

Do As I Say AND As I Do

November 5, 2023

Do As I Say

It's easy to hear this Gospel and think of others. That is, to look at other religious traditions or people with other political affiliations and say, "They're such hypocrites – they do everything for show!" And so, before we climb aboard the "smug-train," let's remind ourselves to approach this text, and our faith lives as a whole, with humility, remembering that Jesus critiqued people earlier in Matthew's Gospel who prayed, "Thank God I'm not like them." Rather than taking this Gospel as a self-congratulatory pat on the back, let's look at what it has to speak to us today.

First, Jesus roots his teaching firmly within the tradition. He acknowledges that the scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; that is, they are authoritative. Remember, Jesus never intended to make a new religion. What he took exception to was the interpretation of the faith of the religious leaders of his day as well as how they lived it out.

The Pharisees weren't all bad. Chelsea Harmon of the University of Edinburgh School of Divinity writes:

"Scribes and Pharisees were a mix of ordained and lay leadership, and on the whole, were intent on helping normal people understand how to keep the law. For instance, they were the ones who came up with the list of the sort of actions one was allowed to do on the Sabbath."

Thinking through what is allowable and what is not has its merits. And yet all too often those rules become burdensome, the letter of the law becomes inflated and the spirit of what it was trying to help us accomplish gets obscured. Think of Jesus healing on the Sabbath or being willing to touch the woman with the hemorrhage. The Pharisees' teaching about such things centers on adherence rather than abundant life, on doing what is lawful rather than what is just.

Think of it this way: Some of the best authors in the world use awful grammar. In many cases, they know what is proper, but choose to use slang or informal speech patterns because that helps them to convey a mood. They would argue that it's important to know the rules of language in order to know how and when to break them. (Already, I'm thinking of all sorts of instances in which this isn't the case, all sorts of instances in which great authors do not know the rules of language and still create things of beauty. Nonetheless, the truth remains that knowing the rules can be an invaluable tool, even if one then chooses to break them.)

At its core, this passage is about a fundamental difference of opinion between Jesus and the Pharisees about the function of faith. The Pharisees teach faith as a series of rules and regulations, while Jesus teaches faith as commitments to freedom and relationship. Jesus continually seeks to free people from the constraints that keep them from living fully, while the Pharisees' version of faith is fraught with burdens. Jesus' critique is really twofold: First, to the Pharisees, faith is a set of requirements, and second, they behave like hypocrites.

My dad used to joke, “Do as I say, not as I do.” He would say it in that deep, pontificating voice, too. He was making fun of folks without integrity. Jesus’ commitments are not only to right teaching, but also to living those teachings out in ways that are grace filled. How often have we encountered people who spout off “correct” teachings in hurtful and demeaning ways? Godly faith, faith that will draw people to a deeper, more meaningful relationship with God and all of creation, does not sacrifice the wellbeing of the individual for the sake of the teaching.

At face value, Jesus telling the crowd not to call anyone on earth Father or Rabbi or instructor seems to be an extenuation of this idea that the religious leaders of his time were taken in by trying to impress one another. But theologian Sharon Ringe reminds us:

“These are all titles that carry both status and authority in the value system of the Empire. ‘Father’ in particular was the term for the head of a household, whose total life-or-death authority mirrored the role of the emperor. To seek such roles and titles would be in conformity to the hierarchical values of the Roman Empire, and those values should not prevail for Jesus’ followers.”

In other words, Jesus isn’t telling us that the word “dad” is wrong, he’s saying that the authoritarian, tyrannical power structure of a 1st century middle eastern family system does not model God’s intentions for our relationships.

So What?

So what do we do with this? First, we need to consistently remind ourselves that being a follower of Jesus isn’t a checkbox. It isn’t a series of hoops to jump through, rules to follow. It’s a way of living that constantly seeks a deeper relationship with the sacred, not only for ourselves but even more importantly for others.

That dovetails with our second take away. Putting burdens and expectations on others is not Christlike. Rather, following Jesus means seeing:

“someone who is weighed down by the law, and walking beside them, helping to unburden them from the lies that have tied them to seeing the will of God as unattainable demands.”

(Chelsea Harmon)

And this isn’t just something we do here in church. It needs to permeate our family relationships, our politics, our social structures. Being a follower of Jesus means making grace and compassion and mercy and justice and healing and hope our central ethic. It means allowing God’s ways to animate us and give us our purpose.

And isn’t it convenient that this once again dovetails with our final takeaway: living with integrity. Integrity weaves its way throughout Jesus’ teachings and comes across particularly strongly in the Gospel of Matthew. That’s why you’ve heard me talk about it so much this year. Let your word be in your deed. Let your buying and your finances reflect your values.

Let your voting and your civic life model God's intention for a just world for all. Let your parenting demonstrate the power of a relationship built not on authority but on flourishing. Let your business dealings exhibit mutuality rather than dominance.

You may say, "But that won't get me as far as if I behaved the other way." Perhaps by this world's standards. But my job isn't to encourage you to this world's standards. My job is to encourage you to something much, much greater. May it be so. Alleluia and amen.

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