

Jesus' Words about Church Leadership

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 23:1-12

Verse 9 drew me to preach on this passage. "And do not call anyone on earth 'Father,' for you have one Father and he is in heaven." I got interested in that verse because of something I heard Alan Torrance say. In one of his lectures, Dr. Alan Torrance who was then a teacher of Systematic Theology at St. Andrew's University in Scotland complained that people don't take this verse seriously! "Why don't we pay attention to the whole Bible. Here is a very specific command of Jesus and we completely ignore it. We call our Dad's 'Father' and think nothing of it." He took Jesus at his word, and when he spoke of his Father during his course, which he did fairly often, he would always refer to him affectionately as "The Old Man." I found this all very intriguing and I thought, "Wow. It's true. We do ignore that verse. I ought to preach on it sometime!!" And hence this sermon!

Well, during my study on the passage something interesting happened. I realized that Alan Torrance was just plain wrong. Maybe his kilt was too tight, or maybe he had a little too much Haggis that morning but whatever the reason his interpretation was badly off the mark. This text isn't about the titles we use for parents; this is a discussion about the titles we use for religious leaders. The whole discussion is about how we address the people out front in the church, not the people out front in our families. It was the Pharisees who were being called rabbi, teacher, and father. So, I thought that this would be a sermon about the place of the family in the kingdom of God. It turns out that you are getting a sermon on church leadership tonight.

Some of you might already be saying, 'O church leadership, could Peter have possibly picked a duller subject. I'm not a leader in the church, I'm not on council, I'm not a pastor so maybe it's time to let my mind start wandering.' If that's what you're thinking let me call you back to attention. We might not all have positions of leadership in the church, but I think all of us find ourselves in positions where we are called to be leaders. When we are parenting, when we are teaching a class or an individual, when we are trying to offer support and counsel to a friend over coffee, we are taking on a leadership role. We are discipling another human being. Whether we like it or not, just about everyone here finds himself or herself in a leadership role every once in a while. That means we all have something to learn from Jesus.

So what does Jesus have to teach us about leadership in Matthew 23? I think there are at least three things Jesus is saying. First, Jesus is warning us against hypocrisy. The religious leadership of Jesus day was corrupted by hypocrisy. "Those Pharisees don't practice what they preach!" he says. And at one level this is sort of obvious I suppose. We all know what hypocrisy is: hypocrisy occurs when we deceive others about our true motivations and feelings. On the outside we wear the clothing of generosity and piety, but on the inside we are really all lit up with pride; we're focused on our own reputation and prestige. We all know what hypocrisy is and we all know that it's bad.

While the nature of hypocrisy may be obvious to all of us, what maybe isn't so obvious is how religious hypocrisy is a particularly dangerous species of hypocrisy. When you are engaged in Christian service, when you are sitting across from someone trying to help them through trouble and give them spiritual support, it is very easy for hypocrisy to get its foot in the door. Your motivations can get pretty confused in these situations.

For example: What is really going on in my heart when I am having a pastoral visit with a person? Am I thinking about this person's spiritual needs? Am I operating out of a spirit of compassion for this person in their struggle? Or, am I thinking about how the other person is reacting to me? Am I thinking about impressing the other person with my attentiveness and my sensitivity so that he will speak well of me to others. 'Man what a help Peter was! He's such a nice guy! He's so helpful!' Do you see the difference? In just about every helping situation these two motives, both these motives are present, competing for space, trying to box each other out. As a leader, you are always struggling to keep the selfishness at bay and let the compassion rise to the surface. The seeds of hypocrisy are always present.

The same goes for any public prayer. You have dinner guests over for Sunday dinner and the time comes to pray and your wife says to you, "Honey could you open for us?" Where is your head as you start this prayer? Are you locked in on the goodness and grace of God, or are you thinking, "I hope this prayer sounds good." It's the same dynamic. It's the struggle against religious hypocrisy.

Years ago I talked to a member of my previous church who told me about something that happened to him in his youth when he and his family were very, very poor. They did not have enough money to survive, but they managed to make it through with the help of other church members. He remembers how church members used to leave groceries on the front porch of their house. They would come out of the house and there would be groceries sitting there. The family would have no idea where this offering came from, they knew it had to be a church person, but they had no idea who. The donor, whoever she or he was, wanted absolutely no one to know who did this.

When I first heard about these stealth groceries, I thought that this was maybe going overboard. Why go through so much effort to keep your identity a secret? What's the big deal? But now I think it was probably someone who understood the dangers of spiritual hypocrisy; someone who wanted to make absolutely sure that her soul was untainted by religious pride. And this anonymous generosity was a kind of leadership. It helped lead this family through their difficult times. And it shaped the faith of young Walter, he couldn't cynically put the church's generosity down to self-interest and showing off. There was something else driving the generosity of those church members, the Holy Spirit.

As I hear Jesus say: 'Call no man Father' and 'You are not to be called Rabbi' I realize that, when it comes to our use of religious titles, we are not as careful as though grocery-delivering church people. Jesus is clearly worried that the use of titles will inflame our hypocrisy and our pride. He has some hard questions for leaders and leadership systems that use titles. It raises some interesting questions. For instance: should I be called Reverend? Should we call ministers Reverend? What about calling person doctor? Or Dominee? A straightforward reading of this text certainly calls that all into question doesn't it?

Calvin says it's okay to call people Reverend and doctor. He says that Jesus could not possibly be concerned with mere words, it was more the spirit of how we treated our leaders that mattered. It's not a literal interpretation. I looked up some Catholic opinions on this question, and they basically had the same interpretation as Calvin. Jesus is forbidding cults of personality and personal strength, but he is not forbidding the perfunctory use of honorifics nor forbidding us to recognize that the person does have a role as a spiritual father and teacher. Maybe. And maybe not. Even if Calvin is right, there's no question that Jesus would have us be careful about applying titles to leaders.

The second warning Jesus gives to people in leadership situations, is a warning against detachment. He warns leaders not to be aloof from the people they're supposed to help. It seems like the Pharisees were aloof. They were removed from the people they're supposed to lead. They attend fancy banquets and take the places of honor in the synagogues. "They tie up heavy burdens and put them on people's shoulders, but they themselves aren't willing to lift a finger to move them." They are not down in the trenches; they are up in the rarified air of their own sanctimony. They give the people rigorous spiritual instructions, they bask in the authority of that, and then head off to their fancy dinners leaving the people to struggle by themselves. They are aloof.

There is nothing worse for leadership than a leader who isn't attentive to the needs of the person he's trying to lead. Peter Drucker, the famous management and leadership writer who is also a Christian writes about a lesson he learned back in the 20's when he was a high school student. His history teacher was a wounded World War One veteran who had been in the trenches during that war. They were studying World War One and its dynamics, and one of the students asked the wounded veteran, "The Great War seems to have been a war of total military incompetence. Why was that?" According to Drucker, the teacher did not hesitate one second in his answer: "Because not enough generals were killed!" he said. "The generals stayed way behind the lines and let others do the fighting and the dying." The generals placed a heavy burden on the other soldiers, but they themselves weren't willing to lift a finger to help carry them.

This same sort of thing happens all the time in the area of religious leadership. Back in the 90's when the church growth movement and the Willow Creek movement were at their apex, I saw this happen to some young seminarians. They came out of seminary full of the latest ideas and the latest books. They had a vision of what a church should be. They knew what kind of community they wanted to create. They were bristling with entrepreneurial spirit. Then they'd get their first call to a local church and try to enact their vision there and things would fall apart. Why? Because they hadn't taken the time to get to know the people. They hadn't taken the time to become part of the community. They hadn't listened to the stories of the church's past, they hadn't met the charter members and understood why they loved the church so much. They had come in, looked around for a month or two and then proclaimed, "You people need to change or you will die! Let me tell you what you need to do!" They were aloof and needless to say, churches don't respond well to that kind of leadership.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Those whom you would change you must first love." Those whom you would change you must first love. That applies to a pastor trying to lead a church, that applies to a teacher trying to lead a class, that applies to a parent or a grandparent trying to help a young person. The number one important thing for anyone who is trying to help or lead or influence another person is that you love them and show you love them by standing beside them.

And it is precisely in this respect that Jesus' leadership stands out. While the religious leaders of those days stood at an aloof distance, making their fancy dinner dates, Jesus was tromping around with fishermen, eating with prostitutes, and laying hands on lepers. Jesus did not stay behind the lines and send others out to do the fighting and dying, he went ahead and did the fighting and the dying for us.

Finally, when it comes to leadership and helping people, Jesus wants us to remember where the power comes from. Years ago I took a leadership course at Calvin Seminary. I read hundreds of pages on Christian leadership and church leadership. And as I reflect on what I read, it seems like so much of it was focused on personal ability and results. Here's an example from a book called *Awakening the Leader Within*; a book published by a Christian evangelical publishing company. "Insightful leaders recognize their potential and learn how to turn it loose. In just three and a half years Jesus established a movement that has lasted 20 centuries and inspired billions of people. He intentionally used leadership techniques that we can study, practice and master. Follow Jesus' example."

I find this talk completely mystifying. The secret to being effective leaders isn't focusing on ourselves and finding our inner potential and turning it loose. Think of the call of Jeremiah, did Jeremiah think he was a leader? When God called him did He tell him to let loose his inner potential? Is there any leader anywhere in scripture who is called to unleash their inner potential? No. It's not inner potential; it's God's gifting, God's grace, the Spirit's leading, the Spirit's work. The same thing is true of Isaiah and Peter and Moses and a whole host of other Biblical leaders. This author talks about being a master of technique when Jesus talks about being a servant of God and a servant of God's people.

We used to talk about pastors serving congregations, now all of a sudden we're talking about pastor's leading congregations. The change is telling. You know, the Bible doesn't even talk all that much about either leadership or success. We like to talk about them but the Bible seems to want to change the subject. Where we want to talk about finding our hidden potential, the Bible wants to talk about recognizing our neighbor's need. Where we want to talk about leadership, the Bible wants to talk about servanthood. Where we want to talk about results and success, the Bible wants to talk about faithfulness. "Call no one Rabbi, call no one teacher, call no one father."

So, how can we sum this up?? Don't worry about being a great leader. Trust God's presence with you through his Holy Spirit. Focus on loving and caring for those people God puts in your path. Do that and God will take care of results. Whether we are pastors trying to serve a congregation, or parents serving our children, or one congregation member trying to help another, Let's not be anxious about our work. Let us worry about loving our God with all our heart. Let us love our neighbors as ourselves. And let us leave results in the hands of the Good Shepherd.

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