

“Practice, Practice, Practice”

Matthew 23:1–12

November 2, 2008

Back in the 80’s on the television show Saturday Night Live, Billy Crystal made a name for himself playing a character known as Fernando. Do you remember him? Based on actor Fernando Llamas, Billy’s Fernando was suave and debonair, sitting in his corner booth at Fernando’s Hideaway where he would interview celebrities, schmoozing, name dropping, and talking show business talk until inevitably at some point in each and every interview he would interject his trademark phrase, *“You look mahvelous.”*

Well, if ever there was a group of New Testament religious leaders who would fit well into Fernando’s world, it would have been the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus was talking about in this morning’s scripture passage. For them it was all about looking marvelous.

In Jesus day, and still today in some corners of Judaism, it was common for devoted followers to wear phylacteries, which were leather boxes strapped to their heads or their wrists that contained little scrolls inscribed with scripture. But as Jesus described them, the Scribes and Pharisees not only wore phylacteries, they wore huge, giant phylacteries that screamed out, *“Look at me!! See how obedient I am to God?”*

In Numbers 15:37–41 and Deuteronomy 22:12, we also read that God commanded his people to make fringes on the borders of their garments. Worn like tassels on the four corners of their inner garment, their purpose was to remind the wearer of God’s commandments. However, once again, in order to make a show of their faith, the Scribes and Pharisees were known for wearing huge, oversized tassels that called attention not to God’s law, but rather to their own brand of overblown personal piety. As Fernando would say, *“They looked, Mahvelous!”*

But not only did they look Mahvelous, they also made certain that everyone had the opportunity to see just how mahvelous they looked. As Jesus described them in verses 6–7 of our scripture lesson, *“They love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues, and salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi by men.”* Like teenage kids parading up and down in front of the bleachers playing *“see and be seen”* at a high

school football game, the scribes and Pharisees worked hard at looking good and making sure that everyone noticed them.

And notice them, Jesus did, but unfortunately for them, he wasn't impressed. Instead, he said of their neon-bright show of religious pageantry, "*The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach but they do not practice.*" [Matthew 23:2-3]

We've all heard that old saying, "*practice what you preach.*" And Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees leads us to wonder just what it was that they were preaching that wasn't being translated into practice. We are given a clue in verse 4 when Jesus describes them further by saying, "*They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger.*" And here's his point. What Jesus is talking about, and what the scribes and Pharisees were preaching was the law, God's law, as in the first five books of our Old Testament. And that's all well and good. After all, Jesus said himself that he had come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. And so we see that Jesus took issue not with their preaching of the law, but rather with what they had done with the law that they were preaching.

"They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger." William Barclay puts it this way in this commentary on the passage. "*The scribes and Pharisees whole outlook on religion had one fundamental effect. It made it a thing of thousands upon thousands of rules and regulations; and therefore it made it an intolerable burden. Here is the test of any presentation of religion. Does it make it wings to lift a man up, or a dead weight to drag him down? Does it make it a joy or a depression? Is a man helped by his religion or is he haunted by it? Does it carry him, or has he to carry it? Whenever religion becomes a depressing affair of burdens and prohibitions, it ceases to be true religion. Nor would the Pharisees allow the slightest relaxation. Their whole self-confessed purpose was to "build a fence around the law." Not one regulation would they relax or remove. Whenever religion becomes a burden, it ceases to be true religion.*"

You see, the scribes and Pharisees had taken the central piece of their religious experience, God's law, and made it a burden so big and so heavy that it was impossible to carry. Not only were they expected to obey God's

10 Commandments, they added to that list hundreds and thousands of other Biblical laws and interpretations of those laws. They defined what you could eat and how you should eat it and how you were to wash your hands before you did so. They defined who you were allowed to touch or speak to and who you were not allowed to even associate with. They defined where and how you were to worship, and what you were and were not allowed to do on the Sabbath in order to keep it holy. For the scribes and Pharisees, it was all about the law. It was all about looking good; it was about appearing to be more holy and devoted to God than the next guy.

In Jesus eyes, they were doing a lot of religious-looking things, yet they were still missing the point. This is why he said earlier in Matthew's gospel, *"My yoke is easy and my burden is light."* [Matthew 11:30] And to define his point, as we talked about a couple of weeks ago, when asked what was the greatest law, Jesus distilled the entire Old Testament down to what we call his "Great Commandment" when he said, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."* [Luke 10:27]

You see, the scribes and Pharisees were preaching and even practicing the law, at least their own peculiar interpretation of it. But they were not practicing love of God and their neighbor, and for Jesus that makes all the difference.

And it behooves us as the Body of Christ on earth in the year 2008 to pay attention to that distinction. Because like those scribes and Pharisees, we as followers of Christ can just as easily fall into the trap of focusing on appearances. We can occupy ourselves with all sorts of church business and religious activities. We can fill our lives with team meetings and Bible studies and worship services; we can look pretty marvelous just like the scribes and Pharisees. However, if all that we practice as individuals and as a church doesn't somehow show bountiful and extravagant love to God and our neighbors, then it's all for nothing, and it doesn't mean a thing.

When I was a kid and was trying to learn how to play the guitar, there was a simple phrase that my teacher used to recite to me over and over and over again. It was the secret to success contained in one simple word repeated 3 times over. What he used to say was, *"practice, practice, practice."* And it's the same for us as we seek to be and become the people that God is calling us to be. You see, it's not just what we preach, it's what we practice as well.

And not just what we practice, but what we practice with diligence and devotion and consistency over and over and over again—practice, practice, practice. Practice patience. Practice humility. Practice forgiveness. Practice understanding. Practice peace. Practice kindness. Practice generosity. Practice gentleness. Preach and practice love. Amen.