

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Eleventh Sunday After Trinityⁱ

I. Lessons:ⁱⁱ

A. The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighth Verse of the fifth Chapter of the Book of Job.ⁱⁱⁱ

“... I would seek unto God, and unto God would I commit my cause: Which doeth great things and unsearchable; marvellous things without number: Who giveth rain upon the earth, and sendeth waters upon the fields: To set up on high those that be low; that those which mourn may be exalted to safety. He disappointeth the devices of the crafty, so that their hands cannot perform their enterprise. He taketh the wise in their own craftiness: and the counsel of the froward is carried headlong. They meet with darkness in the daytime, and grope in the noonday as in the night. But he saveth the poor from the sword, from their mouth, and from the hand of the mighty. So the poor hath hope, and iniquity stoppeth her mouth. Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty: For he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth, and his hands make whole.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

B. The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Verse of the twenty-third Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.^{iv}

“But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows’ houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves. Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a

debtor! Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold? And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty. Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift? Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon. And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein. And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

II. Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.”^v
 In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

III. Introduction:

Today's Second Lesson is taken from a long passage in St. Matthew in which our Lord warns the Scribes and Pharisees of the shortcomings of their approach to the religion of the Covenant. The "woes" He expresses almost seem to parallel, in an inverse way, the "blesseds", or "beatitudes", with which we are so familiar in His Sermon on the Mount.

Before we look at just what Christ was saying to the Scribes and Pharisees, let us stop for a moment and remember something about them. Almost the only passages we have in the New Testament that mention them are His criticisms of them, so the words "Scribes and Pharisees" sound in our ears almost automatically as derogatory.

But that was not Our Lord's objective. He was addressing them precisely because they were good people, deeply religious in nature, men who wished to devote themselves entirely to the service of God. He saw, however, that they were going about that devotion in a counterproductive way, so He tried to call them back to the right way.

Had they not been estimable people, in whom He saw the real possibility of redemption, He might well not have bothered trying to correct them. After all, we have no recorded incident in which He ever bothered even to try to address outright pagans, do we?

IV. Theme:

In this, we should sense some warning for ourselves. The defects in the rails which caused the Scribes and Pharisees to run off the tracks are still there in the roadbed. If we drive heedlessly on, paying no attention to what He warned them against, then we, too, may find ourselves in a train wreck.

V. Development:

The problem Jesus pointed out to the Scribes and Pharisees was, at bottom, that they focused entirely on outward behavior in their attempts

to comply with the Law of the Covenant. Now this was, from their viewpoint, an entirely natural and appropriate thing. They lived in a world where every nation and people around them worshipped solely by making sacrifices and offerings and by sending up prayers to their gods – almost always aloud -- but none of those nations and peoples ever thought of establishing a *relationship* with its particular patron or protector.

As anyone knows who has ever had a friend, or dated, or been married, a relationship always has an outer and an inner component. It is certainly affected by whatever is done or said between the partners, but it is also affected by what each of them thinks or feels within him- or herself. How often do we observe two people who carry on the outward forms of friendship, or of a marriage, but who have, inside themselves, actually grown apart, so that the heart has gone out of their relationship?

While on some level the people of the ancient world must have known this reality, just from their powers of observation, they would have been unlikely to have dwelt upon it, for they lived long before the advent of psychology as we know it. Unlike us, they did not instinctively look for explanations to inner fears, drives, or instincts; they explained people's actions by reference to *character*, a largely fixed aspect of human personality that they saw as conditioned and formed by *virtues* and those virtues' opposites, or *vices*.

Just think of the classic Greek tragedies that some of us studied in high school or college. While some of the heroes of those dramas later gave their names to some psychological concepts, their authors and audiences understood them in terms of the "tragic flaws" or vices in their characters that ultimately brought them to destruction. While these flaws or vices operated internally, they were visible to observers through the ways they manifested themselves in the outward behavior of those they afflicted.

The virtues that were so important to the ancients, and their corresponding vices, were seen as being embedded in a person's character, and that character was seen as something akin to a modern missile's guidance system. Even though that guidance system is

controlled in large part by the way it was designed and manufactured, it can, to some degree, be reprogrammed so as to alter the destinations toward which it is directed.

So the classic concept of character saw it as being, in the first place, inborn, yet, to some degree, capable of being improved or degraded by upbringing or even later conscious effort. That is why we see ancient educators and civic leaders devoting so much time and effort to inculcating virtuous behavior in their charges and attempting to eradicate vicious conduct. As with athletic prowess, regular exercise of good habits and practices would strengthen one's ability to behave well and regular exercise of slovenly habits and selfish practices would atrophy one's ability to behave well.

This is still a good lesson for those who wish to live the Christian life. Good habits of devotion and conduct lead to good practices; lazy habits lead to shiftless practices. However, at the moment we are concerned with how all this bears upon the Scribes and the Pharisees, who were, just as much as the Greeks, influenced by this universal tendency of the ancient world to concentrate on outward behaviors as symptoms of inner virtues and vices.

In that world, it was natural for those who wished to live out the Law of the Covenant to the fullest possible extent to shape their lives to conform to every possible implication or requirement of that Law. It was equally natural that to do this in the course of daily life required extreme vigilance and, often, expert guidance. Hence the legal opinions of the rabbis and the safe rules handed down by tradition were prized to an extreme.

We can easily see the results of this in our Lord's reference to paying tithes of mint, anise, and cumin.^{vi} What is more natural than for someone, who wishes to comply to the uttermost with the Lord's command that we tithe to Him on everything we grow or raise, to include in that tithe the herbs from his kitchen garden? What Jesus complains of is not the inclusion of these inconsequential herbs in the tithes but the unthinking punctiliousness with which some made sure

they were so included at the same time other, more substantive religious duties were overlooked.

The meaning of our Lord's striking reference to "whited supulcres" is less obvious than is that of the culinary herbs. One must remember that, to the observant Jew, any contact with a dead body or with that body's container caused ritual defilement,^{vii} which could only be cleansed after separation from the community for a stipulated time, followed by ritual exercises such as baths and so on.

As an example of the importance of this formal defilement, and the time required to cleanse oneself from it, that is what lay behind the priest and the Levite's reluctance to aid the victim of assault in the parable of the Good Samaritan;^{viii} they feared that either he was already dead or, if not, he might die while they were assisting him. Also, it may have played a part in our Lord's injunction to a newly-called follower not to tarry for a funeral but to "let the dead bury their dead":^{ix} the time needed for decent obsequies, and then for the consequent ritual cleansing, would delay too long his taking up the mission to which Jesus was calling him.

So, as a direct result of this taboo about touching dead bodies, there was in our Lord's day a custom of white-washing tombs to help the pious avoid accidentally touching them, which would have caused this dreaded ritual impurity.^x

It would be a mistake for us to assume that this sort of hyper-concentration on rituals and outward observances, and the hypocrisy that so easily results from it, was purely a problem of the Scribes and Pharisees to whom Jesus spoke. After all, Jesus spoke before there were any Christians who were separate from the Jewish people, so He was speaking to Scribes and Pharisees who were still themselves Jewish. But His followers recorded His words so that they became part of our Scriptures, meaning they were preserved for us who are no longer Jewish but purely Christians.

Pharisees such as St. Paul knew we would need to heed these sayings, just as much as their original hearers did. Those who passed

them down to us were right; this tendency to distract ourselves with externals is a lurking danger for anyone who seeks to take seriously his or her religious duties.

VI. Conclusion:

For just one example, as the Second Office of Instruction tells us, we Christians are under an obligation to worship God every Sunday in His Church.^{xi} So it is all too easy for us to fall into the trap of assuming that when we go regularly to church, we are good people and good Christians, even when we give no thought to why we should be coming here or what it is we should be doing during the vast majority of the week when we are not here.

Even worse for us, precisely as for those Scribes and Pharisees, we tend to make our religious observances ends in themselves. I once heard this, and the hypocrisy to which it leads, summed up in one pungent phrase when someone remarked, “The trouble with Christians is they are so proud of being humble.”

So when we read our Lord’s warning, “But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!”, remember that as Walt Kelly’s philosophical opossum Pogo would have said, “We have met the Scribes and Pharisees, and they is us.”

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister, J.D.^{xii}
August 15, 2010.

ⁱ This year, Trinity 11 falls on August 15, which appears on some Kalendars as the *Falling Asleep of the Virgin Mary*. Most who use the traditional Books of Common Prayer will observe Trinity 11 because it is contrary to generally-accepted Anglican practice to substitute a black letter day for a Sunday feast of the Resurrection. Even the two in which the *Falling Asleep* appears on the Prayer Book calendar, the *Scottish BCP* (1929) and the *Canadian BCP* (1962), have special propers only for Mass; for this day as for most black letter days, the *Morning and Evening Prayer* lections remain those appointed for Trinity 11.

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- ⁱⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxx (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Job 5: 8-18 (KJV).*
- ^{iv} *St. Matthew 23: 13-31 (KJV).*
- ^v *St. Matthew 23: 28 (KJV).*
- ^{vi} *St. Matthew 23: 23.*
- ^{vii} *Apparently by commentators' expansion on the more limited prescription of Leviticus 21: 1-4, 11.*
- ^{viii} *St. Luke 10: 30-37. See: I. H. Marshall, Luke, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDS., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED, 3rd Ed. 905 (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publish Co. 1970).*
- ^{ix} *St. Matthew 8: 22; St. Luke 9: 60.*
- ^x *R. E. Nixon, Matthew, in GUTHRIE AND MOTYER, supra note 8 at 845.*
- ^{xi} *"My bounden duty is ... to worship God every Sunday in his Church...." The Offices of Instruction: Second Office, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 291 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*
- ^{xii} *Priest Associate, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, New Orleans (Metairie), LA. Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.*