

Sermon: Passing on the Gospel

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **1 Thessalonians 2:9-13, Matthew 23:1-12**

Like anything else in the Bible, the Gospels and the letters written by Paul and others were meant to be heard by a local audience to address a specific problem in their own moment in time. Then we come along and try to adapt them. It might matter who wrote what when and to whom, or not, but these are the writings we have to work with in any case, to do the best we can to make meaning for ourselves.

Both readings today are partly about maintaining teachings and tradition in the midst of changing times. Paul had never been a disciple of Jesus, and he had to work hard to overcome that. Before his conversion experience, he was a Pharisee and a persecutor of Christ followers. After his conversion, he never failed to let people know he was an ambassador, an apostle, for Christ. His authority was always an issue. So, when he says, ‘you received the word of God that you heard from *us*,’ he’s describing a predicament that has existed in the church ever since the original twelve disciples began to die off, as one new generation after another had to learn the Word.

So, too, in Matthew. He was writing within the bubble of the Roman Empire, where many different schools of thought encountered one another and where you better have your story straight if you were to make a believer out of anyone.

Everything we know about Jesus has come down to us from someone other than Jesus himself. As far as I know, none of us has heard directly from Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, let alone from Jesus. We have been taught everything we know about him and his ministry, and we accept those teachings as God’s Word.

Notice in today’s reading that the Pharisees, chief priests and elders, and Sadducees have all left the scene. After challenging Jesus repeatedly, they finally have no more questions for him. Jesus is left to speak to the (Jewish) crowds and the (Christ-following) disciples, so he begins his critique of the Pharisees. In fact, the rest of chapter 23 is full of woes directed specifically at the scribes and Pharisees.

We should note here that the Pharisees were lay leaders who cared deeply for Torah law. They wanted to reform Israel during a time of compromise and cynicism. The very word *Pharisee* means ‘separatist’ and it stems from the Maccabean revolt about two hundred years earlier. Jesus himself was said to be a Pharisee and he honors their authority to teach. So why is he so hard on them?

For starters, they really don’t seem to practice what they teach, and that lack of integrity becomes a threat to their relevance. Secondly, teachers have a lot of influence over their students. But that influence can be toxic. As Jesus said, the Pharisees put heavy burdens on the shoulders of others without being willing to lift these burdens themselves. And finally, their egos got in the way: ‘they love to have the place of honor;’ they love titles like *Rabbi*; they want to be seen by others as they pray in the Temple; they want *respect*, like Fredo Corleone. There’s a reason Jesus calls them hypocrites.

About this reading, Judith Patt, the pastor at Promise Church in Weymouth, said, ‘Jesus speaks against the establishment, against being part of the institution, because the leaders have become interested in their own egos being satisfied rather than in following their own teachings.’ She also said to remember that we have one teacher, and that following God is a life of humility, not selfish pride and gain.

The good news here is, Jesus leads by example. He doesn’t teach as the Pharisees do; he’s a humble servant. He shows us what he does, and we follow; and what he does becomes the lesson. A few chapters ago, Jesus said,

‘Come to me; [...] Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; [...]

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light’ (Matthew 11:28, 29, 30).

In the world of Jesus and the Pharisees, the hypocrites trade God’s quiet and often silent approval for the louder, more obvious praise of the people.

In the world of professional sports, it seems a lot of the players play not just for the love of the game but also for the chance to play on a big stage, to be seen by thousands every time they step on the field, or the court, or the ice. The National Football League even has rules against excessive celebrations when a team scores. Some coaches have to tell their players that when they score, to act as if they’ve done it before, meaning tone it down and show some humility. Then again, it may be impossible to play at a high level in any sport unless you have an ego the size of a house.

Sports are supposed to be fun. Celebrating is part of any game. And, as Larry Bird once said, 'It ain't bragging if you can back it up.'

But other parts of the entertainment and media industries have recently come under scrutiny for sexual harassment claims, corruption, and egomania out of control. The news stories are both depressing and infuriating. We know that people are people and we all make mistakes, but some things verge on being unforgivable, at least by us.

Augustine describes sin as pride. He said, 'Pride hates a fellowship of equality under God, and seeks to impose its own dominion on fellow men, in the place of God's rule.' We all have different strengths and abilities, but we are all equal in God's eyes. When we gather our various gifts together in community, then will 'the greatest among you be your servant, and all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.'

Or, as the prophet Isaiah wrote, 'Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God; Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain' (Isaiah 40:3-4), with ourselves being the desert.

Some theologians note that we'll find the sin of pride most often among the powerful, while the sin of the weak and oppressed is to turn away from God and neighbor. So, a broader definition might be that sin is the breaking of relationship both with God and with people.

We are all children of the same God and we are all students of the same teacher, the Messiah. As such, none of us are to be called instructors, but the apostle Paul says we can have mentors, in the sense that parents serve as mentors to their children. Mentors provide guidance; they help turn weaknesses into strengths; they help pave the way as Isaiah would understand it. Mentors have our best interests at heart. But we have only one instructor.

Some readings are universal for all times and audiences. When Paul wrote that God's Word is at work in 'you believers,' he meant in us too. Everyone has a role to play and gifts to give in God's kingdom. But to live a life worthy of God, we need to live it with total commitment, with our complete trust and reliance on God.

Amen.