

Gospel: Matthew 23:1-12

Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, saying,
"The scribes and the Pharisees
have taken their seat on the chair of Moses.
Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you,
but do not follow their example.
For they preach but they do not practice.
They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry
and lay them on people's shoulders,
but they will not lift a finger to move them.
All their works are performed to be seen.
They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels.
They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues,
greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation 'Rabbi.'
As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.'
You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers.
Call no one on earth your father;
you have but one Father in heaven.
Do not be called 'Master';
you have but one master, the Christ.
The greatest among you must be your servant.
Whoever exalts himself will be humbled;
but whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Homily: The Pharisee in Me

I heard a couple cute stories I want to share with you quickly, as they hopefully segue into my message. There was a young mother who worked as a secretary for a large corporation and one day she received a phone call from her daughter's teacher while she was at work, and the teacher said, "I thought you would want to know this, that we have found your young daughter taking some pens and pencils from her classmates." And the young mother was stunned. She said, "I don't know why in the world she would do this. I bring pens and pencils home all the time from work for her."

Much along the same line, a young father called the school principal about his son. He was so irate and angry and he said, "My son has come home from school using profanity and damn it, I want to know why in the hell he gets on this?"

It's so interesting to look at ourselves at an angle we don't always see ourselves. If you look through a two-way mirror, how we not only see ourselves but how God sees us—with love—but with piercing eyes that see through this certain facade we all tend to have blocking our inner vision. Today I want to talk about the Pharisee in you and me that we read about so much in the Gospel, especially this one this Sunday. But once again it's always helpful, I think, to first have a background appreciation of who they were back in Jesus' time; the Scribes as well as the Pharisees. Let me take you back, just quickly, to that time in Jesus' day when the Law of the

Lord meant everything. The Law represented the Torah, the God's Law. Their whole communion was based on God's ways and commandments, much unlike our society today.

As a sociologist said sadly, "We are beginning to live in a post-Christian era, because we're no longer really influenced by the Christian way." Isn't that a sad commentary? But it wasn't so in Jesus' day. At least in the Jewish community they were a theocracy that had laws that guided every possible discipline in their life. These laws they got from the Torah. In fact, that Hebrew word Torah, which refers to the first five books of the scripture, means law. They believe the laws were given by God to Moses and Moses in turn gave these laws to Israel so that they could walk in God's ways, and if they obeyed these commandments, they would be blessed.

Now the Scribes were the scripture scholars of Jesus' day who studied the Torah. And they were often called lawyers because in studying it, they interpreted it, and then applied it to daily life in the tiniest details of life. For example, we all are familiar with the law—the third great commandment—to keep holy the Lord's day. The law in the Torah translated to, that they must not work on the Sabbath. But the Scribes now had to determine *what does that mean*, so they could really help people to live the Law. Well, they figured out that you could only walk a half a mile—up to that point half a mile would be leisure, beyond that point it would be work. They thought that they needed to spell things out in such great detail, but they always took it a step further. Their intentions were good, it's just that they made it equal to God's Law. Here's what I mean.

They were known to do what they called, "Build a fence around the Law of the Lord." Building a fence means to take it a step further so they don't fall off the edge and break the Law of the Lord accidentally. So they would say, "Okay, if we think they should only walk a half a mile, then we'll add the law—You should only walk two fifths of a mile—and then they won't break the commandment."

William Barclay—whose commentary I read and studied, and who was a great student of Jewish law—commented on the legalism that developed out of this kind of mentality of determining in great detail every minute part of our life. And so, he said, "By the time the Scribes finished writing their interpretation of the law, it took more than 50 volumes to hold all these rules and regulations." Imagine, last week we talked about the 613 laws that are in the Torah itself. Now add to that 50 volumes of innumerable laws, rules and regulations, and we have added such a burden on the people's backs that many of the common people in Jesus' day simply gave up even trying. And they said, "There's no way I can be holy."

This was the great misunderstanding, that to be holy meant to follow all the rules and all the regulations; even though they knew they couldn't even hope to simply know what the laws were, much less to follow them. And so, the Scribes and Pharisees looked down on these people and judged them to be sinners when they didn't follow these restrictions. The Pharisees, therefore, were the small group of people—lay people—who were very dedicated to accepting all these written restrictions and regulations that the Scribes had translated and interpreted as coming from the Torah, and they gave their whole life to learning them and following them in the most meticulous way.

The Pharisees were, according to William Barclay, always few in number because who but wealthier people could afford to take the time to study, and read, and then follow. You had to be an extraordinary person. These Pharisees often ended up restricting themselves or withdrawing themselves or separating themselves—that's what the word *Pharisee* means, separating one—so that they could live these great and many laws. What they did inadvertently, is become an elitist group and that was their pitfall, that they put themselves up and over other people, thinking themselves better.

When Jesus confronted the Scribes and the Pharisees, he was addressing a very religious—in fact the most religious—group of people. They were the ones who would have been recognized as the religious leaders and teachers of the day. Yet he was constantly challenging their concept of religion that was more of a burden than a help to people. Worse yet, Jesus was critical of them because, not only did they turn religion into a set of rules and regulations, and not into what we heard last week, a relationship of love, but they said one thing and always did another. They were guilty of a kind of hypocrisy that we'll hear about and always lacking humility. With that as background information, we can then appreciate this confrontation Jesus has with his religious people. Keep in mind as we try to translate this, that maybe this is not too unlike the church today. If Jesus walked among us good people, what would he find in us?

I'm going to be suggesting there's a little Pharisee in you and me, that he wants to call forth, and challenge, and correct, so that we could live a healthy and truly holy life. Jesus said to his disciples, "The Scribes and Pharisees have succeeded Moses as teacher, therefore, do everything they tell you." What he's telling us here is that he has a certain respect for them, at least respect for their legitimate authority, as the official teachers of Israel. What they would have said wasn't wrong, or certainly not far wrong from the mark; however, Jesus says, "Do not follow their example." Here is where they miss the whole heart of religion. You notice they were hard hearted in judging others and hardhearted for not accepting Jesus Himself, and God, into their lives. So, Jesus criticized them, because, he said, their words are bold but their deeds are few. Which is to say, and we've heard the word used before, they were hypocrites.

You might remember me describing the word hypocrite. It was first literally coined by the Greek people, describing the actors on stage who wore a mask. That's how they acted out a different character. It's a wonderful image to keep in mind, because what Jesus was trying to do is to remove that mask—one of the worst masks can be religion, that we can hide behind—and was trying to bring out the real true self, which for all of us, is a creature of God. We are sinner and saved. But that has to be called forth. Jesus challenges that and tries to rip the mask off them and he says, "They bind up heavy loads, hard to carry." Now again, what's the heavy load? It is how they have translated religion to be a burden. He even went on to say, "They lay a burden on men's shoulders while they themselves don't lift a finger to help them." That would seem they are missing the heart of it because for Jesus, religion is all about service, as we will hear. It's all about helping people, not laying a load on people. Life is difficult enough. Amen?

So, what should the Church be about? I often think of this today. I think of parents, how you find with raising your own children, you have to have rules of the house but the rules are not helpful if it's just alienating children further and not really helping them effectively learn to live an ordered and good life. Jesus is calling this forth. Later in the Gospel we will hear Jesus give His

own impression of religion when He says, "My yoke is easy." (Yoke was a term for the Law.) He says, "I don't want to lay a lot on you. My yoke is easy; My burden is light. I'm not going to ask a lot of you in terms of laws. I'm going to ask that you live loving lives." This we heard last week in the great commandment, which of course is to ask the most of us, that we could become the best of us.

Again, Jesus finds fault with the Pharisees, in this kind of impression that they are good themselves and of this false sense of religion when He says, "All their works are performed—the key word there, *performed*—to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and wear huge tassels." Remember what phylacteries were as I talked about last week? They are little leather prayer boxes that contain The Shema and other texts of the Torah. And he said, "They widen them obviously wanting to be noticed as religious leaders." And Jesus says they miss the whole point here. They are concentrating continually on the external things, when it's the internal things that matter most. And Jesus again presses the point: They are fond of places of honor at banquets, front seats and synagogues, marks of respect in public and being called Rabbi.

The Lord is saying the opposite and in fact the leader should be the servant to all. He is constantly turning it around, and upside down, and inside out. This is what He's doing with the Pharisees yesterday, and certainly us here today; particularly us religious people, who should be modelling what Jesus taught and always exemplified so perfectly. And so, He says, "Avoid the title *Rabbi*." One among you is the teacher, the rest are learners. Avoid being called Father, only one is your Father, the one Heaven. Avoid being called Teacher, only one is your Teacher, the Messiah.

I want to clarify this because obviously we don't want to take this literally. I don't think Jesus had anything against these titles. In fact, Rabbi was a title of honor given to any teacher, even given to Jesus. Although in Matthew's Gospel he uses that word not by the disciples—disciples don't call Jesus Rabbi—but it's those who, like the Pharisees, don't believe in Him. There's always a little irony here. But in Jesus time, it was a title of honor. He's not speaking of the biological fathers here, He's speaking of the elders of the Christian community who are called Father as a term of respect and endearment along with those who had died that they revered as holy people like the saints of old, called father. It's the same word in Arabic, Abba, from which we have the word Abbot, a title respect given to those heading religious communities or monasteries. So again, Jesus is saying don't get caught up in titles. Today maybe the titles are what kind of degree do you have in this or that. And don't get caught up in that because, what we all need to be is: student, disciple, learner, consulates, servant; taking the low road, the humble place.

I often think of that when you introduce yourself to other people. You always tell them what you do. Well, that is not nearly so important as who we are. I don't how you say that, but we get caught up in all the wrong things. Then Jesus says, "The greatest among you must be the one who serves the rest." I think what He's given is the perfect anecdote to the cure for any Phariseeism in us. Any tendency toward performance of religion can be cured by service to religion. Service is always the cure, because performance is *put the light on me* whereas service is *put the light on others*. What a difference it makes. Focus on service. That's what it's all about. How easy that is to forget though. Jesus again, in this grand summary, says, "Whoever exalts themselves shall be humbled, but whoever humbles himself shall be exalted." I could say that I

think humility is the exact opposite of hypocrisy. If hypocrisy is putting on a false face in front, humility is coming out from behind that and revealing your true self, which is very humbling, which is very honest. It's very true, but we can never think when we are truly humble that we're better than anyone. All that said, what would Jesus say to us today? If He were speaking to us, which surely He is, and we're trying to now transpose this Gospel onto ourselves.

How would He speak to the Pharisee in you and me? What would He ask of us? What would He challenge in us or what would He say to us? I believe what the Lord wants to do to all of us is reveal our truest self to us. And once we come to know who we truly are, before God, I believe we will become people not only of humility but people of great charity and great compassion. When Christ comes to us—you know Christ is a title that means anointed one—He comes to anoint us. What is His anointing? What I like to say is, He brings out the worst in us. He brings out our sin. And what are the sins, but those things that are potentially deadly. We talk about the capital sins of anger, pride, lust, envy, sloth. All these sins that have a deadly effect on our soul. What we need to do, is bring our selves before the Lord and say, “Lord, what is it I need to see? What is it you want to treat, that needs to be healed, cured, helped? What is it that needs to be forgiven? How do I need to be saved?” And if we ask that question, and bring ourselves in the light of the Lord, we will discover, what I would call, some of the ugly things that lurk inside of us—at least potentially. It is not that they're looming so large, but I could share personally, and I need to because I recognize I've hidden behind this unconscious curtain of my own mind, and I need to see, and I confess there is a little (sometimes a lot) of pride inside of me. It has kept me from not seeing myself as I truly am. There is a touch of envy that affects me in my relationship with others. There are all these little things. I invite you to please, see it in yourselves.

But I don't know if we could even see it with our own eye, but if you ask the Lord to reveal it, He will bring it out. What the Lord's been leading me through is what I feel, and I don't know how I would know this if I hadn't been helped tremendously by great Saint John of the Cross. He writes about the Dark Night of the Soul, and what he wrote is that, all of us have to go through a dark period of suffering, because it's only suffering that will actually bring out this stuff inside of us. It's like something that's tried in the fire—gold is purified in that way. We must go through this fire of suffering that becomes the purifying way that the Lord gives us pure heart and mind and soul for Him. In other words, what I have learned is this, and John of the Cross is eloquent in speaking about this and has been a great teacher for me in saying: "None of us can have union with God unless we go through the purgative way."

That's a classical term for that process of suffering and sacrificing and dying to our self to move for the Lord. Another way of saying it is, How could we—take ourselves, so full of our self, be one with Jesus who is so full of love—accept that all that has to be let go of or died or purified of. Now what does that, except to go through these purifying times or these purging times; or, what John the Cross says is purgatory. And this is an insight I have. It's really his insight of course. That we all have to go through Purgatory and we do it either here and now, or later. And it's better to go through it here and now. Better to go through this purgative way here and now for this is what this life is all about: a preparation for eternal life with the Lord. Now to do that, only the Lord can lead us in that. But usually it's always a time of fire. Fire in terms of purifying, suffering; a hard look at oneself and one's symptoms: one's wretchedness, one's weakness, and

that the Lord reveals this only for the purpose of curing it and removing it from our soul, so that it could be made ready to receive Him.

We must undergo this purgatory and the Lord will invite us to do that here and now. Let me offer three suggestions that I've come to ask the Lord, so that we come to know our deepest, truest self and see ourselves as Jesus sees us, which is always with love. Some of our self-images are so poor and we need to be healed of that. The Lord's calling us out to just be the human being we are, made in His image and likeness. So, I would have you ask the question: *What mask do you wear that is not your truest deepest innermost self?* That the Lord wants to free us from. What are those things we need to be let go of and purge ourselves of to prepare for the holy union with the Lord? So I ask this: *Do we need to see ourselves?* And just ask the Lord to do that, and He will do you that favor. He will do you that favor, but be prepared, it won't be easy and it isn't because it's a death to our ego.

Secondly, I try to come before the Lord and say, "Lord I'm a sinner but I want to be a Saint." And somehow, we're caught between that. What I suggest—and that most helpful thing—in fact I don't know how I would have made it through these months if the Lord has not given me his Saints to help me and I have read (it's been so helpful) the life of St. Francis of Assisi. I read how he had to confront his demons, his sinful self, and then the Lord could free him to live for good and the Lord alone. He had to give up his image of himself; his idealized life and live the real life. And the person I think is my own patron is Saint Peter. I loved him because like me, he's always tripping up and struggling even though he loves the Lord. I don't know what I'd do without Peter to help me and I pray to Peter every single day to help me be the kind of apostle he was, that God could use me. Peter, I pray God could use me. And I pray that Peter would help me never to give up hope; always to trust the Lord's forgiving way.

And I don't know what I would have done without Saint John of the Cross teaching me, guiding me. I prayed, "Lord help me understand what's going on." I tell you, the Lord led me to read the *Dark Night of the Soul*; I know that with all my heart. And that book has been so instructive and informative, and transforming for me, that my suggestion is treat yourself by asking the Lord to show you your patron saint, which may be a special one right here and right now and may be different than one you had awhile back. Who among the Saints could really teach you, guide you, companion you? The Saints are the greatest gifts to us. Henry Nouwen, the great priest, author, spiritual writer, said, "The greatest favor we could do to people, is to introduce them to the great lives of the Saints." I believe that and they are here to help us. And they're not just up in Heaven but St. Therese of the Little Flower says, "I want to spend my time in Heaven doing good on Earth."

Thirdly, as we hopefully will be one with all Saints, we are presently one with all souls. We too are going through a purgative way. Now, if you had caught me talking about Purgatory ten years ago, I would have been very vague. I would have said, "Oh yeah, this is what the Church teaches." But I hadn't a clue what it meant. I believe in Purgatory because that's what we're going through. That's what I'm experiencing. And I think the only thing we can do is unite our souls to going through this transformative process. And the only thing that helps us is prayer. We need to pray for those souls in Purgatory, those temporarily in Purgatory, and those here among us going through difficult times. Prayer really helps us, and I see this as a good thing. Purgatory is good

because it's so hopeful. We have to be purified before we get to Heaven. Or, think about it, Heaven wouldn't be Heaven long if we went there just as we are right now. Because we'd be fighting the war and next thing you know it would be the battle of the angels again.

There wouldn't be Heaven for long if we went there with our egos as they are, or our greed, or our selfishness or pride. You have to see, this is a gift of God. Thanks a lot Lord. But as Saint Teresa of Avila said—all these great Saints have so much to say—she says, "Lord if this is the way you treat your friends, well it's no wonder you have so few of them." What I'm saying is, unite yourself with the souls in Purgatory. Pray for them. And pray for yourself as we undergo this purgative way. This is the great way the Lord is leading us. I really believe, and that we see ourselves, and He's doing great work in us, a great work in us. If we just give our life over to him.

Amen.