

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
ALL SAINT'S DAY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“SAVED BY GRACE: THE PHARISEE IN ME”
Matthew 23:1-12
November 2, 2008
8:45 & 11:00 AM Services

Throughout our lives, each of us is responsible for others. Through the power of love or authority, we can influence the way people accept God or reject God. We cannot afford to be indifferent about this effect we have in the lives of others.

Jesus was very critical of the Pharisees. Many of them were more concerned with outward observance rather than inner purity. Every religion has its *“Pharisees”* – people who keep the letter of the law but violate the spirit of their beliefs and practices.

The father of a young boy called the school principal very upset. He said: **“My son is coming home from school using profanity, and I want to know where in the hell he is learning these four-letter words?”**

That father is not entirely unusual. It is fairly common for people to preach one thing and practice another. Many politicians want to reduce government spending. But they plead long and loud for the expenditures in their own districts. We read occasionally of police officers whose job is to enforce the law. But they themselves have been caught in unlawful practices. We just had a federal judge to resign because he violated the high principles of his office. I read about a college professor who was highly regarded in his field. He was a teacher of ethics. An audit revealed that he had been stealing money from the university for ten years.

These kinds of things are deeply disturbing, and rightly so. If we cannot trust our leaders, whom can we trust? Some people think our society is in a state of decay. And the end is not far away. That may be true. I do not know! I do not pretend to have a crystal ball on the future. But to keep the

picture in perspective, remember that this kind of thing is not new. Some leaders have been saying one thing and doing another for a long time.

In today's Gospel, Jesus warned his audience about the scribes and Pharisees. They were leaders in that society. Their roles were to interpret and apply the Law of Moses. And they were apparently doing a reasonably good job of that. At least, I get that impression. Otherwise, Jesus would not have said, "***Do everything they tell you.***" That was a clear endorsement of their teaching. But then, he added this word of caution: "***Do not follow their example.***" In other words, they taught more truth than they lived. Their preaching was better than their practice.

To this very day, that is the reputation of the Pharisees. Their name has become synonymous with religious hypocrisy. But that is not quite fair. Some of them were good and decent people. And we have no right to tag them all with the same label. It is easy for us to throw rocks at the Pharisees, to make them the bad guys of the New Testament. But in reality, most of them were no better or no worse than the rest of us. The only Pharisee I need to fear is the one who lives inside of me. And there is a bit of the Pharisee in all of us.

Is it not true that our words are often better than our deeds?

That was the rap on the Pharisees. Jesus said: "***Their words are bold, but their deeds are few.***" They talked a better game than they played. I am sure they did. But so do I, and so do you. To some extent, that is inevitable. There are parts of the Bible that I would never preach, if I waited until they became a solid reality in my life. Last Sunday, we read the two great commandments: "***Love God with your whole heart, and love your neighbor as yourself.***" Do I love God with my whole heart? Do I love my neighbor as myself? I will not insult your intelligence by pretending that I always keep both of these commandments.

There is a degree of hypocrisy built into the Christian gospel. The standard is so high that none of us can live up to it. So what can we do? Admit the truth! Face the fact that there is a gap between what we are and what we ought to be. Do not try to fake it. Be honest. Then do our best to close that gap at least a little. There is a bit of the Pharisee in us all.

Here is another question: is it not true that we expect more of others than we demand of ourselves?

The Pharisees did. Jesus said: ***“They bind heavy burdens and place them on people’s shoulders. But they will not lift a finger to budge them.”*** That is a common practice – holding others to a high standard, but making an exception of ourselves. We expect our public officials to be honest. We have a right to expect that. But how honest are we? We expect our church leaders to be above reproach. I am glad we expect that. The mission of the church requires it. But what about our own morals? Do they help or hinder the work of Christ?

You remember the story of King David and the prophet Nathan. It was after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. To cover his sin, he arranged for her husband to be killed. Then he married Bathsheba. And all seemed to be well. But the prophet came and told the king a story. He said that in a certain city, there are two men. One was rich. He had thousands of sheep. The other was poor. He had only one little lamb. A guest came to visit the rich man. Dinner must be served. But instead of butchering one of his own sheep, he confiscated the poor man’s lamb and served it.

When David heard that story, he was indignant. He said, ***“That man deserves to die.”*** Then Nathan looked the king straight in the eye and said, ***“You are that man.”*** There was a bit of the Pharisee in David. He expected a higher standard of others than he required of himself. And so do we. There is a bit of the Pharisee in us all.

Jesus said: ***“The greatest among you will be the one who serves the rest.”*** That is what the Pharisees were really after. They wanted to be somebody special. And so do we. Nobody wants to be a nobody. Our problem is that we seek recognition in the wrong ways. The Pharisees sought it by holding themselves to a strict moral code. And some of them did fairly well at it. But it did not make them anybody special. And it made some of them insufferable snobs... it will do the same to us.

There is only one answer to the Pharisee in me. I must get down off my high horse and become a genuine servant. If I do that, the Pharisee will fade into the background. And something more like the image of Christ will take his place.

Let the Pharisee in you be saved by the grace of God. God will give you the strength and the courage to get past surface matters and experience the deep things of the spirit. I would love to be your pastor to help you put your heart into your religious faith. I would love for this to be your church where you will find open doors, open hearts and open minds. Come; let your spirit grow with us.