

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Now we've all been taught as Christians that we are not to be harsh in judging others. As a result we tend to tip-toe around speaking out against what we know to be wrong because we don't want to be seen as being judgmental. So we shy away from judgment of wrong doers, not because we are trying to be holy and compassionate but because we are uncomfortable with confrontation. The truth is that we are not supposed to be judgmental, but we are called to judge between right and wrong; good and evil; truth and falsehood.

Today we hear the Lord once again harshly criticizing the Pharisees, who we have to understand were not only the religious leaders of the people to whom He was speaking, but also their political leaders. In fact no one seemed to anger Jesus more than the Pharisees. Throughout the Gospels he judges them harshly, variously calling them hard-hearted, hypocrites, blind guides, fools, self-indulgent, greedy, whitened sepulchers or tombs, lawless, a brood of vipers, or descendants of murderers. Today he rips them for being hypocrites: "For they preach but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation, 'Rabbi'".

It's important to recognize that Jesus addressed these remarks, not to the Pharisees, but to his disciples, and the crowd that followed Him. He was calling them to cast a critical eye toward their leaders. Judging rightly, with humility, is what Jesus is telling his followers to do.

When we consider that St. Matthew was writing at a time when the relationship between the Christian community and the leaders of the Jewish faith, as well as the relationship with the political leadership, had completely ruptured, much as it has in our own time and place, this teaching of Jesus is very relevant to us today.

For instance, the whole debate over health care comes down to our leaders, both Democrat and Republican, conservative and progressive, tying up heavy burdens to put on other people's shoulders. They're all hypocrites! If they offered the kind of leadership the Lord is calling for they would humbly acknowledge the excellent health care that the people provide for them, with little or no cost to themselves, and recognize that they should provide the same excellent, affordable health care to the people who are providing it to them and their families. If that would be too expensive to provide for all of us, to be the servant-leaders the Lord calls for, wouldn't you think that fairness demands that they reduce their own benefits to what the least in the citizenry can afford?

You may have noticed in the beginning of this teaching, Jesus said, “The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example.” He’s telling us obey the laws, keep the rules, but do not be ruled by their example, the way in which they want to lead you.

What has been said of political leaders is assuredly as true of the religious leaders of that time and this. No one has been more critical of the religious leaders of our Church than Pope Francis. He has ordered the Canon lawyers in the Vatican to simplify the annulment process for those seeking them and liturgists to leave the celebration of liturgies to local conferences of Bishops. He has basically told the Bishops get off their thrones and out of their cathedrals and the priests get out of their rectories and get themselves dirty shepherding God’s people where they are. Don’t wait for the people to come to us. He’s told us that we have value to Christ and to His people in serving, not in pontificating. And he’s given us the example of how we are to be of service to all in his own washing the feet of imprisoned men and women, Christian, Jew, and Muslim on Holy Thursday.

The hypocrisy and arrogance of the leaders of Jesus’ time and our time is easily recognized by the way in which they seek to make their importance felt. Appearances are more important to them than authenticity. But that’s not limited just to the political and religious leaders of that time or ours. Appearances versus authenticity! It’s rampant in our society. For instance, U.S. News and World Report offers the example of a box of a popular brand of detergent that once held 61 ounces, now contains only 55 ounces—same size box, less soap, same cost. What’s on the outside doesn’t always conform to what’s on the inside. That’s true with people, as well as boxes of detergent. The Pharisees and too many of our leaders, as well as many of us, are more concerned with appearances, rather than being authentic—that is true to who we are and what we believe.

A young friend recently shared this story with me. He has a good friend, Walt, with whom he went all through grade school, high school, and, now college room-mates. They’ve been best friends forever. My young friend has always gone to Mass pretty regularly, while his friend, Walt, has always professed to being an atheist.

One day, Walt looked at my friend and said, “Eddie, do you really believe there’s a God?” Ed said, “Sure, Walt, I believe there is a God.” Walt said, “You don’t live like it.” Eddie asked, “What do you mean?” Walt said, “Well, you live like I do. I’m an atheist. I don’t believe there’s a God, and I live like there’s no God. We’re buddies. You do everything I do. You say there is a God, and yet you don’t live like there’s a God. Don’t you have enough sense to know that, if there is a God, if you can get to know Him and live the way He wants you to live, that’s the most important thing in life? Yet, in all these years we’ve been best buds I don’t see one thing about you that’s different than me and that’s why I can’t see any point in believing there is a God?”

As Eddie finished telling me this story, he broke down crying. He said, “Father, that was the greatest sermon I’ve ever heard. God convicted me out of the mouth of a professed atheist. I’ll never forget it. I am so ashamed. All these years I’ve been talking the talk, but not walking the walk, not even well enough to show my best friend that God is real to me. Please ask God to forgive me and show me how to walk like a Christian.”

At one time or another, we’ve all been there, haven’t we? Those times we haven’t lived what we truly believe? The many times we’ve sought to live more in tune with the crowd than with the cross! That happens. We say something with our lips, but our hearts are not in it. That doesn’t mean that we have to be religious fanatics. It just means that we are called to live our faith in Christ and in His teaching as simply and as real as we can. The Lord isn’t asking us to be merely fans. He is calling us to be followers.

The Lord also is telling us today that a lot of people try to impress us with their importance. They throw around their titles in a way that makes them believe and they want us to believe that the titles in themselves somehow make them better than everyone else. The Lord reminds us, “You have but one master, the Christ” Titles, if they are important, must be earned:

**It is okay to be called teacher if you are a teacher in deed.
It is okay to be called father if you are a father in deed.
It is okay to be called mother if you are a mother in deed.
It is okay to be called doctor if you are a doctor in deed.
It is not the title but the deed that makes it so. It is only humble service that makes it so.**

Jesus ends this teaching by telling us, “The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

According to Jesus, leadership is marked by servanthood. If you want to rid your life of hypocrisy, if you want to rid our nation of hypocrisy, and you want to rid our church of hypocrisy, find a place to serve. A servant’s word will carry far more weight in the end than the word of a great teacher who does not follow through.

These words of the American poet, Edgar A. Guest, sums up the teaching of today’s Word really well:

**I’d rather see a sermon than hear one, any day;
I’d rather one should walk with me than merely show me the way;
The eye’s a better pupil and more willing than the ear.
Fine counsel is confusing, but examples always clear.
And the best of all preachers are those who live their creeds;
For to see good put in action is what everybody needs.**