes for money.  
Yet they look for the Lord's support and say,  
"Is not the Lord among us?  
No disaster will come upon us."  
**12** Therefore because of you,  
Zion will be plowed like a field,  
Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble,  
the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.

Matthew 23: 1-12

**23** Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: **2** "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. **3** So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. **4** They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

**5** "Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries<sup>[a]</sup> wide and the tassels on their garments long; **6** they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; **7** they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others.

**8** "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. **9** And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. **10** Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. **11** The greatest among you will be your servant. **12** For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.