

“Be Careful”

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Even when dealing with hypocrites, the leader’s heart is a heart of love.

Matthew 23:1-12

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Still learning

Last week I said that it’s not only difficult, it’s impossible, to get “money” exactly right from a biblical perspective. Christians have gone to the extremes of asceticism (self-denial) or greed (spending and/or hoarding). If you try to live in balance, you inevitably feel you’re never doing it right. Money is a major reason we need grace.

This week I’m going to make the same point about leadership. The only perfect leader who ever lived was tried by imperfect political and religious authorities, condemned ignorantly and unjustly, and put to death.

If I may push back a little on one particular leadership book, in my view there are no “irrefutable laws of leadership” – principles that work everywhere and always. The pandemic has illustrated that point for presidents, governors, business and medical professionals, teachers and school administrators, and pastors and church leaders.

One advantage Jesus had as a leader (besides being the Son of God) was that he knew what other people were thinking. Because I happen not to be omniscient, I’ve sent out a series of surveys during the pandemic. There’s one out there right now about Easter Sunday. The one before that better illustrated today’s point about leadership.

It was not surprising to learn that a significant plurality in our church family feel less connected to us than they did a year ago. But the comments were interesting. The feedback ranged from “I will never attend a service with a mask” to “We don’t come when people are not following precautions,” from “It’s time for the church to stop

promoting fear” to “You are doing an amazing job in difficult times.” If leadership is getting everyone on the same page, Jesus would have failed during a pandemic.

You would think that a three-year, 24/7 internship with Jesus would perfect leadership. The disciples listened to him, watched him, and also lived with him. Yet we know that they exhibited some of their worst behavior during the five-day period from Wednesday (when Judas betrayed him) to Thursday (when the disciples squabbled over who would be the greatest) to Friday (when Peter denied him and the rest deserted him) to Saturday (when they all hid in fear) to Sunday (when Thomas doubted).

Leadership is hard to learn, even from Jesus. One of Jesus’ final lessons in leadership came in Matthew 23. This chapter is unique in the Gospels. There’s nothing like it in Mark, Luke, or John. In this chapter Jesus says more about the Pharisees than he says in any other extended discourse. But in my view the reason for this chapter has a lot more to do with his disciples, and even with you and me and all who lead.

These lessons don’t guarantee anyone will ever follow you. They do ask some of the right questions of your heart. In all matters of leadership, be careful.

Am I willing to both follow and lead? (1-4)

Notice in verse 1 that Jesus was addressing both “the crowds” and “his disciples” (1). You know who the disciples were. By “the crowds” Matthew means a hodgepodge, especially in relation to Jesus.

It’s Tuesday of Holy Week, and Jesus is on the massive temple platform, 33 football fields of stone pavement with Herod’s temple rising toward heaven. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims are in or making their way toward Jerusalem for the Passover. Jesus has drawn the attention of many of them, having ridden into the city two days earlier on a donkey with crowds chanting Messianic Scriptures. He has sent the religious leaders reeling by turning over the money changers’ tables and rebuking the system that had turned God’s house into a profit-gouging circus. He has told self-fulfilling parables about their intent to kill him. They have tried unsuccessfully to trap him before Rome or the public by asking questions publicly like, “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” and “If seven brothers marry the same girl, who gets her in the resurrection?”

So now this mix of people – the devoted, the curious, the antagonistic – they’re all crowding around as Jesus says, “The teachers of the law (scribes) and the Pharisees...” Many must have held their breath. What will he say next? He had little positive things to say about them in Galilee and they have felt very threatened by him.

How Jesus continues from there is so stunning that some commentators and translators of the Bible think he’s being sarcastic. He says, “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you” (2-3a). What’s going on here? I don’t think he’s being sarcastic. “Be careful,” he says.

Remember that people in Jesus' day didn't have their own Bibles in their homes. Not even scribes and Pharisees did. All copies of Scripture were stored in the temples and synagogues, and only a handful of people had access to them. When it came to Scripture, they were like museum curators – and nobody else was allowed in the museum. So if you wanted to know what Moses said, they were the ones who read or quoted or summarized it for you. It's why you can't turn this chapter into a simplistic, "What Jesus is saying is that you shouldn't take someone else's word for it – study the Bible for yourself." The "crowds" in Jesus day did not have that option.

We shouldn't imagine that everything they said was an addition to the Law. But even when their tradition did add to the Law, it was an attempt to put safe boundaries around God's Word. So Jesus is saying, quite literally I believe, that imperfect as they are these scribes and Pharisees are your source for what God has said. It's a consistent New Testament principle that we are to honor human authority. It's ordained by God. The first major question Jesus is asking his disciples to consider is this: "Am I willing to both follow and lead even if the ones I'm following are imperfect?" Do leaders I follow have to get it absolutely right according to me in order for me to listen to them?

Respect for authority, however, doesn't negate discernment. "But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach" (3b). You can use your own God-given powers of discernment when you observe their actions. If you go back and review Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees in the Gospels, it is mostly about their hypocrisy. That's what this chapter is about.

It's why vulnerability and authenticity are so critical for leadership. Leaders have to say, "I might not be getting this right" – "this" being money or leadership or the Bible.

Remember that Jesus is talking about the Pharisees, but he's teaching his disciples, the Future Leaders of the Church. Jesus' complaint about the scribes and Pharisees is that "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" (4).

Whether we recognize it or not, leaders place burdens on our followers. We all do. It's an unavoidable part of leadership. We have to be willing to at least try to practice what we preach – and admit that we too fall short.

Is God's approval enough for me? (5-7)

Jesus continues with a specific example about the heart problem of the scribes and Pharisees. But remember, he's really teaching his disciples a very public lesson.

It takes a lot of faith to believe that God sees all and that Jesus "will come again to judge the living and the dead." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had said to give in private, pray in private, and fast in private (Matthew 6:1-18). Why? Because "your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." Do you believe that?

As for the Pharisees, Jesus says, “Everything they do is done for people to see” (5). I think here and elsewhere in this chapter he’s using hyperbole. Specifically, Jesus says, they “make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long.” Then and now, orthodox Jews wore small boxes containing Scripture verses on their foreheads and tied Bible quotes around their arms in bands.

If that seems odd to you, I remind that the instructions to do so are in your Bible too. The instructions are connected to the heart of the entire Old Testament, according to Jews.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

The issue in Matthew 23 wasn’t wearing phylacteries. It was enlarging them – literally and figuratively. It was making a big deal out of public display and recognition. So even when you’re obeying Scripture, be careful.

Furthermore, “they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others” (6-7). Again, the issue is not being in front or even being noticed or honored. It’s rather craving it, positioning for it, needing it in order to lead.

So again, the question comes back. “Do I have enough faith to believe that God sees and knows?” Is his approval enough for me? I can’t tell you that it always is for me. I need an “attaboy” from time to time. Don’t you? I appreciate words of affirmation, maybe hold on to them too much. I even have a folder on my computer to save thank you notes and expressions of approval. I like knowing I’ve made an impact. But Jesus calls me – and you – to a fresh exercise of faith in those moments when nobody notices and nobody praises us. Do I live for the audience of One?

Am I being taught by the Teacher? (8-12)

In verses 8-12, Jesus warns the crowd against accepting titles like Rabbi, father, and instructor. “You are all brothers” (8), he says, and you only have one Teacher (8), one Father (9), and one Messiah (10).

Jesus’ words remind us of the importance of looking at other Scriptures to see how to interpret and apply a particular text. No other New Testament text reinforces the literal application of what Jesus says here – although James says that “not many of you” (as opposed to “none of you” should become teachers (James 3:1). The word

“father” occurs over 1000 times in the Bible, and the vast majority refer to human fathers.

If you start asking yourself, “Why do Catholics or Anglicans use terms like “priest” or “father” for their spiritual leaders, you’re missing the point. Actually, if you leave church today thinking about how bad Pharisees were or who today are the Pharisees Jesus would condemn, you’re missing the point.

But also don’t walk away doing what Pharisees do, which is detailing a checklist of do’s and don’ts that will make Jesus smile or frown. What Jesus is teaching his disciples is that it’s so easy to make leadership about you, and not about the Lord. As William Barclay wrote, “The sin of the Pharisees was that they were not really seeking to lead others to God. They were seeking to lead them to Pharisaism.”

Am I more interested in pointing people to Jesus or to Bob? To The Church or to Corinth? What does it look like to point them to Jesus?

It looks like servanthood (11) and humility (12). There are two more concepts you’ll never perfect. Serving instead of being served looks exactly like Jesus, yet it’s clear there were times Jesus also allowed others to serve him. There’s a grace in receiving as well as giving.

As for humility, many of you know I started working on my book on that subject a few years ago. I finally laid it aside even though I hope to finish the project someday. I found that it’s really hard to write a humble book about humility. You end up saying or at least implying that other people aren’t as humble as you are.

One of the most important discoveries I made about humility in writing was that it’s much more about how you think than what you say or do. If you try to sound humble in your works or look humble in your actions, it’s just another form of pride. The Apostle Paul says, “Have this *mind* (attitude) in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who...humbled himself by becoming obedient to death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8).

I love the hymn, “May the mind of Christ my Savior,” written in 1925 by an otherwise unknown woman named Kate Wilkinson who was involved in London’s Keswick Conventions and also had a ministry to young girls. The fourth verse captures what Jesus wants his disciples to hear in this passage –

*May the love of Jesus fill me as the waters fill the sea,
Him exalting, self-abasing, this is victory.*

It seems to me the appropriate question is simply, “Am I being taught by the Teacher?” There’s only one Messiah, and it’s not me. There’s only one Father of all, and we human fathers – biological or spiritual – are dim reflections. There’s only one Teacher, and it’s Jesus. The more I look to him, the more I look like him.

When to confront

So what about the rest of the chapter, then? Seven times Jesus says, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!” Isn’t Jesus also modeling for us that we need to call a spade a spade. Isn’t he validating righteous anger? Isn’t he saying when there’s open sin we need to name it? Isn’t he giving us permission to rebuke?

Be careful. My answer is, “Go ahead and confront when you’re ready to be crucified.” Jesus doesn’t lose control in the rest of this chapter (13-39). It’s not like he has a bad day and finally his pent up frustration boils over.

Jesus came to die. Now he knew it was time. This would be his last encounter with the religious leaders, and it would seal his fate on the cross. He was OK with that. He was ready for it. From this time on Tuesday afternoon he would not interact with them until they brought him to trial early Friday morning.

Here’s what we need to see about Jesus’ woes in Matthew 23. Jesus waited through thirty years of synagogue attendance and an untold number of pilgrimages to the temple. As far as we know, he never interrupted a sermon. He respected those who sat in Moses’ seat. Those who find in this or any other part of Jesus’ story an excuse to be an obnoxious accuser of others have missed the point of this passage. Also, don’t forget that Jesus had the harshest words for the most pious-sounding and self-righteous people, not those they excluded as “sinners.”

And even here, when he laid into the scribes and Pharisees, he did so with a heavy heart. The word “woe” is an expression of grief. “Alas!” Seven times he said “My heart is so heavy for you in your hypocrisy. Your blindness distresses me to the depths.”

He closes this chapter saying, “Jerusalem! Jerusalem! How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.” Even when dealing with hypocrites, the leader’s heart is one of love. Amen.