

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

Matthew 23:1-12 Text vs. 12 *“Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

Out text this morning is a reminder God will bring shame on those who try to make themselves important. Jesus was warning His disciples not to become like the teachers of the law and the Pharisees who did everything for show. They had a need to be respected. They had to be adored by everyone who saw them. But the problem was, they didn't practice what they preached. They were hypocrites. And a hypocrite is defined as *“a person who pretends to have moral beliefs but doesn't practice them”*. The word comes from a Greek word that means *“actor”*. In other words, a hypocrite is someone who puts on a show. A false face. They behave differently from what they believe.

For example, a person claims to be environmentally friendly, but is always littering and throwing things on the ground. That person would be considered a hypocrite. Jesus said the teachers of the law and the Pharisees were like that. They had put heavy, cumbersome religious practices on their people. Remember those 613 Jewish commandments you learned about last week that were put upon the Jewish people by the religious leaders? Yet, they were not willing to remove them! The Pharisees prided themselves on following the letter of the Mosaic Law and the Mishnah, those 613 external laws that separated the Jewish people from all the other nations. Those laws made them outwardly distinct. They were divided into 365 negative commandments which prohibited certain things, and 248 positive commandments which required certain things.

So, if you were a good, righteous person you followed all 613 of them. But the teachers of the law and the Pharisees didn't! Everything they did was done for show. For people to see them. They made their phylacteries wide. The practice of making phylacteries broad and fringes long was to show off piety and religious devotion. They wanted to be seen as good and religious men.

Now phylacteries, or Tefillin (tefill-in) are a set of small black cube-shaped leather boxes with leather straps containing scrolls of parchment written on parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Tefillin are worn by adult Jews during weekday prayers. The hand phylactery has one compartment with the texts written on a single parchment. The head phylactery has four compartments, each with one text. Exodus 13:1-10; 11-16; and Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21. And Jesus mentioned the fringes, the tassels on their garments. They're long and are called Tzitzit (tz-itzit), specially knotted fringes that hang from the four corners of a tallit (tal-lit) prayer shawl worn only by observant Jew and Samaritan males. The word *“tz-itzit”* translates from Hebrew as *“fringe”* or *“tassel”*. And the *mitzvah*, the commandment to wear tzitzit originated in the Torah, the Hebrew Bible. Numbers 15:38-39 says, *“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. ³⁹ 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 chasing after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes.’”*

The command was simple: Every day, wear a garment with tzitzit so that you will remember God and the Commandments. Tzitzit are worn in pairs. One tzitzit is tied to each corner of a four-cornered prayer shawl which must be made of wool, or the same material from which the clothing being worn is made. The tzitzit is tied in a unique way. Tzitzit tying customs vary from community to community. However, the standard is that on each of the four corners there are eight strings with five knots.

Then Jesus went on to say that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees love the place of honor at banquets. As well as the most important seats in the synagogues. They love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. They love to be called ‘Rabbi’: Teacher.

Now, put all that together and it's not a very good picture of humility! So, the message of our text today is that ***humility is a virtue***. It's good behavior that shows high moral standards which should be practiced by everyone. Yes, it's important to admit your gifts and your talents are all due to the grace and goodness of God. But don't brag about them. Don't be overconfident about your achievements. Rather, be modest. Admit you're no better than anyone else.

John Wooden was considered the greatest NCAA basketball head coach of all time. Many people knew him simply as *Coach*. On the basketball court, Wooden had led the UCLA Bruins men's basketball program to an impressive 664 wins to 162 losses. A record! Six times He was named the NCAA College Basketball Coach of the Year. Famous for his motivational quotes, often called Woodenisms for their simplicity and subtle message, was one: *“Be more concerned with your character than your reputation. Because your character is what you really are. Your reputation is simply what others think you are.”*

Humility isn't a sign of weakness. It's a sign of strength. It takes courage to admit your mistakes. It takes courage to admit your weaknesses. It takes courage to ask for help when you need it. Humility lets you learn from your mistakes. It helps you grow as an individual. In contrast, pride will lead to your downfall! When you become too proud of yourself, you lose sight of what's enormously important in life. You become selfish and self-centered. You hurt others around you. That's why it's important to practice humility every day. Try to be kind. Compassionate. And understanding of others. Don't judge

others by their appearance or social status. Treat everyone with respect and dignity. That's why Jesus spent so much time showing the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. It's why He told his followers, *"Do whatever they teach you, and follow it. But do not do as they do. For they do not practice what they teach."*

A man was asked by a pastor why he didn't come to church with his family? He replied, *"Because the church is filled with hypocrites."* To which the pastor responded, *"That's okay. There's always room for one more!"*

Are there hypocrites in churches today? Are there people in churches who say one thing on Sunday and then do another thing on Monday? Of course, there are! A lot of people don't practice what they preach. They talk the talk. But they don't walk the walk. However, nobody's perfect. And that's why we're here today. We're just a bunch of sinners saved by grace. But apparently, some people don't even try!

Nelson Mandela was a South African anti-apartheid activist and politician who from 1994 to 1999 served as the first president of South Africa. He was the country's first black head of state. And the first black head of state to be elected in a democratic election. His powerful words focused on this: *Prejudice is learned. And it can be unlearned.* Education and understanding break down barriers. Education and understanding advance love and compassion. He said, *"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate. And if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love. For love comes more naturally to the human heart than hate."*

That quote should inspire all of us to resist the unruly behavior of today and to strive for a world where nobody is judged or discriminated against based on superficial differences.

Right now, in our own country, we are fighting Racism, which is discrimination and prejudice against people based on their race or ethnicity. And Christians are always under a microscope because of it! Are you living a life worthy of being called a *"child of God."* Or are you a hypocrite trying to impress others with your pride and your ego? Those are what cause people to become hypocrites. And it hurts. It hurts your relationship with others. You pretend to be somebody you're not! Because of pride, you try to hide who you really are. *"I don't have any problems! My life is perfect! I don't make mistakes!"* Pride and ego. They will never allow you to become your real self. Don't be ashamed to admit you're not better than anybody else. Too much pride can lead to arrogance. And arrogance can give a sense of superiority over others. That's why those teachers of the law and the Pharisees did everything for show. It's what Jesus was talking about. It's why, He concluded, *"Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."* It's a warning against pride and self-promotion. It suggests that those who seek to elevate themselves above others will ultimately be brought down. While those who are humble and modest will be lifted up.

Humility is a virtue! And it should be practiced by all. Humility allows you to learn from your mistakes. To grow as an individual. To treat others with respect and dignity. That's what Jesus was telling His hearers. If you practice humility, you are more likely to consider others' beliefs and opinions, because humility gives you the opportunity to become less self-absorbed. It helps you to be more in tune with the feelings of others. So, let's all strive to practice humility in our daily lives. Humility can really help develop a kinder, more honest, and less entitled approach to life. Humility can strengthen relationships with others. It can develop rational thinking. It promotes personal growth. Humility can help you live a better life.

To sum it all up, humility is important, because it can help you live a better life by improving your relationships, increasing your self-awareness, promoting strength, improving your mental health, and increasing your creativity. So, Jesus was right on the mark when He said, *"Those who exalt themselves will be humbled. And those who humble themselves will be exalted."* Now, that's really something to think about! AMEN