



“NOT AS THEY SAY”
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Matthew 23:1-12

It is a strange passage but it is one of those many passages in scripture that seems to trouble a lot of people. This one is no different. It troubles us because in this we find Jesus in a condemning mode. He is condemning a group of people who were known for being very religious, very faithful and he is condemning them because of something that they teach and yet won't do.

Ironically this is the beginning of a section of scripture in Matthew's Gospel that really lays it on thick. He holds nothing back. We even hear Jesus beginning to call these folks names – broods of vipers and so on and so forth. As a matter of fact in the passages that will follow this particular section of scripture Jesus, there's no holds barred, he goes all out. But in this passage of scripture Jesus has turned aside from the Scribes and the Pharisees, those folks who were there. He had been addressing them for a moment and now he has turned to the crowds who have followed him, who still love him and are still wont to follow him and then also to his disciples, that small band of folks whom he had chosen by name, and he shares with them some teachings in these twelve brief verses about the Scribes and the Pharisees. Please don't misunderstand they are still there and they're within earshot.

The words that Jesus uses are troubling because they are condemning. They point to something that I think all of us have at one time or another heard or have learned. I remember my grandfather saying it frequently and my father saying it even more frequently and you have probably heard it too. “Do as I say and not as I do.” Yeh, you've heard it - do as I say and not as I do. Now the saddest part about that is that I've heard me say that to my own kids. I confess, I have. I've asked them to follow the example of my teaching and not the example of my life. And I think that came home to roost very clearly for me one day when I watched my daughter, who at that time was about a year and a half or maybe two years old. She came clunking into the room. She was wearing a pair of my shoes and she said, “Look at me, daddy, I'm walking in your steps.” Now she was about two, I wear a size 11, 11-1/2. They were pretty good size shoes on her little feet. It dawned on me that she thought that she was being cute and she was, she was adorable when she did that, I kid you not and I'm not saying that because she is my daughter, well maybe a little bit. But she shared with me something that I thought longer about, that my daughter is not just walking in my shoes, she's walking in my shoes. She's following in my footsteps. Whether she becomes a preacher or not is up to her and I'm not pushing her one way or another. Or a teacher, I'm not pushing her one way or another. But the fact that she is watching what I do and where I go, it made me sit up and take notice that I lead by example, as do all of us.

The irony of all of this is that Jesus is talking about a group of people who, you know we could really start to nail these folks these Scribes and Pharisees for several reasons, one is because they lived way back when, twenty some centuries ago and they don't have any relevance whatsoever to today. You know what a phylactery is? A phylactery is a small leather box and it was made into a cube about two inches square or there about and it was wrapped up in ribbon or string and then tied with a ribbon around one's head and it contained the scripture of Deuteronomy 6. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your strength and with all your soul.” And they wanted to make sure that, in Deuteronomy of course it is a mandate, you will have this written on your foreheads. If they didn't put it on their foreheads, they wrote it on their arms so that it would be in their hands. They would always feel it and know it and at a time of prayer that

was supposed to be the first thing on their minds, or I don't know maybe it was osmosis, but it was the first thing on their minds that they remember to love the Lord their God with all their being.

And Jesus is kind of contradicting, well he's not contradicting he is just making fun of them you might say by making these huge boxes on their foreheads. Nobody did that. But they did that so that everybody would know that they were serious about keeping this law on the front of their minds and they would make their fringes long. Now a fringe, the closest thing we have to it today in the Christian tradition, is a pastor will wear a stole over their robe around their neck – just a piece of cloth that has decorative stuff on and sometimes they have fringes on them. Well the fringes had specific purposes. They each one was a law that they would count off and that they would remember as they went through their fringes, they would remember the laws and that kept them sacred and kept them in covenant, kept them in communion with God.

You know as well as I, folks have a tendency to take things to extreme and they were no exception. Jesus even pointed it out. Sometimes they would take the phylactery and make it huge or they would take the fringes on their prayer shawls and make them very long so that they would remember in front of everyone how long and how much they had loved the Lord their God and remembered their law. It's so easy for us in the twenty-first century to say, "You know what, that really doesn't apply" cause I don't see anyone of you here and I'd venture a guess that none of you have ever put a phylactery on, have you? I don't think so. Raise your hand if you have. I've never done it. None of us wear prayer shawls so to speak. We don't wear the cloth around our necks with the fringes on them and we don't recite the laws one by one. We don't do that, do we?

Talk about irrelevant. Here's another case in point where scripture is absolutely timeless. It doesn't make any difference to us today. It's in the past, or is it? It would be too easy for us to condemn this passage and say that it's not important. Just skip right over it; just go to the next part. But the importance of this is that we do do those things. Oh, they don't look like a box and we don't strap it to our heads, but we do things like that. We will put a fish on the back side of our car. We'll wear a gold necklace that has a cross and flame on it or a cross on it. We'll wear cross earrings or something like that. We'll even have a cross ring. We'll do it.

How many of you all have ever even thought about wearing a bracelet. The youth are doing it all over the place. It has WWJD. What Would Jesus Do? We put those things all over us in the same manner that they do here. We want folks to know that we are Christian. Now there's nothing wrong with that, just like there's nothing wrong with what they're doing, unless!

See motive has everything to do with it and that's what Jesus is upset about. And he is warning these crowds not to be led astray. Don't be led astray by what looks holy, but in reality isn't. I mean those of you who've had the inclination, who've ever even thought about it, maybe have scanned through your TV channels you've seen MTV. You see all kinds of things going on in MTV where you have scantily clad people wearing a cross necklace singing about lust, not love, they call it love but it's really lust. What example is that setting? I'm not suggesting that any of us in here are MTV music stars but perhaps there is something that we need to be aware of.

The ways that we carry ourselves in public is what Jesus is really getting at here. Be careful! Now the irony of this is that Jesus is telling these folks, these crowds and his disciples to do what they say, these Scribes and Pharisees because they sit on the seat of Moses. They are teaching about the law. Do it! That's the law, that's the covenant. Live in covenant with God. In other words, do as they say but don't do as they do. That's troubling for a lot of us. It's very troubling.

This past week we give you thanks for the opportunity for us to gather and to send a team to Louisiana. There are several things that have happened during that trip that I feel as though I should share with you. Some of the things that happened are most ironic. The winds that came in and blew down trees and blew apart buildings and took roofs off of houses in the Lake Charles and the

Cameron Parish area was just astounding to all of us. We were aghast and many times speechless. The only thing we could utter was a prayer. But there was one particular thing that was noticed and on the way home, you know if you have a six hour drive, you have a lot of time to process what you saw and you get a chance to really kind of unpack it and sometimes even put it together. There's a lot of pieces of puzzle that are just scattered hither and yon and you get a chance to put it all together in the time that you come home. One of the things that was mentioned was that of all the churches that we saw in the Lake Charles area and even down in the Cameron Parrish area, the wind damage that was sustained did one thing that was most peculiar. Almost every church lost its sign. The thing that distinguished it, one church denomination brand from another and every church looked like every other church and you couldn't tell whether it was a Presbyterian or a Baptist or a Catholic or non-denominational. You couldn't tell if it was a Methodist or Episcopalian. You couldn't tell. If you'd studied architecture you might have a good guess but basically you couldn't tell what church was what.

And you know as strange and twisted as my mind is as you are driving home for six hours and you're thinking about this, you wonder what did God have in mind in doing that. Maybe God was trying to say something to us that we ought to listen to, that those things that would distinguish us and those things that make us distinct from one another maybe ought not be. The irony of seeing that played out is what some of the experiences, Glen you had some of them, Ruth Colley had some of them, when they went to serve in the distribution centers and went with folks who were helping to present food. Even in the work teams where we worked, we talked with everybody that we helped to work on their homes and the irony of that is that all of the things that used to segregate the population by class or by race or by sex or by anything, religion, suddenly that was irrelevant. People were in the business of helping people. We all became people again. It didn't matter if you wore fancy clothes or rags. It didn't matter if you drove a Cadillac or you came on foot. It didn't matter if you lived on the south side of town where all the homes were nice and brick or on the north side of town where everything was pier and beam and on a bunch of rocks. It didn't matter.

One of the churches there was Warren United Methodist Church. It is a traditionally African-American church and Warren church had been built in the late 1890's. The congregation was founded in 1890, the building itself was built in 1931 and the Warren church lost its entire roof so the entire time of the storm it rained and the winds blew and the rains came and it soaked down through what used to be the roof into the sanctuary into the hymnals and into the pew cushions and into the carpets and into the walls and into the ceiling and now six weeks later there is nothing but mold and mildew throughout the entire building. The Warren church is having to face some pretty significant decisions right now. They were awarded everything that they were insured for; unfortunately it wasn't for replacement cost. They are going to get a check for about \$800,000.00 and the total cost of their damage is in excess of two million. They have a significant decision to make whether or not they can afford to rebuild at least part of the church or to move off site and start from scratch. It is a congregation of about 120 people. They worship about 75 on average on Sunday mornings as according to the pastor on a good Sunday. Should they move off site or right now they are meeting in another congregation's facilities in Oak Park United Methodist Church and there is even discussion there about wanting to merge with that church, a traditionally white church.

But you know, race suddenly is no longer relevant, it's no longer an issue. The thing that tied that whole community together was their common experience of loss in the midst of a huge storm. Those things that used to be extremely distinctive, that's what is really irrelevant.

And I don't know maybe that's what Jesus was trying to say about these Scribes and Pharisees, the things that made them very distinctive compared to the rest of the community really weren't that important. It wasn't the size of phylactery that they tied to their forehead or the length of

the fringe on their prayer shawls. It really was their faith, their faith and the humility of knowing that we are all truly a massive bundle of needs, each and every one of us and all of us together. Maybe that's what Jesus was trying to say in the end there where he said those words – he said, “The greatest among you will be your servant and all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The press, I don't like to talk bad about the press, but what they show on TV and in the newspapers, it's no where near – you know it's not as they say, it's not as bad as they say, it's worse. And it's not as good as they say, it's better because people are now people again. And maybe that's the lesson that we could all learn, that we can come together and hear once again the teachings of the Master, the Messiah, the Lord and do as He has told us to do. More than that, do as He did. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen!