



WEEKLY GOSPEL REFLECTION



31ST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, CYCLE A

Fr. David Rosenberg

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"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted." Matt 23:12

There are two important points to consider about Matthew's account of Jesus' harsh condemnation of certain religious leaders of his time. First, he is speaking of bad leaders. There is no justification here whatsoever for presuming that all the scribes and Pharisees were hypocritical. In fact, the vast majority of them were good and faithful servants of God's law.

Second, Matthew at the time was engaged in a bitter struggle between the fledgling Christian communities and long-established Judaism. There is no doubt that his formulation of Jesus' words about contemporary religious leaders is colored by this struggle. From age to age scripture scholars are called to consider what is called the *hermeneutics*, i.e. the interpretation of a scripture passage through the lens of current societal and cultural norms.

Keeping this in mind, this reading gives us an extremely powerful message about religious leadership that is relevant for all time. In every generation we are tempted to wander from the ideal that Jesus exhorted by his word and example. The prideful display of wide phylacteries and huge tassels for exhibition were quite common among the clergy of His day, and places of honor seemed not to make them uncomfortable at all. Titles are often misinterpreted as demand for subjugation attached to the individual rather than respect for the office, which is evidenced when God's presence animates His human instruments. Saint Francis of Assisi said this beautifully in his prayer, "Make me your *instrument*, Lord."

As Jesus travels toward his Passion and death in Matthew's Gospel, His emphasis is on this human failing. He rises in psychological and spiritual stature among those He preaches to, as is befitting of His majestic and serene authority as King, Judge and Lord of humankind. Scripture scholars interpret His words symbolically in all ages for current forms of self-serving religiosity, no matter where it may be found.

"They preach but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people's shoulders..." Matt 23:3-4 Mosaic Law was the culmination of the process for liberation of God's Chosen Ones. God wanted to fashion for Himself a people that would be liberated and free to reciprocate His love. But over the centuries, the situation that Jesus depicts grew worse than the Jew's Egyptian slavery. The Pharisee's binding enforcement of the Law enslaved human minds and souls, as well as their bodies. They have shattered the sacred solidarity that God instituted, and reduced a liberating set of laws to approbation for enslavement.

Jesus, however, concludes his discourse on the Pharisees with an age-old Christian paradox that overturns earthly values, *"The greatest among you must be servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted."* We reflect and pray this week that our Church, and us by extension, practice humility in our daily witness to a world filled with strife and heavy burdens. May our prayers and actions liberate those most in need of His mercy!

A Reading from the Holy Gospel according to Matthew

Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, saying,
"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.
For they preach but they 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.'
As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.'
You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers.
Call no one on earth your father;
you have but one Father in heaven.
Do not be called 'Master';
you have but one master, the Christ.
The greatest among you must be your servant.
Whoever exalts himself will be humbled;
but whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

The Gospel of the Lord