

wAuthority and Authenticity

Matthew 23:1-12

I have a question for you this morning, have you ever heard this saying before: “Do as I say and not as I do?”

I recall my mother saying that to me often as a child when I would challenge something she had told me to do or not do. Often it seemed that what she asked of me was in opposition to what I had observed her doing herself. Why could she eat one of those freshly baked brownies a half hour before dinner and I couldn't?! I would become annoyed and frustrated that she seemed to be employing a “double standard.” As an adult and my parent, my mother had the *authority* to set the rules for our household, including guidelines for my chores, studies, and behavior, including when snacks could be consumed in relation to real meals. However, I felt that her *authenticity* was compromised when she would ask me to do something other than what I had observed her doing. As I grew older I came to realize that her intent probably was not to frustrate me, but to steer me away from things she thought might be detrimental to my well-being.

I believe my mother, in some way, saw this as a teaching tool. From my point of view, as far as teaching tools go, it was not very effective. It left out the explanation of why something was okay for her and not for me, but then there may not have been an explanation for the difference. It could be that “do as I say” was my mother's only defense against my questions.

As I grew older and processed my mother's "do as I say" message, I began to see that though we may know the difference between right and wrong behaviors, we can have a great deal of difficulty living the right way. While it may seem right to scarf down that gooey brownie as it comes out of the oven, when it diminishes your appetite for good things like chicken and vegetables, then we've just stepped over into the wrong side of the equation. Jesus understood that even though he had taught his disciples the difference between right and wrong behaviors they, too, could have trouble living the right way. Just as my mother would say to my sister and me, "do as I say, not as I do", in today's message Jesus is telling the disciples to do as the Pharisees and scribes say, however he warns them against doing as the Pharisees do.

As the religious leaders of the day, the Pharisees and scribes had the authority to teach and set rules for worship, but they did not show authenticity in their actions. Though charged with being keepers of the faith, they were far from being faithful to God. Jesus is telling the disciples that true discipleship requires both authority AND authenticity, which was sorely lacking in the religious leadership of the day.

Let's take a look at the situation:

In Jesus' day the religious leaders believed that speaking from the Moses seat in the Temple gave them authority. Their positions certainly did give them the authority to teach the Laws of Moses, but their living lacked the authenticity to back up their teaching. Jesus goes on to enumerate the ways in which they lacked authenticity. These words are similar to the messages brought by earlier prophets of God about

the shepherds of God's people: the Pharisees lacked mercy, justice and humility (Micah 6:8).

You might wonder then, if the Pharisees and scribes are lacking in authenticity, why does Jesus say to the assembled crowd, "So you must obey them and do everything they tell you"? Jesus recognizes that the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees are good and ethical. Their teachings came directly from the writings of Moses. He doesn't have a problem with their teaching, or with their religion. Jesus himself was a devout Jew. He has a problem with their actions.

According to the ethics of the time, the religious leaders were to be as strict or as lenient on the people as they would be on themselves. They were expected to uphold God's Law, but also to extend God's Grace. Instead, the religious leaders were too strict on God's people and overly lenient on themselves. The religious leaders had piled on so many rules and regulations that the common people could never hope to live up to the expectations put upon them. The religious leaders then created subtle exceptions that excused *them* from having to abide by the same traditions they expected the people to observe. The Pharisees could easily say to the people "Do as we say, not as we do. Our ways are not for you."

I like the way Eugene Peterson tells this story in *The Message*: (starting at v. 3)

"They talk a good line, but they don't live it. They don't take it into their hearts and live it out in their behavior. It's all spit-and-polish veneer.

⁴⁻⁷"Instead of giving you God's Law as food and drink by which you can banquet on God, they package it in bundles of rules, loading you down like pack animals. They seem to take pleasure in watching you stagger under these loads, and wouldn't think of lifting a finger to help. Their lives are perpetual fashion shows, embroidered prayer shawls one day and flowery prayers the next. They love to sit at the head table at church dinners, basking in the most prominent positions, preening in the radiance of public flattery, receiving honorary degrees, and getting called 'Doctor' and 'Reverend.'"

God's Law, which was meant to nourish God's people spiritually, had instead become a means to oppress and break God's people. These leaders, who were supposed to give aid and comfort to the people, instead strode around town in fancy clothes, taking the best places at public banquets, and expecting those they oppressed to address them with titles of honor and respect. Fancy clothes and flowery prayers were more important to them than helping those in need: the fatherless, the widow, and the alien.

Yet all that they did they could claim authority for doing. Didn't God's Word say to wear the phylacteries and fringes on one's garment? It might sound like a valid argument, but when you look closer you will see that the Pharisees had once again twisted or embellished the intent of God's word. Although an argument has been made that the wearing of phylacteries is a manmade invention and that the words in Deuteronomy 6 to "tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads" were meant as metaphor, still in any event many pious Jews wore phylacteries during worship, but phylacteries worn by the Pharisees were larger and

more prominent than those worn by other people and they wore them all the time, even outside the Temple. The Pharisees certainly had the authority to wear these items, but they did so without any authenticity. Instead of wearing them to show their dedication to God, they wore these exaggerated versions to impress others with their seeming piety. The same applied to the fringes on their garments that were meant to remind them of God. All the faithful who worshipped in the Temple wore the prescribed fringes on their garments, but those of the Pharisees and scribes were “supersized” so others would think that they were more spiritual because of it.

The same was true about the use of titles. The Greek philosophers of Jesus’ day were greeted with titles like Teacher and Doctor by their followers. The Pharisees sought to be hailed in a similar way by God’s people. In Jewish tradition there are three levels of teachers: Rab – meaning great; Rabbi – meaning greater, and Rabboni or Rabban- meaning the greatest. The Rabban class were considered infallible oracles in matter of religion, who often not only usurped the Law, but often God Himself. The Pharisees strove after these titles and the approbation of men, rather than seeking the approval of God. They may have had the authority to claim titles like Rabbi, but they lacked the authenticity of living out what those titles truly meant to God and His people. These leaders kept the focus on themselves and away from God to the detriment of the people that they were supposed to be serving in God’s name.

Jesus instructed his disciples to not model themselves after the religious leaders and seek these outward signs, but to live an authentic life before God and others. He knows that religious language and observing rituals alone do not make someone

faithful. Faithfulness is found in the orientation of a person's heart. And faithfulness is lived out when we use our gifts and resources for the sake of the community and not just ourselves.

The disciples had the authority to make even more disciples for Christ, not for themselves. Unlike the Pharisees who identified as either followers of Hillel or Gamaliel, the disciples had only one Teacher and that was Jesus, the Son of God. The Apostle Paul addresses this same issue in his first letter to the church at Corinth when he wrote:

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,^[a] in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹ My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ¹² What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas^[b]"; still another, "I follow Christ."

Menno Simons, for whom the Mennonites are named, believed the same way. The only authority for Christians to claim when they teach and in how they live is Christ. Jesus remains the only authority that we need to claim today.

The disciples were not to clamor after titles or the approbation of the masses. Titles of Reverend or Doctor were not to be used by Jesus' followers. If their lives were authentic there would be no need for ostentatious displays of high-powered titles,

religious icons, fancy garments, or being granted distinction by sitting in the choicest seats at church gatherings.

This made me think of a church sign I once saw that read, “A good example is the best sermon”. How true that is, we lead by example. Jesus knew that people would be drawn as much by the authentic lives of the disciples as by their words. Their authentic lives would open the door for them to teach with the authority given them by Jesus and thereby bring others into the family of God.

This brings us to another question. What would Jesus say today? In this day of TV evangelists who often behave more like spoiled rock stars than men and women of God, Jesus would say the same thing: Do as they say (as long as they are preaching My true word), but don't behave like they do. Don't clamor after wealth and fame. Don't expect others to bow to your every whim. I think it's easy to see why Jesus would have something to say about those who are in the public eye, just as he did with the Pharisees, because these are the people that the masses will use to form their opinions about Christians. But does Jesus' admonition end with them? I don't think so.

Jesus means this admonition for those of us in the pews as well. Are *we* living with authority AND authenticity? While you and I may not have private jets and an entourage like some high profile evangelists, we should remember that we are considered a “royal priesthood”. Whether we claim the title of pastor, reverend, deacon, waiter, secretary, janitor, or retiree, we are all representatives of Christ. We can have all the religious symbols we want hanging around our necks, stuck to our

refrigerators and car bumpers, or we can quote Scripture and sing hymns all day long; but if we are not living the life Jesus has called us to, a life that is true to Jesus' own personality, spirit, and character, we are no better than the Pharisees. We can have great wealth, but if we are not using that wealth to help alleviate the suffering of others, we are no better than the Pharisees. We may be well-known both within and outside our immediate circles of influence, but if we are not using our notoriety to win others to Christ, we are no better than the Pharisees.

You might ask then, how *do* we live with authority AND authenticity? I believe these words, attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, can serve as a guide:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,

grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;

to be understood, as to understand;

to be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive.

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

When we follow this example, when we seek to serve others rather than exalt ourselves, when the Word of God is within us shining like a light in a dark world, Jesus promises that “whoever humbles himself (in this life) will be exalted (in heaven),” the outcome of living a life of authority and authenticity in Christ.

Let us pray:

Lord, we have heard your words. Impress them on our hearts. Lead us from this place to live lives of authority and authenticity that we may bring glory to your holy name. AMEN

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Hatfield Church of the Brethren