

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Third Sunday in Lent, March 24, 2019

✠ ✠ ✠

(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns:366:1-5, 89:1-2, 652, 56:1-4,366:6-7

Lessons: Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Acts 15:1-14, Matthew 23:13-36.

Sermon Text: Matthew 23:1-12.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

If we could use only one word to describe Pharisees, we would use the word hypocrisy, that they are hypocrites. The Pharisees as a group believed that men are rewarded or punished in a future life according to whether or not they lived a good life or an evil life. They believed and practiced that the outward life and actions are more important than what is in the heart. One writer called them ‘the best people in the nation.’

As you heard in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus denounced them for their self-righteous hypocrisy, and for ignoring the more important matters of the law of God, while being very particular as to the detailed points of the law, especially man-made laws.

The word Pharisee is found about 85 times in the Bible, all in the New Testament. As a sect, they apparently came into existence within the 200 years before Christ’s birth.

Our text begins with Jesus saying *“to the crowds and to his disciples: ‘The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.’”*

A dictionary meaning for the word hypocrisy is ‘the false profession of desirable qualities, beliefs, or feelings, especially a pretense of having virtues, moral principles, or religious beliefs that one does not really possess. It is the condition of a person pretending to be something he is not, especially in the area of morals or religion, a false presentation of belief or feeling.’ Synonyms include insincerity, deception, phoniness, deceitfulness, and pharisaism. The word hypocrite comes from a Greek word which means an actor in a play, that is, someone pretending he is something or someone he is not. Jesus today gives us perhaps the best picture of the Pharisees and what they do. Today let’s examine Scripture’s

WARNINGS AGAINST HYPOCRISY

- 1. Jesus describes the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and**
- 2. Jesus condemns hypocrisy everywhere and**
- 3. In Jesus himself we see an example of true humility.**

These words were spoken by Jesus in the last days of his life before his capture and crucifixion. In the previous chapter, we read that Jesus had humiliated the Sadducees and the Pharisees and the teachers of the law and that *“No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.”* Matthew 22:46 (NIV)

In our text Jesus tells his hearers that to please God, do what the Pharisees tell you to do, but don’t do what they do. The Pharisees had the right words, the right things to say, but didn’t do what they told others to do. They didn’t practice what they preached. He denounced the Pharisees for their own sins and for leading others astray.

There is much in the news about well-known people whose hypocrisy and secret lives and actions have been revealed. This might lead us to think that honesty and decent behavior is becoming more common. But we know that every human being is sinful, and despite mankind’s pretense of becoming better people, sin still fills our lives, and without the motivation of the Gospel, all that unbelieving men will accomplish is mere outward better behavior.

The Pharisees in Jesus time, just like such self-righteous people today, were more concerned about the show they could put on. They did things for appearance to other men, not from their hearts to please God. How terrible! Jesus is using the word **“woe”** repeatedly in the verses following our sermon text as a warning of terrible consequences to come upon Pharisees of his day, as well as all those who behave like the Pharisees.

Although Jesus states that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were representing God because they were sitting in Moses’ seat, he warns **“do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.”** What a terrible indictment! They told others what to do and how to live, but they didn’t listen to themselves or do what they were telling others to do!

“They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.” This refers especially to the hundreds upon hundreds of man-made laws that the Jews created in addition to the laws God commanded in the Old Testament: his moral, civil, and ceremonial laws the Jews were commanded by God to obey.

What a contrast to Jesus himself, who carried our burdens, especially the burden of sin, as we read in Isaiah. **“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.”** Isaiah 53:4 (NIV)

Then Jesus, carrying the burden of all our sins to the cross, tells us in this word of Gospel: **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”** Matthew 11:28 (NIV)

On this day Jesus bluntly tells his hearers **“Everything they do is done for men to see”** and then gives a number of examples. In our Epistle lesson he gives even more examples.

“They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long.” This is an interesting example of how Jews made it appear that they were obeying God’s laws. Phylacteries were little leather boxes which are worn on the forehead containing written passages from the Old Testament. God in Deuteronomy wrote about his commandments: **“Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”** Deuteronomy 6:8-9 (NIV) And several chapters later he wrote: **“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.”** Deuteronomy 11:18-21 (NIV)

The phylactery was literally worn on their foreheads. The figurative explanation of these passages would mean that God’s people were to put his law in their heads and hearts, and that their hands were to do all things in obedience to God’s will. It could, of course, be beneficial to have reminders like bracelets or necklaces as a witness to what we believe and want to do to please God.

They were to put tassels on their clothing so they would **“remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes.”** Numbers 15:38-39 (NIV)

Now there is nothing wrong about wearing such things as jewelry which illustrates that we are Christians. But to let that become an ostentatious show of religion is what the Pharisees prided themselves on. Everything they did in religious matters was done for show, to show what great people they pretended to be. Today many people, even celebrities, appear to wear crosses just for decoration and not as a witness to live as God’s people.

Jesus goes on: **“they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’ But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers.”**

Perhaps you have seen people who have made a real impressive outward show of their religion. I recall seeing one man in a store, obviously a clergyman of some sort, wearing a clerical collar with a black shirt, black suit, black cowboy boots and even a black cowboy hat with a very large silver cross – about 6 or 8 inches long around his neck.

Jesus goes on to warn his followers about seeking praise. He speaks out against seeking titles of honor, such as **“Rabbi”** and **“Father”** and **“Teacher,”** because they tend to reinforce the sinful pride he is condemning. However we must caution against overly literal application of these words lest that lead to the

same kind of sinful pride. People who refuse to accept any title often fall prey to the temptation to regard themselves as superior to people who do permit the use of titles.

Jesus warns against seeking out to be called “*rabbi*” which is an honorary title meaning literally, “my lord”, referring to “teacher”, or “master”, applied by the Jews to their spiritual instructors,

Jesus warns against being called “*father*” because you really have one Father and he’s in heaven. All men can call God “Father” through creation, although it is likely that most men do not believe in creation by an omnipotent, all loving Triune God in heaven. But Christians have a special, second reason to call God “*Father*”, as we read in Galatians: “*You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*” Galatians 3:26 (NIV)

Jesus warns against being called “*teacher*”. The Greek word comes from a word which means “guide”, as if you have, within yourselves, the knowledge and ability to teach and guide others. Remember, Jesus has just given a terrible example of teachers: the Pharisees. They didn’t do what they taught others to do and they didn’t practice what they preached. All wisdom comes from God, not from within ourselves. All true lasting, beneficial wisdom comes from God. We read in Proverbs: “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*” Proverbs 9:10 (NIV) Jesus is the teacher. Jesus himself tells us “*For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*”

Jesus is teaching a role of service. James writes: “*Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.*” James 3:1 (NIV) Jesus also makes the point that privileges of leadership carry corresponding heavy responsibilities.

When some of the believers in Jerusalem wanted to insist that Gentiles must be circumcised and must obey the laws of Moses, Peter said “*Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?*” Acts 15:10 (NIV)

Jesus asks: before whose eyes are you living? Everything the teachers of the law and the Pharisees do is done for men to see. Elsewhere Jesus says “*And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.*” Matthew 6:5 (NIV) The praise and opinions of men are of the greatest importance to them. But the psalmist reminds us, “*From heaven the LORD looks down and sees all mankind; from his dwelling place he watches all who live on earth.*” Psalm 33:13-14 (NIV) And again: “*The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry; the face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth.*” Psalm 34:15-16 (NIV)

For the Pharisees piety became a show. But Jesus says “*For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*” When you exalt and praise and honor yourself, you will be brought down.

But Jesus’ disciples didn’t really learn this lesson well. Even on the night he was betrayed, after he has instituted the Lord’s Supper “*Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.*” Luke 22:24 (NIV) Jesus asks: “*For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.*” Luke 22:27 (NIV) Jesus serves us. He even gave us his body and blood.

After our sermon text of 12 verses, Jesus goes on with 23 verses of “*woes*” – warnings of ultimate damnation – unless the Pharisees repent. But as Jesus piles one woe on top of another, we must remember that the merciful heart of the Messiah is broken by his people’s callous rejection of the gospel. But there is hope. Regardless of how we have puffed ourselves up, God the Holy Ghost can work faith and repentance in sinful mankind. And God can give each of us the ability to “*do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*” Philippians 4:13 (NKJV)

May God lead us to true humility and strengthen us to daily do his will! Amen.

(Phylacteries: The next page shows a contemporary Israeli soldier praying with a phylactery on his forehead and one on his arm.)

Phylacteries

In our sermon text, Jesus tells us *“Everything [the Pharisees] do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long.”* Matthew 23:5 (NIV)

Phylacteries were little boxes typically made from leather from a “clean” animal which were worn on the forehead and on the arm containing written passages from the Old Testament.

They are still in use today as the following picture from Wikipedia shows. The picture shows a contemporary Jewish soldier wearing both a forehead phylactery and one on his arm. They are also called “tefillin”. Only males are required to wear them.



God in Deuteronomy wrote this about his commandments: *“Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”* Deuteronomy 6:8-9 (NIV) Several

chapters later he wrote: *“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.”* Deuteronomy 11:18-21 (NIV)

The phylactery was literally worn on their foreheads and arms. The figurative explanation of these passages would mean that God’s people were to put his law in their heads and hearts, and that their hands were to do all things in obedience to God’s will. It could, of course, be beneficial to have reminders like bracelets or necklaces as a witness to what we believe and want to live to please God.

Now there is nothing wrong about wearing such things as jewelry which illustrates that we are Christians. But to let that become an ostentatious show of religion is what the Pharisees prided themselves on. Everything they did in religious matters was done for show, to show others what great, good people they pretended to be.

Today many people, even celebrities, appear to wear crosses just for decoration and not as a witness of living as God’s people. It really becomes a mockery when a cross or other Christian symbol is worn and one’s life or words do not also reflect the confession and faith of the wearer.

Tassels

God’s people, the Jews were also *“to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes.”* Numbers 15:38-39 (NIV)

There were other customs, still seen today in use by Jews, such as wearing prayer shawls and skull caps.

But we must not make such decorations the important thing in our lives. Our words, our entire lives, and most importantly, our thoughts are to reflect our faith in Jesus as our only Savior.

