

Scripture Study

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A



Opening prayer

Malachi 1:14b—2:2b, 8-10

(Ps 131:1-3)

1 Thessalonians 2:7b-9, 13

Matthew 23:1-12

Overview of the Gospel:

- In this Sunday's Gospel reading, Jesus is addressing both the crowds and his disciples after he has silenced his opponents, including the Pharisees (Matthew 21:23—22:46).
- Jesus tells his listeners that the Pharisees have a type of authority and should be listened to. Tradition had it that the precepts of the Jewish law were carried on through an unbroken line of scribes all the way back to Moses.
- The "chair of Moses" (chair = the Greek *kathe'dras* = the Latin *cathedrum*) may have been an actual chair as was found in later synagogues. It is where we get the Latin term *ex cathedra*—from the Chair of Peter, that is, the Pope.
- Even though Jesus acknowledges the authority of these leaders, he warns his leaders not to imitate their hypocritical behavior, "for they preach, but do not practice." (see Romans 2:21-24). They wield and exercise authority, but without humility.
- After Jesus' discourse that we hear today he will, in no uncertain terms, go on to condemn the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (Matthew 23:13-39).

Questions:

- What was the sin of the Old Testament religious leaders as described by Malachi in the 1st Reading? What were some of the results of these sins?
- In the 2nd Reading, what sort of example did St. Paul and his fellow missionaries give to the Thessalonians? What was the fruit of their example in their lives?
- What was the seat of Moses? Given Jesus' remarks about the Pharisees in chapters 21—22, what is surprising about his remarks in 23:3? How does he limit his commendation of them?
- As Jesus sees it, what is the main evil of the Pharisee? How are his disciples to avoid falling into the same evil? Why would it be important that the disciples not allow themselves to be called "rabbi"? What distinction was Jesus trying to make between his followers and the Pharisees?
- Compare the path of greatness followed by some of the Pharisees with that taught by Jesus (verses 5-12). What do these two views of greatness teach us about the two views of the kingdom of God?
- What do you expect from your religious leaders and teachers? If you are a parent, catechist or other religious teacher, how well do you practice what you preach?
- Regarding Matthew 23:12, what are some of the episodes of your life that illustrate the truth of this passage to yourself? How have you been humbled? What did you learn from these events (see James 4:6 and Luke 1:52)?

Catechism of the Catholic Church: §§ 427—428, 526

Closing prayer

If we possessed every virtue, but lacked humility, those virtues would be without root and would not last. —St. Vincent de Paul

Remember to read and meditate on the daily Mass readings!

"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted"

Scripture: *Matthew 23:1-12*

Meditation: Does your practice match your talk? Jesus scolds the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of the Jews, for their showy practices. In a way they wanted to be good models of observant Jews. *See how well we observe all the ritual rules and regulations of our religion!* In their misguided zeal for religion they sought respect and honor for themselves rather than for God and for his word. They wanted the people to treat them as great teachers and rulers. They, unfortunately, made the practice of their faith a burden rather than a joy for the people they were supposed to serve.

Was Jesus against calling anyone rabbi or father? Or was he just directing this sharp rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees? Jesus seemed to be warning both his disciples and the religious leaders about the temptation to seek titles and honors to increase one's personal reputation and admiration by others. The scriptures give ample warning about the danger of self-seeking pride: "Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall." (Proverbs 16:18) "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6; Proverbs 3:24)

Jerome, an early church father (347-420 AD) and bible scholar who translated the bible from the original Hebrew and Greek into the common Latin tongue, comments on this passage:



"No one should be called teacher or father except God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. He alone is the Father, because all things are from him. He alone is the teacher, because through him are made all things and through him all things are reconciled to God. But one might ask, 'Is it against this precept when the apostle calls himself the teacher of the Gentiles? Or when, as in colloquial speech widely found in the monasteries of Egypt and Palestine, they call each other Father?' Remember this distinction. It is one thing to be a father or a teacher by nature, another to be so by generosity. For when we call a man father and reserve the honor of his age, we may thereby be failing to honor the Author of our own lives. One is rightly called a teacher only from his association with the true Teacher. I repeat: The fact that we have one God and one Son of God through nature does not prevent others from being understood as sons of God by adoption. Similarly this does not make the terms father

and teacher useless or prevent others from being called father." [Jerome's *Commentary on Matthew*]

Respect for God and his ways incline us to Godly humility and simplicity of heart. The word *disciple* means one who listens in order to learn. Jesus shows us the way to the Father – the way of peace, joy, righteousness, holiness, and true happiness. He showed us the way by lowering himself as a servant for our sake. He humbled himself, even to death on a cross, that we might be raised up and exalted at the Father's right hand in heaven (Philippians 2:1-11). What is true Christ-like humility? Humility is true self-knowledge – regarding oneself as God sees each of us. The humble do not rely on themselves, but trust in God and in the power of his love and saving grace. True humility is a servant-like quality which enables us to place our life at the service of God and the service of our neighbor. Do you know the joy of Christ-like humility and simplicity of heart?

"Lord Jesus, teach me your way of humility and servant hood that I may walk in love as you have loved me. Fill me with the joy of servant hood that I may know the true freedom of selfless love and generous service for my neighbor."

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