



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
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Title: **"An Easy Target."**
Comment: *Today's Gospel is often used to criticize the clergy. Is that really fair?*
Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Micah 3:5-12
Epistle 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13,17-20
Gospel Matthew 23:1-12

Today's Gospel is one that makes many a Christian preacher glad he's not Jewish. That's because our Lord's criticism of the Pharisees cuts just a little too close to the bone for those involved in public ministry unless one tries to emphasize that this took place "long, long ago" in a biblical galaxy "far, far away." But the lesson must be learned by those of either religion, or any religion, who become part of a "system" of religion. Today's lesson speaks about hypocrisy in the Church, and some would say that it is very timely indeed.

It's not just the misbehavior of famous televangelists that is in question here, or even the numerous cases of clerical abuse being dealt with by the Roman Catholic Church. The issue, in fact, is the nature of accountability in Christian leadership, whether ordained or lay. Jesus certainly has his sights on the Pharisees in Matthew's passage, but they were only one of a number of religious groups in 1st century Judaism. We might find parallels in the various denominations or even personalities who make news today: the Brother Mikes or the Cardinal Sins: not necessarily immoral religious people, but certainly those with a certain larger-than-life presence. The Pharisees get bad press in the New Testament because by the time it was written they were the dominant Jewish denomination: to say "the Pharisees" was just

about the same as saying "the Jews" and so they come in for a lot of abuse in the Gospels.

Some of it they deserved, at least according to Matthew, and they were easy targets: ostentatious religious practices, places of honor at banquets and in church, and special salutations. Actually, they sound more like our local government officials than anything else- the ones who can't put up a bridge or give an ambulance to a poor barangay without plastering their names all over it to get votes in the next election! This pretense, this "show" is what Jesus condemns. And this is why he then attacks any and all titles, like rabbi, master, teacher or even father- because unless the authority that goes with these names comes from God and the honor is given back to him, they can all be a source of dangerous pride and arrogance to those who presume to use them.

And this is why clergy today get nervous when this Gospel is read, because although we may not be fallen Pharisees in the technical sense, we run the real risk of being so spiritually. We assume a position in a congregation, a community, even a whole society that guarantees certain perks and honors, and it is very, very tempting to cash in on them.

Ordained ministry is, of course, first and foremost a "vocation" or calling. God reaches down to choose whom He wishes, and the candidate reaches up to grasp that hand.

Why do people aspire to ministry? Well, there are lots of reasons. Some really do want to help people and share the love of God with them. Some feel the need to compensate for something in their past and believe that they can do so by being ordained (and that is not always a bad thing). For others, of course, it is a power trip- the automatic authority and deference that comes with the clerical territory is a tempting way to becoming "someone" without really doing much at all besides wearing a collar, and the amazing array of titles that the Church has amassed- the "venerable's, canon's, reverend's, very reverend's, right reverend's, most reverend's" and up to eminence's and "his holiness" himself- these things do nothing to dissuade people that we're just in this business for ourselves, not for God or anyone else.

Jesus warning about titles and names is to remind those who have authority in religion that its origins are in God, not the worthiness of the person who uses them.

Good clergy, the real “quality examples” of the species, ask themselves all the time why they got into this racket. It can be a painful process, and the laity might be either shocked or awed to discover just how often we clergy become aware of some of the really bad reasons that we took this work on. I do it myself. It was 28 years ago yesterday that I become “clergy” when I was ordained deacon in my home town. Like being married, it has been a relationship that has changed and grown, but needs constant grooming and nourishment, not to mention the kind of searing questions about motive that keep us honest.

There is certainly a double standard for clergy. We are subject to greater scrutiny than virtually anyone else, and our personal lives, let alone our professional motives, are speculated about to a degree that would prompt others to bring defamation suits. But we cannot, and we should not, because we have chosen a life that is supposed to follow Jesus faithfully and simply. Clergy represent to the world the possibility of being followers of Jesus: something that is offered to everyone. It is our job to show that it can work.

And it can and ought to work for everyone. “Everyone who is baptised into Christ has put on Christ” and they wear him like a garment throughout their everyday lives. Some bring shame to the name of Christian, others, usually quietly and unobtrusively, become the presence of Christ to those who, for its many sins, the Church has turned off to religion. These are the ones who don’t do good for praise, don’t serve in order to be repaid, and love only in hopes of being loved in return. For them, it is enough to be filled with God and to play their individual roles in the drama of life. Remember the best title that the pope, for all his glory, carries around is *servus servorum Dei*: the servant of the servants of God.

The much-derided Pharisees whom Jesus attacks in today’s Gospel weren’t priests: most of them were just regular, if well educated, members of their congregations who had assumed a great deal of authority and power and liked to flaunt it. The

warning that Jesus gives is not mean to chastise the clergy alone, but the proud and arrogant of whatever calling in the number of God's people. It is a virus that is not selective in whom it infects. "Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be exalted," says Jesus, and "the greatest among you must be your servant."