

Beloved in Christ, the central theme of today's readings is a strong invitation and challenge to render humble and loving service to the community without expecting honor or rewards. Today's Gospel is a warning against hypocrisy and status-seeking. Jesus offers a word of judgment against contemporary religious leaders who are more concerned about self-promotion than service to God. Christ-like leadership calls for integrity and honesty from all those in authority, whether priests, parents, teachers, politicians etc. There should be no double standards. Rather, there should grow a deep sense of equality and mutual respect between, leaders and those they rule. Each should seek to serve the other. Service, not status, is the mark of this new community, and true humility is the only position its members should seek (Mt. 23:12).

In the first reading, the prophet Malachi condemns the irresponsible, proud and lazy priests of his day. The first reading prepares us for the full force of warning by Malachi pouring out God's curses on the unfaithful priests of his time, around 450 BC, after Judah's return from exile in Babylon and the rebuilding of the Temple. The priests of this period were indifferent to their religious duties and were often unfair in the judgments they made about people.

St Paul, in the second reading has given us the example of true ministerial zeal. He labors in preaching the gospel and lives it with integrity. The understanding Paul has of his care for the Thessalonians community like a mother 'feeding and looking after her own children ... eager to hand over ... not only the Good News but our whole lives'. What a contrast to the Jewish leaders who 'do not practice what they preach!'. St. Paul presents himself as an ideal example of servant leadership in a serving Christian community. We need to become servant leaders in a serving community: The Church is a servant community in which the hungry are to be filled; the ignorant are to be taught ... and the oppressed, set free so that they may more fully realize their human potential and more readily enjoy life with God. Hence, the leaders should have a spirit of humble service in thought, word and deed. "The measure of a true Christian is not how many servants he has, but how many people he serves." *We need to live the Faith we profess.* Our Faith tells us that we are all brothers and sisters, children of the same Heavenly Father. The only way for us to practice our Faith is to build a human community of love and justice.

Jesus points out to the Scribes and Pharisees that they have betrayed the covenant because they do not live the message they preach. In fact, **they use their position as leaders to advance their own egos and win prestige for themselves.** Jesus was under fire and lashed out at the religious leaders of Israel for rejecting him as Messiah. Luke's account records three woes Jesus called down upon the Pharisees and four He called down upon the scribes. Matthew's account arranges these (23:13-36) into a series of seven woes against the "Scribes and Pharisees," whom Jesus calls hypocrites and publicly humbles by telling God's truth about them. The passage in Matthew consists of the seven prophetic woes and a prophetic lament over the fate of Jerusalem. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus denounces the "scribes" for their pious pretensions, their hunger for status, and their exploitation of widows. This confrontation looks forward to the bitter conflict which would arise between Pharisaic Judaism and the Early Church where many of the faults found in Jesus' opponents were present. To some extent, these faults are still present. In this Gospel incident, then, we are all warned of the danger and advised strongly to consider our own conduct and attitudes carefully, lest we, too, suffer these "woes."

In spite of their personal failings, Scribes and Pharisees were stewards of a great spiritual treasure and they were to be respected for their role as official teachers and interpreters of the Torah. **Jesus wanted his disciples to avail themselves of that treasure and to receive from these teachers, expert counsel** on spiritual matters. As a pious Jew, Jesus demanded that his disciples honor the office that these men occupied and to do what they taught, at least insofar as their teachings accorded with the Torah, especially observing and applying the two principles underlying the Ten Commandments. These were the principle of reverence and respect. This meant that the Disciples of Christ also should have reverence for God, His name, and His day, for the parents God had given them and for a man's life, his possessions, and his good name.

Jesus raises three objections to the Pharisees: they do not practice what they preach, they adopt a very narrow and burdensome interpretation of the Torah, and they seek public acknowledgment of their spiritual superiority. They create a double standard; they say one thing and do another. When parents create double standards by forbidding their children to do what they have no hesitation in doing themselves, they make the same mistake. Thus, they failed to realize the truth that when religion becomes a depressing affair of burdens and prohibitions rather than a source of love, life and growth, it ceases to be true religion. Jesus also condemns the lack of compassion of religious leaders, shown in their unwillingness to interpret and apply laws in a way that would make obedience less onerous. By contrast, Jesus offers an easy yoke, a light burden, and rest for the soul (11:29-30).

Jesus' condemnations were meant also as a warning to future Christian leaders about possible abuses of authority in their own ministry. They were never to say one thing and do another. Instead, they should faithfully follow their Master's teaching and avoid titles and practices which would imply arrogant superiority which can lead to hypocrisy. The Holy Spirit, through Matthew's account, emphatically reminds us that Jesus never intended His followers to divide themselves into "clergy and laity," into "superior and inferior, " but rather intended a community of mutual love and service in which the leaders and teachers were to be servants of those they led and taught.

Finally, dear friends, it is easy to read today's Gospel and start pointing fingers at others. Of course, I can point a criticizing finger at all the officials I know, political, religious or otherwise. But let me ask the question: am I so different from them? It is important that I see how this applies in my own life. The Gospel is addressed to you and me. Therefore, let us pray in this Mass for grace to remain humble at all times, so that we may be exalted in the Kingdom of God. Amen!