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Valuable Insights from Poor Examples

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TEXT: Matthew 23:1-12 (ESV)

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Every once in a while, a new story will emerge about a scandal in a church or a Christian ministry, in which a popular leader has been caught doing some morally questionable things and has to face disciplinary action for their actions and thinking. Sometimes, we hear about conflicts within a church community, leading to divisions or even a split. Such instances leave us both surprised and disheartened because we understand that they can undermine the church's mission by damaging the credibility of the Gospel in the eyes of those who are watching. We shake our heads in wonder at how such situations can occur. However, the underlying reason is often quite simple: pride, ego, arrogance, and self-promotion. It is all too easy to become self-absorbed and

focused on self-promotion to the extent that we lose sight of God's expectations for us. Our vision becomes distorted, and people suffer as a result, affecting the message of Jesus Christ. Christian speaker Tony Campolo illustrates this point with a story. A friend of mine was speaking with one of the older women in the congregation after a church service. The minister's young son ran up to the pulpit and announced over the loudspeaker, "Hey, look, everybody, look! I'm in the pulpit!" The elderly woman remarked to her friend, "You know, his father does that every Sunday." Campolo adds his own observation, acknowledging the temptation for preachers to use the pulpit to draw attention to themselves rather than preach the Gospel.

He is correct. I can attest to this from personal experience and my own struggles with pride. Christian Century once published an article addressing an issue within the church, stating that church people sometimes assume they are immune to the temptations of power. We may not earn much money, and society may grant us limited authority, leading us to believe that ambition, the desire for success, prestige, and influence over others are problems only for those in business or politics, not for people like us. We may fail to recognize how, for the noblest of reasons, we can become entangled in the same ambitions that motivate others. Eventually, those striving to reach the top within the body of Christ, the church, may resemble those seeking the pinnacle of secular organizations like General Motors. Often, it becomes challenging to distinguish our leaders from those outside the church. By the way, this phenomenon is not limited to pastors and church leaders; it can happen to anyone in the body of Christ. It is easy for any follower of Christ to lose their way and begin selfishly pursuing the wrong things, parading their goodness, seeking the approval of those around them, and striving for status and influence within the church, all while pretending to serve God. Such is the case in today's story from Matthew 23.

Let's first consider the context in which we find the passage we read earlier. It was the last week of Jesus's earthly ministry, and it promised to be a challenging week. On Sunday, Jesus made a significant entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey, causing a commotion with crowds welcoming Him, shouting "Hosanna to the Son of David!" and laying cloaks and palm branches before Him in honor. He caused quite a scene at the temple by driving out the money changers and merchants selling pigeons for sacrifices, which upset the religious establishment. Now, it's Monday or possibly Tuesday, as Mark's Gospel suggests, and Jesus has returned to the temple. The religious leaders immediately confront Him and challenge His authority, disapproving of His actions

and teachings. They have no fondness for His methods. In turn, He questions their ministry, accuses them of poor leadership and service, and labels them as rebellious against God due to their rejection of Him. He informs them that they are under God's judgment, further intensifying the hostility of the Pharisees and scribes toward Him. They seek to have Him arrested, but His popularity with the crowds prevents that. Therefore, they attempt to tarnish His reputation by posing trick questions in the hope that He will stumble and lose credibility.

However, their efforts prove futile. As expected, Jesus appears brilliant in comparison to them at this point. Jesus then shifts His focus to His disciples and the crowds who have been listening to the exchange. He uses the scribes and Pharisees as negative examples of how not to live their lives before God. Valuable lessons can be drawn from their poor example. Jesus begins by saying, "Do what they say, for they sit on Moses's seat," acknowledging their position of authority and the respect it deserves. He encourages the people to heed what they bring from the Old Testament. Jesus once mentioned, "I came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it." However, Jesus proceeds to provide further guidance, saying, "Listen to what they say but don't do what they do." It's similar to what parents sometimes tell their children: "Do as I say, not as I do." So, what are these Pharisees and scribes doing? Well, even though Jesus doesn't explicitly state it, it's evident from their previous actions toward Him that they are rejecting His authority as God's Son and refusing to accept Him as the long-awaited Messiah to save and lead Israel.

Instead, they either attempted to completely disregard him or outright rejected what he had to say about God and living as God's people. Similarly, in the church, it's quite easy to proclaim our trust and following of Jesus, to show our respect, but in practice, refuse to give Him authority to reign over our daily activities and agendas, often relegating His influence to the periphery. While we might trust Him in matters concerning eternity, we often fail to do so in our day-to-day affairs.

Secondly, Jesus points out that they preach but fail to practice what they preach. He accuses them of not living according to their teachings. Despite preaching about Scripture's guidance to love God above all things and to love one's neighbor as oneself, their actions do not reflect this love. Instead, they focus more on self-care, their piety, and their personal relationship with God.

Thirdly, they burden others with heavy expectations while not making any effort to help carry these loads. They construct rigid regulations and rules derived from biblical traditions around the Torah, intending to make it more applicable to contemporary life. Unfortunately, these regulations transform the Bible into an oppressive legalistic code, burdening the people rather than guiding them towards obediently walking in God's ways. Moreover, these religious experts would observe people struggling under these rules, judging and looking down on them without offering any assistance. They seemingly enjoyed the sense of superiority and control it granted them.

Fourthly, Jesus criticizes their outward displays of religious acts for show and social acclaim. They engage in prayers on street corners, make loud offerings, and fast with somber faces, all aimed at seeking attention. Their actions were more about demonstrating their religiosity to gain people's applause rather than a genuine connection with God.

Furthermore, they would adorn themselves with ostentatious religious symbols, like broadened phylacteries and extra-long fringes, not for the sake of devotion but to show off their supposed holiness. This focus on outward displays and symbols was to gain recognition and status from others.

According to theologian John Boykin, the core issue with the Pharisees was not merely hypocrisy in teaching one thing and practicing another. Instead, their main fault was exploiting God and godly things to achieve personal ends, using religious acts as a means to gain social status and recognition.

Finally, Jesus criticizes their pursuit of selfish ambitions, seeking high status and the associated privileges. They long for esteemed positions at gatherings and expect lofty titles and acknowledgments. Jesus contrasts this behavior with the principles His followers should uphold. He advises against the pursuit of titles and dominance over others. Instead, He highlights the importance of serving one another and sacrificing self-interest for the well-being of those around them.

In God's perspective, greatness is found in serving and assisting others, exemplified by Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. He encourages a mindset shift from "What's in this for me?" to a focus on selfless service. Jesus also warns that those who seek self-exaltation will ultimately be humbled.

The fable of the turtle wanting to fly to Florida with the help of geese might illustrate this moral - the one seeking undue advantage may end up with an unforeseen consequence, as in the case of the turtle who tried to exploit the geese for personal gain.

Each of the geese would take an end of a piece of rope while the turtle clamped his vise-like jaws in the center of the rope, and the flight was going fine until someone on the ground looked up in admiration and asked, "Who in the world ever thought of that?" Unable to resist the chance to take credit, the turtle opened his mouth and said, "I did." You see, pride comes before the fall. As Jesus said, whoever humbles themselves will be exalted, ultimately by God, in the end: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

So, what does it mean to be a humble follower of Jesus Christ? Tim Keller puts it well. It's not about self-hate or self-love; it's about self-forgetfulness—removing oneself from the center and playing for an audience of One, God, as Cornel West suggests. Christianity Today defines humility as being so secure as God's beloved child and in one's mission that one doesn't seek excessive attention or status for oneself. Moreover, to be humble means to celebrate the achievements and potential of others, particularly those one identifies with or is connected to organically. Humility comprises self-criticism and allowing others to shine, affirming, empowering, and enabling them.

We trust Jesus on this. We know what happened to him at the end of that week, don't we? A cruel death on a cross. He, the humble suffering servant, took the punishment for our sins upon himself so that we might be forgiven and restored into an eternal relationship with God. He laid down his life for us, saying, "My mission is not to be served but to serve and give my life as a ransom for many." And we know what followed: His exaltation in the resurrection. He is risen. God endorsed everything Jesus did and taught. Jesus now sits at the right hand of the Father, possessing all authority in heaven and on earth. On a great, glorious day, he will return in majesty and power, ushering in the new heaven and the new earth, and judge the living and the dead. Every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. Trusting in him as our Savior, Lord, and following this servant King down his humble path, we too shall be resurrected and join him in his heavenly kingdom forever.

I've heard of a church that's placed a "Servant's Entrance" sign over the door to their sanctuary. It's a powerful reminder for every follower of the servant King, Jesus Christ.

Our ultimate calling, as redeemed people in Christ, is to serve God and serve others. It's not easy or natural; it goes against our inclinations, the world's advice, and the culture we're part of. As Henri Nouwen once said, "Everything in me wants to move upward. Downward mobility with Jesus goes radically against my inclinations, against the advice of the world around me and against the culture of which I'm a part."

Someone asked why it's so hard to serve others, and Nouwen said, "That's easy: people. Ungrateful, unkind, manipulative, selfish, and sinful people." Gordon MacDonald also pointed out, "You can tell whether you're becoming a servant by how you act when people begin to treat you like one." We struggle, we stumble, but don't give up on yourself. Jesus hasn't given up on you. He has a plan for your life and has given us a helper. We serve not by our own power but by the power of the Holy Spirit. We're not alone in this service. As Jim Cymbala noted, humility is the key to experiencing the Spirit's power. The Spirit shapes and conforms us into the image of our servant King, Jesus Christ. Let our daily prayer be: "Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, heal me, use me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me." Amen.