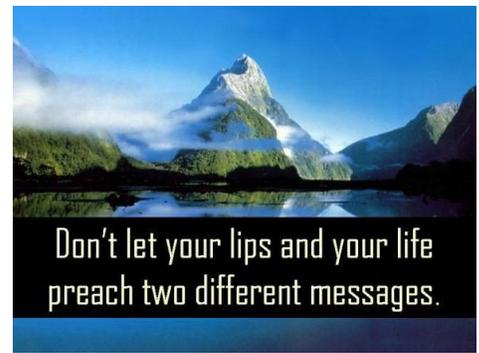


Micah 3:5-12

Psalm 43

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

Matthew 23:1-12



### THEY PREACH, BUT DO NOT PRACTICE

The lessons in Micah and Matthew help us discern whether our leaders and prophets, not to mention ourselves, are being true to God and not acting from selfishness and pride and following other gods.

Micah 3:5-12. *Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry "Peace" when they have something to eat, but declare war against him who puts nothing into their mouths. <sup>6</sup>Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without divination. The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them; <sup>7</sup>the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God. <sup>8</sup>But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin. <sup>9</sup>Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, <sup>10</sup>who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong. <sup>11</sup>Its heads give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for hire, its prophets divine for money; yet they lean upon the Lord and say, "Is not the Lord in the midst of us? No evil shall come upon us." <sup>12</sup>Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.*<sup>1</sup>

- *The prophets who lead my people astray* (v.5). Micah was one of a number of prophets in Judah when Israel fell to the Assyrians around 720 B.C. Advice from some of the other prophets caused Israel's leaders to make disastrous decisions and lead the people to worship false gods. The prophets were not necessarily trying for these results. They were just giving advice that seemed profitable. You can see their motive clearly in the LB translation of v.5: "You false prophets! You who lead his people astray! You who cry "Peace" to those who give you food and threaten those who will not pay!"
- *Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision* (v.6). Men who counseled in the name of God but really for their own selfish reasons would be cut off from the light of truth. No word from God would reach them. There is a universal lesson here. If we think and act only for ourselves, we will be seeing not God, but only ourselves, and listening not to God, but only to ourselves. It would be like walking in darkness. Jesus said, "The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes." (John 12:35). (See also 1 John 5-7.)
- *But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord* (v.8). The genuine prophet was always up front about the authority behind his teaching. Genuine self-assurance is from the Holy Spirit, not the acclamation of men. The disciples saw this genuine assurance in Jesus and regarded him as "a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people" (Luke 24:19). *The crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.* (Matthew 7:28-29).
- *Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel ...* (v.9). List the indictments against the rulers in verses 9-11. What basic flaw in human nature causes men to act this way? Verse 11 says, "They lean upon the Lord ..." What does the expression mean in this context?
- *Zion shall be plowed as a field ...* (v.12). These words were threatening to king Hezekiah of Judah. Yet Hezekiah did not silence Micah. He was a wise leader. The words of Micah were hard to swallow, but Hezekiah was willing to listen. Jeremiah 26:12-19 describes how, years later, the rulers of Judah recalled this occasion.

<sup>1</sup> Bible quotations are from the RSV unless specified otherwise.

Matthew 23:1-12. Then said Jesus to the crowds and to his disciples, <sup>2</sup>“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; <sup>3</sup>so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice. <sup>4</sup>They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger. <sup>5</sup>They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, <sup>6</sup>and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues, <sup>7</sup>and salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi by men. <sup>8</sup>But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. <sup>9</sup>And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. <sup>10</sup>Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ. <sup>11</sup>He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; <sup>12</sup>whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

- “They preach, but do not practice” (v.3). Thus began our Lord’s indictment against the rulers of the Jews. He said they were giving good advice – saying the right things – teaching the law of Moses. But their lives spoke differently. These sayings of Jesus were about the Pharisees, and about us at times. It’s a lot easier to talk about how people ought to love God and their neighbors than it is to walk the talk.
- “They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear ...” (v.4). Over the years the temple tax had become an obligation to the governing authorities rather than to God. The Pharisees, who lived in comfort, had ceased noticing (or did not care) that the tax was a heavy burden, hard for the people to bear.
- “They do all their deeds to be seen by men ...” (v.5). The heart of the problem of “pharisaism” is, in a word, *pride*. Pride is the foundation of all sin, and tempts the heart of every man, woman, and child. Pride is the sin of the spirit that produces sins of the flesh. Discuss “doing things to be seen by men.” When a man does something just to be admired, he is usually not admired, but when he acts unselfishly, he is admired. We generally cannot stand pride in others. How is it that we accept it so readily in ourselves?
- “They make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long ...” (v.5). The *phylactery* was a leather box or pouch strapped to the arm. In it were four scriptures: Exodus 13:3-10 and 13:11-16, and Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21. Discuss how each of these scripture passages reminded believers to know and obey God’s commands and pass them on to future generations.

It is easy to see in the context of this passage what the rulers were doing by making their phylacteries broad, etc. They were trying to show everyone they were righteous – in fact more righteous than the rest. This is pride, and you see it in every generation. You could begin with examples of “dressing up,” and go on to discuss titles and all kinds of ways we use to make ourselves look better than others. Living this way is bad for your health. Is there a solution? Yes, there is for Christians. Instead of living to impress others, we live to please Jesus. Doing this leads away from pride and toward humility.
- “You are not to be called rabbi ...” (v.8). We use many titles today. Episcopalians call their rector *father*. If you teach at the university you are called *professor* (rabbi). We have presidents, priests, judges, captains, chiefs, and so on. A title is not wrong if it simply identifies the person. But a title can easily become a catalyst for pride. Our Lord gave three examples:
  - (1) “You are not to be called rabbi.” When it comes to eternal truth, we have only one Teacher. It is good to teach God’s truth, but never good to let people think you are the source of it.
  - (2) “Call no man your father on earth.” In the case of a church pastor, there are two dangers: First, he may begin to be wise in his own eyes, that is, proud. Second, he may allow parishioners to see him in the role of the old priests – as mediator between themselves and God. 1 Tim 2:5 says there is only *one* Mediator between you and God. Paul was referring to Jesus Christ, not the priest or pastor of your church.
  - (3) “Neither be called masters.” The problem here, as with all such titles, is that the title carries with itself the temptation to think oneself superior and exalt one’s self above others.
- “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled ...” (v.12). Every time the natural tendency we have to seek recognition or praise from others arises, we must simply push it away. Christians know that glorification of self is a dead end. We seek to exalt not ourselves, but him whom God has highly exalted, so that *at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father* (Phil 2:10-11).