

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

SAYING AND DOING

Matthew 23:1-12

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Dana Bjorlin

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to the disciples, 2 “The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4 They 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. 5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6 They love to have the places of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7 and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. 8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9 And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one 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 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Author’s Note: While the word “hypocrite” doesn’t appear in this week’s Gospel reading proper, it embraces much of what Jesus says in the opening verses. Furthermore, if we look at the larger context of Matthew 23, it’s a term that cannot be avoided

as one analyzes this paragraph. As a hospital chaplain, I come across words which use hypo- or hyper- as their prefixes all of the time. For example “hypoglycemia” means someone with dangerously low blood sugar; and hyperglycemia means that someone has a blood sugar reading that is dangerously high.

Taber’s Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary, Ed. 20, (c) 2005, F. A. Davis Company, Philadelphia gives the following definitions: “Hypo-, hyp- [Gr. hypo, under, beneath, below] Prefixes meaning below, under, beneath, or deficient, SEE: sub- (p. 1046); hyper- [Gr. hyper, over, above, excessive]; prefix meaning above, excessive, or beyond (p. 1027).

Jerome (Jerry) Burce shared a more detailed definition in a previous (2006) text study for Ash Wednesday (<https://crossings.org/theology/2006/theolo544.shtml>): “Hypocrite” is a direct carryover from the Greek “hypokrites” which, tugged apart, gives “under” (hypo-) and “judge” (-krites). While we’ll play with that below, herewith the truer etymology: ‘c.1225, from O.Fr. ypocrisie, from L.L. hypocrisis, from Gk. hypokrisis “acting on the stage, pretense,” from hypokrinesthai “play a part, pretend,” also “answer,” from hypo- “under” + middle voice of krinein “to sift, decide” (see crisis). The sense evolution is from “separate gradually” to “answer” to “answer a fellow actor on stage” to “play a part.” Thus hypocrite (c. 1225) is ult. Gk. hypokrites “actor on the stage, pretender”’ (www.etymonline.com).

DIAGNOSIS: “Do” Saying

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : How Am I Doing?

It’s all too human to be fond of ostentation or pretension or the look of success even when that has nothing to do with religious attire (v. 5). The sergeant’s stripes remind the

private of how hard work will be paid off with respect. The professor's notoriety gives her research assistant a clue toward fame. The executives' stock options and yearly bonuses tell the workers on the factory floor and others in the world who the truly successful are. Whether it's true or only seems that way, the world and the media tell us that fame, notoriety, and a multiplicity of finances equals security. Trouble is that we all too easily rush to believe this hype and excess. Trouble is, says Jesus, God has a different set of standards (v. 11).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Not As I Do*

I still recall those times in my youth and young adulthood when my father was seeking to give golden advice and I'd catch him in some life inconsistency. Often he'd respond, "Don't you know? You're supposed to do as I say (not as I do)." This was mostly mildly irksome and I knew that I'd caught Dad in things he could admit as his own foibles. What wasn't so mild, however, was when my own sons reached adolescence and I found the same sort of thing going on all over again. Except now I was the one saying, "Do as I say (not as I do)."

There just seems to be something about most (all?) of us, which reveals an eagle eye to catch others in less-than-noble actions, yet somehow still seeks exemption for such things when it comes to ourselves. Also true, it seems that we in the church are as likely to play pretender as were the scribes and Pharisees of old (v. 3). We pretend to be what we are not while we fear being found out for who we truly are.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Saying What's Due*

And who we really are is spelled out in Jesus' sayings of woe (vv. 13-36). Rather than being representatives of the kingdom, missionaries, or teachers of righteousness, we are those who block the doors to the kingdom; we are such poor teachers that we convert others into those heading for hell. We make false

oaths. We get sidetracked in disagreements about trifles instead of paying attention to important things. Jesus describes us like the hypocrites we are, as being full of greed and self-indulgence and lawlessness, filthy dead bones maybe only spruced up a bit for Halloween. As such, we deserve what he says is coming: our cities filled with empty houses (v. 38) and ourselves headed for the smoking stench of the garbage pit, the fires of Gehenna, the very flames of hell (v. 33).

PROGNOSIS: “Say” Doing

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Hyper-Dues Become Hyper-Kudos*

Jesus had already pointed out that although the scribes and Pharisees had the right to quote and read Moses (vv. 2-3), they themselves were not listening to Moses who had said that “a prophet like me” shall be raised up and you shall pay attention to (Deut. 18:15ff.) – that is, do what he is saying. But this promised prophet who is Jesus is not being heeded by those who occupy the Mosaic chairs of studies. We have seen (in recent weeks’ Gospel selections) Jesus’ rejection by chief priests, scribes and elders (Matt. 21) and by Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees (Matt. 22). In subsequent chapters Matthew records his rejection by Jerusalem (23:37), and finally his abandonment by the disciples (26:56) and the crowds (27:25). Jesus willingly pays the hyper-price for dues that are not his own. He is being consistent (and no hypocrite) to the content of his own preaching. He is doing as he says: “the greatest among you will be your servant” (v. 11).

Rather than fumbling with phylacteries and fringes, Jesus allows himself to be humiliated and walks the way of a servant all the way to his own condemnation and death on the cross. And in the wonderfully mysterious “sweet swap” of the gospel the apostle Paul reminds us, “Therefore God also highly exalted

(hyperupsosen) him and gave him a name that is above (hyper) every name" (Philippians 2:8-9). His is a name to be honored highly and he is a Lord to be worshipped sincerely and consistently.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : As He Says

Adolescent children often find it difficult to listen to parents whom they know to be less than they could be. But Jesus invites us to be all that he has said we can be: beloved children of his Father; highly prized brothers and sisters of our Lord and Savior Jesus himself; those, who though they really deserve the label of humble ones, have been exalted to one day rule with him who is seated among the heavens.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : See What We Can Do

Jesus invites us to give up our need to wonder "how we're doing." In him we can find a fulfillment and joy like that of a psalm we frequently sing in our gatherings of worship:

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. / Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your Holy Spirit from me. / Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain me with a willing spirit. / Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners shall return to you" (Psalm 51:10-13, NRSV).