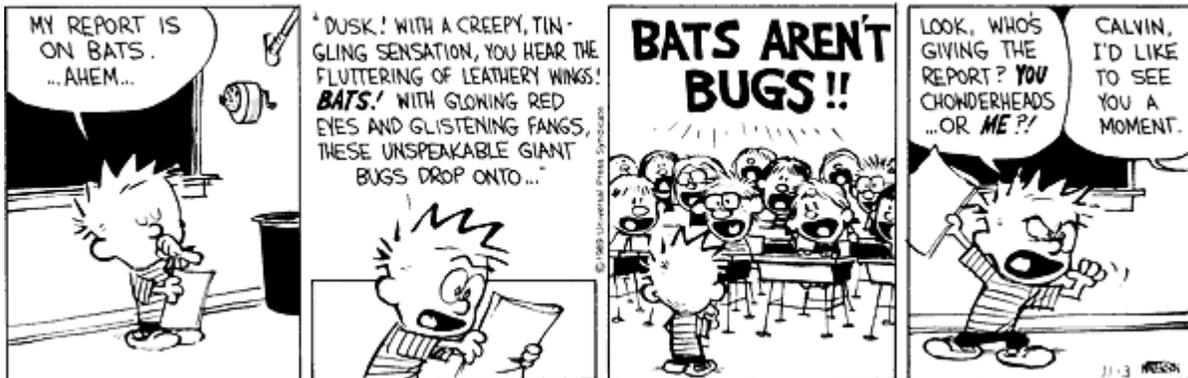


Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
October 30, 2011
Matthew 23.1-12
“Somebody Else Should Preach This Sermon”
Pastor John Guthrie



Calvin's pride is a fragile thing. He manages to see himself very differently from the way others see him. He is always in the right – everyone else is always in the wrong.

Last week I foreshadowed the shellacking that Jesus would be giving the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23 of Matthew's gospel. This reading from the first few verses of the chapter is only prologue. As we noted last week, Jesus condemns the Pharisees and scribes not once, not twice, but seven separate times in chapter 23. Here's a quick summary of those seven condemnations:

1. Verse 13: Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees (Jesus says): for you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven!
2. Verse 15: Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you go to great lengths to make converts, but then you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are!
3. Verse 16: Woe, to you, blind guides, who make people swear by things that are empty!
4. Verse 23: Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe, but neglect more important matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. You must practice these as well as the tithe! You blind guides: you strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!
5. Verse 25: Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and plate, but inside they are filled with greed and self-indulgence!
6. Verse 27: Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside but in the inside full of all kinds of filth.
7. Verse 29: Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You who murdered the prophets! You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape from being sentenced to hell?

Well, you get the idea. Jesus is incensed. He is provoked. He is enraged. And who is it at the center of his rage? Why the religious leaders of the people he loves so dearly, of course.

That's why I gave this sermon the title, “Somebody Else Should Preach This Sermon.” It is impossible for any religious leader to read Matthew chapter 23 without squirming a bit. Maybe a lot. And you can be sure, every time I read it, I squirm a lot. So do I have any volunteers willing to step up and deal

with this passage?

It is first of all important to realize that Jesus lets the scribes and Pharisees have it because he loves his people so very much, and because these leaders have simply got a whole lot of things wrong. Remember that, while the invective is aimed directly at these leaders, it is good for us to remember the definition my friend Ed gives to the Pharisees: "nice, religious folks like us." All of us, leaders or not, can be pretty Pharisaic sometimes. Maybe a lot.

While the later verses in chapter 23 are certainly salacious and exciting, we are focused today on the first 12 verses of the chapter, so let's turn our attention there. Remember that in this chapter Jesus is in Jerusalem, early in the week he will be executed. As we have seen, he keeps having run-ins with the religious authorities: the scribes, Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees.

In verse one Jesus tells the people, do what the scribes and Pharisees teach you to do, for they have the authority of Moses. But do not do what they do, for they don't practice what they preach. They make heavy burdens and place them on the shoulders of the people, but they are not willing to lift a finger to help them. And they do things in order to be seen by others, rather than for the glory of the living God. And they love to have the places of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, to be greeted with respect in the marketplace and to have people call them "rabbi."

Jesus touched on very similar topics way back in chapter six of Matthew's gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps you remember there that he says: Beware practicing your piety in front of other people, in order to be seen by them. They receive their reward in the admiration of others. So give money to the poor and to the temple humbly and not to attract attention, and your Father will reward you richly. And whenever you pray, don't stand on the street corner and make a big deal of it, just to be noticed. People who do that receive their reward in the admiration of others. But rather, go into your room and shut your door, and pray there, and you will be rewarded by your Father. And when you fast, don't look dismal, like the hypocrites, so everyone will know they are fasting. They have received their reward in the admiration of others. But wash your face and attract no attention to yourself and fast in secret; then you will be rewarded by your Father.

All of that is way back in chapter six. So this is not the first time that Jesus has touched on these topics. In chapter 23 he simply takes aim squarely at the religious authorities, and lets them have it for practicing these attention-getting spectacles.

Already you can anticipate where Jesus is going with this line of dialogue: in just a few verses he will tell the disciples and the crowd that the greatest among them will be servants. Those who build themselves up will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be lifted up.

It's not like we haven't heard that before in Matthew's gospel. In chapter 18 Jesus says that whoever becomes humble, like a child, will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. In chapter 20 Jesus says that anyone who wants to be great must become a servant, and whoever wants to be first must be a slave, just as he had come not to be served but to serve. That idea runs all the way throughout Matthew's gospel. Easy to say. Not so easy to do. Also another one of those themes in Matthew that makes me squirm. How am I doing at being a slave and a servant?

I am reminded on this Reformation Sunday of the defiant and courageous preaching of Martin Luther, who saw corruption in the Roman church of his day. In particular Luther was incensed over the abuse of indulgences, which in their original form were a way for one believer to reduce the time another spent in purgatory after death. But by the time of Luther, indulgences had become tickets to get one out of purgatory, and they were actually sold for money by some of the clergy of that time.

Furthermore, you could buy an expensive indulgence from some of the clergy which would guarantee your forgiveness for sins you hadn't even yet committed!

Luther was outraged by this practice, in particular, and with the obvious corruption, greed, and self-indulgence of some of the clergy. His original intention was just to reform the Roman church, but that plan didn't work, and eventually he ended up leading a number of churches in what is now Germany to break their ties with Rome and form a new and separate church. Thus the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, which we celebrate on the Sunday closes to October 31. In addition to being Halloween, that is the day Luther is said to have nailed a copy of his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the chapel in Wittenburg, primarily condemning the practice of selling indulgences. (See the new display on the Worship bulletin board in the hallway.)

Jesus was concerned with the corruption of the religious practice of his day. Luther was concerned in the same way. By the way, an ancient slogan of the Presbyterian Church is that we are "reformed and constantly being reformed." The process of reformation is continuous and ongoing, until the day Jesus returns.

Many of the clergy of Luther's time also exalted themselves, rather than being servants of the people. That sin is an ancient one, ingrained into us broken human creatures. We would rather be the hammer than the nail, the king or queen than the slave, the boss rather than the worker.

But look, Jesus says. None of you have any right to exalt yourself above others. Don't assume the title of teacher or instructor, because you have only one teacher and instructor, the Messiah. And furthermore, you are all students. And don't call anyone else father, for you have only one Father, who is in heaven.

So here's a new way of looking at things. Whenever anyone of us lifts himself up over others, he or she really has no solid ground to stand on. For in reality we are all students, we are all learners, we are all subjects of the realm of God, and there is only teacher, only one instructor, only one Father. And none of us is it.

That means that I cannot in good faith lift myself up. And while I love teaching the Bible, I have to be careful not to make myself the teacher, but rather recognize that it is the Holy Spirit that touches the lives of people through exposure to the scriptures, not me. And it means that my prayers are simply not any more powerful or effective than anyone else's prayers. It means that while I have some gifts, each one of you is gifted in many and diverse ways, and all of your gifts are just as important as mine, and perhaps very often more important.

Jesus reminds us that we are to be a community of equals, with no one lifted above anyone else, and no one pushed aside or forgotten. We are not greater or lesser. We simply have different gifts which are meant to be used to build up the whole community. (That's in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 and Romans chapter 12.)

And those who become our leaders for some period of time are held to very high standards. That fact is emphasized in many, many places in scripture. We have to watch and see that they are practicing what they preach, that they are helping others along the way rather than hindering them, that they are not out to show off and build themselves up. And again I squirm a little bit.

There is some amazing, mysterious way to be a humble leader. Jesus demonstrated that. It is up to us to learn how, from the one who is our only teacher and instructor. I invite you to learn with me how to lead in humility.