

Theme: Do as I say, not what I do!

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, you sent your son to teach us and to lead us and set good examples to make us better followers of you; bless us always with your truth and love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“For the last few weeks we’ve all been subjected to reruns of every scary movie ever made: zombies, vampires, guys in hockey masks, spooks with really long fingernails. Monsters in all shapes and forms are the flavor of the month of October.

“It’s hardly surprising that, as usual, popular culture has gotten the point of ‘All Hallows Eve’ all wrong and totally forgets that the ultimate point is to celebrate ‘All Saints Day.’ The monsters get center stage and adulation. The saints are left to clean up the popcorn and sticky soda on the theater floor.

“But the Church has gotten this All Hallows/All Saints holiday all wrong too. We’ve been convinced that ‘monsters’ are easily identifiable. We think ‘monsters’ are weird, warped, obviously wicked, bent on murder, mayhem and mischief. Alas, outside Hollywood ‘monsters’ are not so easily identifiable.

“A classic ‘monster’ is a creature that takes the best of its qualities and uses them in a horribly wrong way. The amazing ability of bats to negotiate the darkness of night by using sonic signals to hunt swiftly and silently is made murderous by, ‘the vampire.’ The agility and intelligence, strength and speed of the wolf are transformed into the terror of the hybrid hunter, ‘the werewolf.’

“What the movies miss is that the worst kinds of ‘monsters’ don’t take away life in an instant. They suck away our souls over time.

“In today’s gospel text Jesus was preaching against ‘monsters,’ individuals who took those qualities that should have brought out the best in them, and yet instead they warped those gifts into a misshapen, misinformed message.”  
(Leonard Sweet)

Jesus gives them their due, but criticizes their messages. Jesus is concerned that their actions are hurting the religious and spiritual lives of the Jews. Jesus wants to be clear that it is Jesus who is their role model, not the Pharisees and the scribes. What Jesus is telling them is that the disciples of his day and we disciples of our day can avoid hypocrisy by treating each other as equals, saying what we mean and following through with it, and worshipping humbly.

Jesus is in Jerusalem. The religious authorities made several attempts to trap him into saying something they could use against him. They failed. Jesus is now left alone with his disciples and those who are in Jerusalem hanging around to hear what Jesus has to say. Jesus is addressing these people.

Jesus begins by giving the scribes and Pharisees their due. They are the religious teachers of the Jews. People are to pay attention to what they say. But the problem is that they do not practice what they teach. They talk the talk, but they don't walk the walk.

Why does Jesus make this accusation? Jesus says that they lay heavy burdens on people, but they live the life of Riley. (Just who is Riley anyway?) They make sure that everyone notices their religious practices. They even make their personal objects of devotion bigger than most people's religious objects.

Note that Jesus does not include the priests in his objections. What the priests do and wear is dictated by the torah. The scribes and Pharisees are learned people in the torah, the law, as well as the prophets and the writings. They take it upon themselves to teach people in what they should do or not do according to the law, the torah. There is nothing in the torah that gives them their authority. It is given to them through an evolutionary tradition.

The scribes and Pharisees take places of honor in religious and non-religious settings. They like to be greeted in public gatherings, not unlike some of our county supervisors.

They like being called rabbi, a word translated as teacher, which is what they do. So, to call any of them a rabbi is pretty accurate. But Jesus admonishes the disciples that they are not to be called rabbi, because they already have a rabbi, Jesus. In fact, the word disciple literally means student. So, to be a

disciple of Jesus is to be a student. It is to be a learner not the teacher. Jesus is telling his disciples that they are to be brothers and sisters to one another.

I once had a person in Gridley tell me that his evangelical brother told him that priests can't be called Father citing verse nine from this passage. I'm not really sure what he called his own father. Maybe it was hey, you. We have no evidence of the Pharisees nor were the scribes ever being called "Father."

So, what is Jesus talking about here? There was a tradition of calling the great teachers of the past "Father." But in order to get the honorific you have to be long dead. In Malachi 2:7-10, the priests of those days so corrupted scripture that they were not to be called "fathers." There is but one Father, God. This seems to match what Jesus is saying. Those who use scripture to cause people to stumble are not to be called Father.

In our epistle reading today, St. Paul uses the father analogy in describing his relationship to the Thessalonians, "As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory." (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12) Paul is equating one who encourages and pleads with a congregation does so like a father.

So, where does one get authoritative teaching? Certainly not from the Pharisees and the scribes. The source for authoritative teaching is from the Messiah. The Messiah is their instructor.

And what is the job of the disciple? To be a servant. That is the path of greatness. Because "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Jesus delineates two forms of hypocrisy. The first is when one says one thing and does another. The second is when one behaves rightly, but for the wrong reasons. Jesus accuses the Pharisees and the scribes of both of these forms of hypocrisy. Jesus really, really does not like hypocrites.

One of the charges that people give for not joining a Christian church is because we are hypocrites. We say people must live a certain way and then we don't follow through ourselves. We criticize others for deeds we do. TV preachers are very public examples of this. We really can't deny this charge.

The best retort I have heard to this accusation is that the church is a hospital for hypocrites and sinners. We mess up. But we celebrate the fact that we are still acceptable to God, because of Christ's gift of grace won on the cross.

A lot of people are going to be wearing masks tomorrow and some even today. But we all wear masks everyday. We don't need Halloween to wear masks. We wear happy masks when we are not happy. We wear sad masks when we are not sad. We wear the brave mask when we are not brave. We wear the tough mask when we are fearful. There are many masks we wear and each one reveals a hypocrite. In spite of all of this, God still loves us and forgives us. But we can avoid hypocrisy by treating each other as equals, saying what we mean and follow through with it, and worshipping humbly.

**Matthew 23:1–12 (NRSV)**

**23** Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup>“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; <sup>3</sup> therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. <sup>4</sup> They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear,<sup>a</sup> and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. <sup>5</sup> They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. <sup>6</sup> They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, <sup>7</sup> and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. <sup>8</sup> But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.<sup>b</sup> <sup>9</sup> And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. <sup>10</sup> Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.<sup>c</sup> <sup>11</sup> The greatest among you will be your servant. <sup>12</sup> All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> Other ancient authorities lack *hard to bear*

<sup>b</sup> Gk *brothers*

<sup>c</sup> Or *the Christ*

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mt 23:1–12). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.