

Do As They Do!

Shepherd's Grace Church

November 2, 2014

Then Jesus said to his disciples and the crowds, "The Pharisees and the scribes sit on Moses' seat, therefore, listen to what they teach you and do all they tell you to do. Do not, however, do as they do for they do not practice that which they teach. They love to build up large loads and heap them upon the shoulders of others yet they do not lift even a finger to move them. They love to do their deeds in public where they can be seen for their phylacteries are broad and their fringes are long! They love to sit at the places of honor at banquets and to have the best seats at synagogue. They love to be recognized in the marketplace and to be called Rabbi. You, however are not to be called Rabbi for all of you are students and you have only one teacher, the Messiah! Neither are you to call any one on this earth 'father' for you have but one Father, your Heavenly Father. Neither is anyone to call you instructor for you are not teachers. So, the one who would be the greatest among you must be servant to all. All who are exalted must be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Matthew 23: 1-13) (Also read Joshua 3: 7-17)

(As you read the first part of this message, I will ask you to imagine me wearing my Bible tied to my forehead because as I preached this sermon on November 2, that is how I delivered it. The reason will become clear during the course of the message)

During the course of my preparation this week, I read many different sources trying to understand the aggressive and challenging words I just shared with you. Most of the "experts" tried to make excuses for Jesus, suggesting that it is a common rhetorical strategy to call your opponents names. They wanted to argue that such an attack was to be expected by the leader of one side of a debate and would certainly be retaliated by the other.

The more I read, the more uncomfortable I became with their level of discomfort! I could not accept the analysis that made excuses for and tried to exonerate Jesus from using stinging epithet to convey a point of conflict. I came to the conclusion that there must be more to the reason Matthew's Jesus stands so forcefully this morning. I came to the conclusion that Matthew's Jesus had good reason for using the words he uses. Matthew's Jesus has strong strategic method for deviating so significantly from the strategy of Love that He has espoused since the beginning of the Gospel. Today, as I wear the Word on my head, let's examine the deviation in disbursement of the Gospel message.

First let's start with a thought. Words are words! That is certainly not an original thought but in our 21st century "rattle it off" instant communication world, it is a thought we should be reminded of! In our world of Facebook and twitter where we can speak before we think, where we can express our opinion even when our opinion is unsolicited and then get upset because someone else chooses to express theirs in opposition to ours it is important to remember that words are words and once they are spoken, it is impossible to take them back!

Today, Jesus speaks words and while we would like to apologize for them, we cannot. They are part of scripture and they carry weight! Throughout the centuries, they have carried the weight of causing anti-Semitic thought. These words have been the cause of placing blame, shouting accusation, and marginalizing a whole race of people! Today, we have to ask ourselves, as we look at the whole of Matthew's gospel, if that could be the intent or if there must be some other intent. Today, we must come to the conclusion that words are not just words, words are a very expression of our hearts. As Jesus told us in chapter 11, it is not that which goes into a person, but that which comes out is what causes a person to be defiled. What comes out of the mouth comes from the heart and it is the heart that defiles!

Since we know that Jesus is without sin and that it is His mission to save His people from their sin (1.18, 21) we have to conclude that what comes out of his mouth cannot defile Him and must not defile those who hear. We must therefore dig deeply into the words used. We must recognize that words are more than just words. They carry meaning and impact. They are not for our convenience but for our need to communicate. They are as important as the words of baseball immortal, Casey Stengel who was once quoted as saying that "It's not over till it's over!"

On the face of it, this seems like an obvious statement but the words took on a new meaning for me this week and probably for every other fan of the Kansas City Royals. As the Royals played in the World Series and took the Giants to the 7th game, there were several occasions where both teams were written off! Pundits of the game prognosticated that the Royals were finished after game 1. Some people said the Giants were going to dominate the series and they wouldn't be surprised if it was a sweep. After game 4 when the series was tied, many thought the Royals held the upper hand. After game 5 the Giants were a cinch to win and after game 6 it was the Royals. During game 7, the game was tied for a long time and then the Giants scored a go ahead run. When they brought in Bumgartner, it seemed like the end for the Royals.

I kept remembering Stengel's words however! It is not over till it is over. When Alex Gordon singled and the outfielder for the Giants misplayed the hit into a triple in the bottom of the 9th, I knew the game was not over! I hung on every pitch to Perez, the catcher for the Royals, confident that he would duplicate the feat accomplished in the "Wild Card Game" and bring victory to the Royals. The game was not over! Then there was the pop up foul. Sandevaul, the third baseman, they call him the Panda, moved over and I kept thinking the ball was going to drift out of play. When I saw him squeeze the ball into his mitt and fall to the ground, I could not believe. My eyes told me it was over but my heart told me NO! It took me several minutes to realize the truth of Stengel's words. It ain't over till it's over! But when it is over, it is over!

The words were true and while the words held hope, they also held reality! Words are words! They stand as they are spoken and they can't be changed! Here are some other words. In the beginning was the Word! Word is a word but there is more! The Word was with God and the Word was God and without the Word, not one single thing came into being and with the Word, all things came into being! Do we still think words are just words? Do we still think words have little impact?

Our words are words. Without the work of the Holy Spirit, they have little impact! Without the Power of God, they are only wind but Words that spring forth with the creative and energized power of God know no bounds! The Word came into the world and the darkness could not overcome it! All the evil, all the greed, all the lust of the world could not overcome the Word! All this according to the evangelist John (John 1: 1-8) but what does it have to do with our Jesus according to Matthew?

The Word has everything to do with our conversation this morning and with the conversation Matthew puts into Jesus mouth in chapter 23 of his gospel. You see, the Word became flesh and walked among us! It was filled with grace and truth as of the Father's only Son! (John 1: 16-18) This is the Word that speaks this morning and yet we wonder about grace and truth! We ask, "How can there be grace with such slander?" "How can there be truth in the midst of such attack?"

These questions are really at the heart of our conversation this morning aren't they? These questions are the ones that leave us so troubled. These questions are why the scholars are so apologetic today for the speech of Jesus!

None of us wants to admit that what Jesus says is what Jesus says! It's like the reality of Casey Stengel's slang. It is not over till it is over but when it is over, it is over! Once words are spoken, they cannot be taken back! Once words are spoken they cannot be changed! Apologists want to try to reshape the words, to make them seem less forceful, less powerful but to do that to the Word is to diminish the power of God!

Standing before us this morning is the Power of God in the Word! It is full of grace and truth and we, like others before us want to cower before it! We, like others want to diminish it so today, around the world, there will be countless sermons preached, Sunday School lessons taught that make apologies for the way Jesus or Matthew attacks the Pharisees and scribes!

Countless numbers of people will leave church today filled with a sense of confusion regarding the message that is right in front of us! They will be given the feel good Jesus who never has a harsh word, who never experiences an angry moment, who never gives up on anyone or projects them as faithless in order to convince others that they are faithful! Is that the Jesus you want to leave Church with today? A Jesus who makes you "feel good" about him while leaving you wondering about you? If it is, then *Do as They Do!* Do as the scholars do and make apologies for Jesus venom and vitriol and do not look deeper for the meaning behind the message! *Do as they Do* and whitewash the grace and truth that is offered in this message! *Do as they Do and take a nap* instead of reading the rest of today's sermon!

Do as they do and imagine that Jesus just lost it for a few minutes, that he mis-spoke, that he was having a "bad day!" Do as they do and forget that standing before you in this moment is the Word, that word which brought all things into being! Do as they do and forget that not one thing came into being without this Word! Do as they do and allow for a little misspeak! If you can do as they do and imagine Jesus as a misspeaker, perhaps you can imagine Him calling into being an elephant when He really wanted an elepotamus! Imagine that he called into being strawberries when he really wanted straples (strawberry flavored grapes). No, my imagination doesn't stretch that far and when you stop to think, I

do not think yours will either! I think you, as I do, want more from Jesus! Wake up, therefore and expect more! Trust me, Jesus will deliver!

If you want more from Jesus, if you want to know more about yourself, then read on remembering that I have the Word of God still tied to my head as an illustration!(By this point in the message as it was preached, I am sure the congregation was wondering as you might be about what sort of illustration!) If you want more from Jesus today, then read on!

As you read, remember the scriptures! Who is Jesus talking to this morning? He is addressing the crowds and his disciples. The Pharisees and the scribes are not even present! For the past several weeks, he has been talking to them. He has been in direct conflict with them and with other leaders of the day, making points to them through parable, not so much to embarrass them but to encourage them to recognize the difference between the "Kingdom of God" and the "kingdom of the world." Some of those differences he is teaching are that, "The Kingdom of God is a kingdom of grace and forgiveness," "The Kingdom of God is a kingdom of life and hope," and "The Kingdom of God has room for all people." This is contrasted with the kingdom the elders, the scribes, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees offer; a kingdom of oppression, slavery and ultimate exclusion!

But the Pharisees and the scribes are not present this morning. Jesus is talking to the crowds. He has bested the others and they are no longer asking questions. We can only assume they have learned their lessons. Matthew tells us they now know to whom they are talking. They do not choose to follow Him but they do indeed know! Jesus is no longer talking to them. They have made their choices! They have reached their decision. Jesus is now talking to the crowds, to the disciples. He is now talking to those who still have to decide! He wants them to learn something more so they can make an informed decision!

Listen to the scribes and Pharisees, He says. Do as they teach you! They are in positions of authority and you are to respect the authority. Paul says in Romans 13 that we are to be subject to worldly authority because it comes from God. Jesus affirms this, encouraging the crowds to recognize and submit to discipline. He wants all of us to know that the law of the world is not perfect but it is necessary to preserve order until the "Coming of the Kingdom."

Listen but do not do what they do, Jesus says. This week, as we face the upcoming elections, we know there are elected officials, there are even priests and pastors who do not obey the law! They use the law for their own purposes. Jesus says there is nothing wrong with the Law! God gave the law to Moses and it is intended as a guide to right behavior and faithful worship! Listen to the law, Jesus says but do not follow the example. These teachers do not practice the law, they practice their own convenience placing themselves above the law!

The leaders of the day create huge obstacles for those who have no strength left to overcome them. They add rule after rule so that those who are not in elite circles have no hope of overcoming them! We could spend hours at this point speaking to the bureaucracy of the tax laws, the welfare laws, the health care laws of the society we currently live in but I will leave you to reflect on these situations more for yourself. Most of us know the difficulty of interpreting the law in our own nation, state and community

and most of us know we are at the mercy of others to help us understand. Most of us know also, the struggle we have in finding others who are informed and will take the time to stand for those who are oppressed and enslaved, mired in the muck of our legal system! The leaders we know are the same ones Jesus indicts in His day!

Their phylacteries are broad, he says. At this point, if you are paying attention, you are reaching for your phone or Ipad to google phylacteries. When you get there, your google source will tell you that a phylactery is a box worn on the forehead of scribes and certain Pharisees that is filled with scripture. The broader the box, the more religious, the more informed the leader! Now, look at the box I have been wearing on my head! Remember that inside of that box is contained the Word of God, a Word so powerful that it can change lives!

The leaders wore these boxes so they could constantly remind themselves of God's message in Deuteronomy 6. Most of us remember the part of that message beginning at verse 4. "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One!" We have heard it countless times and for us it affirms the sovereignty of God. Many times, however, we do not read on. We do not remember that God gives us instruction about this word. We are to write the word on our door posts. We are to teach it to our children. We are to meditate upon it when we lie down and when we get up, never letting it depart from us. (Deut. 6: 5-9) Inside the boxes were the scriptures themselves, a constant reminder that the word should be in front of us at all times, that the word should be lived as an example of God's presence!

The word I wear this morning has been a constant message to those of you watching me preach. It has never left your eyes and it has caused your minds to focus. That is the intent, but it is only part of the intent. The word is not supposed to remain as part of our mind but it is to become part of our heart! The heart is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit and when the Spirit speaks it will not defile. Many people miss salvation by the 12 inches that separate the head from the heart! Jesus' message this morning is to the crowds and the disciples inviting them not to miss!

The Pharisees wear the phylacteries on their heads as a reminder but while they have that reminder in their minds, Jesus asks the crowds to have a life! He says to the crowds and to the disciples, you like to hear me criticize the elders. You like to hear me best the Sadducees and the Pharisees because it makes you feel good. It makes you feel somehow superior to those who want to feel superior to you! Jesus' message this morning is not to the Pharisees or the scribes! They are not even there! His message is to the crowds! It is to us! It is a message that invites us to recognize the hypocrisy in our own lives!

When we feel the sting of Jesus' words against the world, against the religious institutions, against leaders of the church, against the elected officials whom we will vote for on Tuesday, we should feel the sting of Jesus' words against us! We are Jesus' target audience this morning. We are the crowd and when Jesus invites us to look closely at the phylacteries tied to the heads of the Pharisees, he is inviting us to remove the "log from our own eye before we try to remove the speck from the eye or our neighbor!"

Once again, we want to point fingers, to place labels like pious hypocrites, to see the worst in others and while Jesus has pointed out the flaw in the Pharisee, he has also encouraged us not to Judge lest we also be judged! Jesus wants the crowd, the disciples to remain above the name calling and finger pointing! He wants us to remember that there is none without sin, not even one of us (Rom. 3) and while we might consider the acts of the Pharisees unnecessary and excessive, we also can be considered excessive in our judgments and in our responses to God and our leaders.

This year, the election has been a particularly vicious in the venom used by candidates on both sides. Neither side seems to be encouraging decisions made in favor of their platform and neither side seems to have articulated a platform. Instead, both sides point to the flaws of the other candidate and give reasons not to vote for that person. This negative approach is exactly what Jesus is talking about this morning. Christians have a positive platform. We have the promise of a loving God who will never leave or forsake us! We have the gifts of redemption and grace through Jesus Christ. We have the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We do not need to point to others and put them down! Instead, we can offer something which can be found nowhere else!

We do not need to wear our phylacteries on our foreheads. We can instead wear our hearts on our sleeves! We do not have to preach, we can practice! We can demonstrate love to others in ways that will encourage them to want to share that love and then share it with those who have never experienced it before. Jesus isn't talking to the Pharisees and scribes this morning, he is talking to all of us, inviting, imploring us not to fall into the trap!

"Don't flatter yourselves," he says, "by accepting the trappings of the world. Don't seek the best seat for yourself but give your seat to another who can use it more. Don't show off in the sanctuary so others will be impressed with your sanctimony. Instead, encourage those who are hurting, come along side them and walk with them a ways, letting them learn from your love what it means to humble yourself so that they might be sanctified!

Don't call attention to yourselves in public places, Jesus says. Think about calling attention to others! *Do as they do* who claim success as an effort accomplished by many and not just by one! Remember you have had a log in your own eye and you didn't even know it! Rejoice with others who are rejoicing with you as you find your faith journey together! You are not rabbis he tells us! Don't try to impress others with your knowledge. All of you are students and you have only one teacher! That teacher is the Word who is standing in front of you now!

This is the only place in all of Matthew's gospel where Jesus refers to Himself as Messiah. He does so in order to claim the authority of the Word. He does not claim authority of many words but of the singular Word that proceeds from the mouth of God! As this Word, He is filled with grace and truth and his teaching is with authority! Others can claim titles, let them! Others can seek glory, let them!

Those who would be the greatest among you are the ones who would be servants! *Do as they Do!* Today, we stand on the shoulders of giants, we stand on the shoulders of those who have served as our Sunday School teachers, parents, teachers, friends, confidants and mentors! These are the saints who have recognized that "People do not care how much you know until they see how much you care!"

They have cared, cured, caused us to think and today we think with them about what Jesus wants for us. They know we are to be difference makers. They want us to make a difference *Doing as they do!* They invite us today to serve and not to seek glory! They invite us to be humble so that God may be glorified even as God has been glorified in them! Today, they invite us, Jesus invites us to *Do as they Do!* Amen!