

WALKING THE WALK
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October 30, 2011

Jesus is on the warpath against the Pharisees once again. He does this a lot in Matthew's gospel. Today he is no longer addressing them, but has now turned to the crowd possibly in the temple courtyard.

What follows is something I've learned about since moving to Southern Virginia. He has what I call a "bless your heart" moment. Have you noticed that when someone says, "Well bless your heart" it often means that you need to duck because you are about to get slammed. Jesus does this at the start.

Jesus does not condemn what the Pharisees teach. In fact he tells the people to listen to them. The issue comes in how they act and how they apply their teaching. Jesus does not have a problem with the message, but he does take issue with the messenger. You can almost hear him say, "Well bless your hearts, you have a great message, but boys you have to walk the walk, not just talk the talk."

The Pharisees it seems preached one message and lived another. Everything they did, they did for show, to be seen. It's all about the PR. How easy it is for us to point the finger at others. I think we can all come up with names of people who fit this description. They certainly seem to fill our world of politics and religion. A politician or preacher who supports family values while having an affair is certainly common enough and incredibly damaging to all of us.

There are several issues in this passage. Not only do the Pharisees say one thing and do another, they expect all who follow them to live the life they preach. The Pharisees have placed a great burden of following all of the laws of Moses on the people. They expect them to live a life to the standards of a priest. What's more the Pharisees have added to the law by their interpretation of the law which place additional demands on the people.

The challenge comes when we have finished complaining about others and turn to look inward. My grandma used to say that when you point your finger at somebody, there are three fingers pointing back at you. This is the important message to us today.

This teaching carries it's greatest weight when used to judge our actions. Are we a disciple or a Pharisee? It's not what we say, it is what we do that matters to God. The critical factor is what is in our hearts not what is on our lips.

I believe this is probably the greatest issue facing churches today. The generation of 20-30 year olds in our country have one outstanding trait. They see through

hypocrisy very quickly. I was at a seminar about Stewardship and the leader said, that young adults today are more repelled by hypocrisy than by anything else. They can tell when something is bogus and it sends them running for the exits.

A modern day prophet and religious leader expressed a sentiment similar to Jesus' teachings today towards Christians. Ghandi once said: "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." He also said that if Christians actually lived what they preached then all of India would be Christian. Think about that.

Some also use this as a cop out or an excuse. Church people are all a bunch of hypocrites, who needs them is the attitude. What's more I'm out the door as well. This implies that other peoples actions or inactions somehow excuse us from following the call to service the Christ issues. However this is a reality and the reason many do not cross the threshold of our door or the door of any church.

The other big issue here that Jesus is attacking is the question of motivation. Why do we do what we do? This is an ego issue. Now a strong sense of self, a strong ego is important, but so is the ability to set that strong ego aside for a greater good, a great call. I know many who do wonderful things, for all the wrong reasons. Many do acts of public service because their school or employer requires it. Or they do it for the adulation that they receive. The problem is this is done from obligation not love.

One positive example comes to mind. Several years ago a bishop decided to live as a street person for a month in the area around the cathedral. How the cathedral community was viewed by the homeless in the area shocked and deeply saddened her. The members of the cathedral community were viewed just as the Pharisees were depicted by Jesus. Most of the homeless knew that the building was a church. They did not know that it was Episcopal or that it was the cathedral. They only knew it was a place where they should have been but were not welcomed. The bishop shared this information with the cathedral leadership and a huge cultural shift took place. This bishop then went on to write and speak about the experience as a message to all churches in particular those in city centers about being the hands and feet of Christ to those just outside their doors. The bishop did not do this to get publicity, adulation or other accolades. She did it because this is what needed to be done to spread the gospel.

I was involved in a discussion the other day for another organization that is dependent on gifts. We talked about the two different kinds of givers. Those who give because it gives them joy to share their abundance and those who give because it is good PR. One gives out of joy, the other is looking for what the pay back is on the gift. The discussion of course was about how we get money from both types. In today's economy any charity will take the money any way they can get it!

In the church world in particular, but even in general, what we do should be done to honor God, not ourselves. This requires a setting aside of ego and that is about as

countercultural as you can get in today's world. Jesus is talking about doing and giving because it is the right thing to do, not so that we get something back in reward. We are called to generous because of the joy that is our payback. In just a few moments you will see the results of some of that generosity in our own parish of those who work with and support our Godly Play classrooms. Sabrina will show you how this program touches the lives of our youngest members. They are our future. They are also the ones who are watching to see if we really live what we teach them in Sunday School!

I hope you will take Christ's teaching today as a personal challenge to look inward and see if you are acting as a disciple or as a Pharisee? Do you walk the walk or just talk the talk?