

Matthew 23:1-12 (NLT)

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup> “The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the Scriptures. <sup>3</sup> So practice and obey whatever they say to you, but don’t follow their example. For they don’t practice what they teach. <sup>4</sup> They crush you with impossible religious demands and never lift a finger to help ease the burden.

<sup>5</sup> “Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, \* and they wear extra long tassels on their robes. <sup>6</sup> And how they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the most prominent seats in the synagogue! <sup>7</sup> They enjoy the attention they get on the streets, and they enjoy being called ‘Rabbi.’\* <sup>8</sup> Don’t ever let anyone call you ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one teacher, and all of you are on the same level as brothers and sisters.\* <sup>9</sup> And don’t address anyone here on earth as ‘Father,’ for only God in heaven is your spiritual Father. <sup>10</sup> And don’t let anyone call you ‘Master,’ for there is only one master, the Messiah. <sup>11</sup> The greatest among you must be a servant. <sup>12</sup> But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.<sup>1</sup>

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**Matthew 23:5**

Greek *They enlarge their phylacteries.*

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**Matthew 23:7**

*Rabbi*, from Aramaic, means “master” or “teacher.”

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**Matthew 23:8**

Greek *brothers.*

<sup>1</sup> *Holy Bible : New Living Translation.* 1997. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House.

## Harder than It Seems

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: Matthew 23:1-12

“Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” This is a text that perhaps every public official and every person who gains any high office ought repeat as a pray each morning when they arise. “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Whether it be in governments or in churches or in corporations, the tumble from lofty places is so common that we may become anesthetized to its remarkableness. How is it that those who have had the talent to attain the highest levels so regularly fall from the heights in acts of such remarkable stupidity? How is it that those who know better than most so often turn out to fail the most miserably?

Many of us have ready answers to these questions, I think. We say that such people lack character. We say they think they are above the law. We say they got too big for their britches. We say they’re full of themselves. We say they are drunk with power. We say that they got where they got by ambition, and that their ambition was base and selfish. We say that they became seduced by power and money. We say they forgot where they came from. We say they forgot those they were supposed to serve. We say that power corrupts. In the end, we may simply say they lost their moral compass.

The religious teachers and the Pharisees of Jesus’ day seem to fit all of these descriptions. Jesus is constantly calling them to task for their holier-than-thou attitudes. He is constantly irritated by the way that they call attention to themselves and the way they luxuriate in their privileges.

They don’t practice what they teach. They crush you with impossible religious demands and never lift a finger to help ease the burden. “Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear extra long tassels on their robes. And how they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the most prominent seats in the synagogue! They enjoy the attention they get on the streets, and they enjoy being called ‘Rabbi.’

What a condemnation of those who are supposed to show the way, of those who are entrusted with leadership and oversight. And oh how simple it is to reel off the names today of those who have failed to live up to their promises. Bernard Law, George Bush, Dick Cheney, Scooter Libby, Karl Rove, Bill Clinton, Ken Lay, Martha Stewart, Donald Rumsfeld, Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden, Tom Delay, Bernie Ebers. God will it ever end? Actually, were we to list all those who have misled us, or who have not practiced what they preached, or who have fallen prey to money and abused power, we would be here forever and a day.

Jesus points to the teachers and the Pharisees, and then he admonishes his followers and the crowds that gather around him, “Do not follow their example.” Instead, he says, be humble, not exalted; serve rather than seek greatness. Sounds like good advice. And yet, remarkably, it

seems so seldom followed.

How do we explain our repeated capacity for self-destructive self delusion? How do we explain that in era after era those who rise to the top fall so hard? How do we explain our proclivity for getting it wrong? Are the Calvinists right, are we at our core base and sinful and selfish? Was it the fall in the Garden of Eden? Is it the lure of Satan? Is it because we have lost touch with church and family values? Is it because the flesh is weak, or as Paul says, we do the things we don't want to do and fail to do the things we want to do?

I have come to believe that getting the answer to this question right is a lot more important than I may once have thought. Why do we so regularly fall from the heights? We may not be able this morning to perfectly define human nature, but I am increasingly aware that what we think of human nature undergirds not only how we explain human actions, but how we imagine to improve them. And I have come to believe that many ideas about human nature are if not wrong, then incomplete.

What I am talking about is just this. The most common way of thinking about human failure is to think of it as an individual's failure in the face of a moral decision. Martha Stewart, despite having more money than she would ever need, couldn't stop herself from taking an inside stock tip. Bernard Law, for all of his theological and pastoral training, couldn't bring himself to raise his hand and say, Today this shameful sin in the church comes to a stop. Peter, who promised Jesus he would be there to the end, was weak, and he couldn't help himself from running away when the chips were down. We take these who thus fail to court, even if it is only the court of public opinion. We convict them. We put distance between ourselves and them. We do it shaking our heads in dismay, saying by our very systems of law and public opinion, and by our sentences of one kind or another imposed that, thank God, they are different from us, and were we in their shoes we would never have done what they did. We want to make it clear that they have failed, and where they have failed, we would not.

René Girard says in his book *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, "in looking for the failure of Peter in purely individual causes, we attempt to demonstrate, unconsciously of course, that in Peter's place we would have responded differently; we would not have denied Jesus." (20) And it's not just a Bible story, we're playing with. We think to ourselves, were we living in the nineteenth century, we would not have owned slaves. Had we been in Nazi Germany, we would not have followed Hitler.

And yet history wants to put our claims to the lie. I have had occasion recently to view some of the film footage shot in Germany during Adolph Hitler's rise to power and reign. Perhaps the most unsettling thing about the footage is the passionate support he had. In many of the scenes the crowds literally extend as far as the eye can see. The numbers have to be into the millions. The flags are waving. The rhetoric is of patriotism. And the cheering, the cheering is unceasing, clamorous and devoted. There can be no question of their heartfelt backing of the man and the regime.

And what is most unsettling isn't just that this horrifying moment in history actually happened. What is most unsettling is that our Holocaust museums, our moral outrage, our emotional revulsion may make us more certain than we ought to be that we would not have been in the crowd, or that in our own time we would know better. The museums are best understood not as reminders of what an awful leader or an awful people did, but of what is possible in every time and in every heart.

A little later in the chapter from Matthew that we read from today Jesus says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous,<sup>30</sup> and you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’” But of course they do. Indeed, Jesus makes these remarks within less than a week of when his blood will be on their hands.

Girard tells us, “The children repeat the crimes of their fathers precisely because they believe they are morally superior to them.” (20) Our unswerving belief that in everything the individual who knows enough and can claim to be morally upright can rise above the failures of those who came before us is our most dangerous tendency. Knowing the truth isn’t enough. Indeed, it is its own trap. Jesus knows that the teachers and the Pharisees know the truth.

Jesus tells his listeners, “The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the Scriptures. So practice and obey whatever they say to you, but don’t follow their example. For they don’t practice what they preach.”

What irony there is here. Jesus acknowledges that the teachers and the Pharisees know what they are talking about. They are authorized interpreters of the scriptures, and they know their subject. The problem is, even knowing their subject, they do not practice what they preach.

And now the irony increases. Why do those who know what they are talking about fail to practice what they preach? Is it somehow that especially bad sinners are attracted to high places? Is it because somehow they really are worse than everyone else? Is it because of their especially high degree of weakness and moral depravity?

What Jesus seems to be implying is that it may be just the opposite. It may be because they have the highest of moral convictions. Stay with me now. The teachers and Pharisees have dutifully studied the scriptures. They were motivated to do so by a deep religious and moral conviction. They wanted to know what God had to say. They wanted to know how God had spoken. They wanted to know the stories of those in the past so that they would know the stories of the prophets and also the stories of those who had killed the prophets. They believed, it seems, that this knowledge would set them free. Like many moderns they seem to have believed that if they knew the history, they would be less likely to repeat it. They seemed to believe that if they knew the stories and the mistakes, they would be immune from falling into the same old traps. At the end of the day, they believed they knew enough to escape the past. Like Peter, when he told Jesus he would stay by his side forever, the teachers and the Pharisees thought their knowledge, their faith and their devotion had inoculated them.

Light now shines on our subject somewhat differently. Remember that list of people I spoke of earlier, that list of people like Clinton and Law who fell, or others who are in the process of falling, from seats where they were entrusted with the good of others. If we see their failures as simply individual moral failures, we may miss the point on two important counts. First we give ourselves too much credit. We judge them and believe that we would never make the mistakes they made. We think we know better. And second, we don’t give them enough credit. I think it is fair to say that in most ways those who have fallen from high places had motivations that began on a high plain. In most ways they went into their life’s work wanting to make the world a better place. Very few said to themselves, I’d like to get power so I can be as corrupt as possible. Their greater mistake was that they believed that by trying hard and learning from the past, they could see the way clearly and that it gave them the power and the insight to

do a better job. And it was just this certainty that they could and would do a better job made them blind when they might have seen their foot leaving the path. Moral superiority is the most deadly of sins, not because it is so obnoxious, which it is, but because its inevitable result is moral failure, often on a grand scale.

Jesus tells his hearers, “The greatest among you must be a servant. But those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” I think sometimes we think of these sayings as some kind of promise of payback. If you aren’t a big shot now, don’t worry you will be later on. But the meaning is much deeper and the stakes more deadly. For what Jesus is telling us is that our capacity for wrongdoing actually increases in direct proportion to our confidence that we can prevent it, or our belief that we are above it. Jesus knows that the best chance we have is humility. Oddly enough, confession, the honest appraisal of our capacity for wrong, does not have the effect of making us cheerless self-loathers. It has, instead, the effect of opening us to God’s voice and direction and grace. It has the effect of helping us know how much we need it, and how grateful we must be that it accompanies us always. So, the truth truly is, “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” A word to live by. Amen.