

Matthew 23:1-12

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The **scribes and the Pharisees** sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for **they do not practice what they teach**. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the **place of honor** at banquets and the **best seats** in the synagogues, and to be **greeted with respect** in the marketplaces, and to have people **call them rabbi**. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students.

And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father-- the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who **humble** themselves will be exalted.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

Sermon

A few years ago, while I was serving at St. Elizabeth's Church in Kalihi, I was invited to a party celebrating the 80th birthday of Deacon Viliami Langi. It was held at the Empress Restaurant in the Chinese Cultural Plaza. I felt so honored to be included in the celebration.

Imagine my surprise when I walked into the restaurant and realized that the entire Empress Restaurant was reserved and decorated for his birthday celebration! I found a seat at a table way in the back of the restaurant and sat with some other people I knew.

Before the party began, Mrs. Langi came to say hello and said, "this is not your seat." She took me by the arm and lead me from the back of the restaurant and sat me at the head table!

I was very surprised and I felt uncomfortable. I was seated next to two other clergy who were just as surprised that they were sitting at the head table. They told me to just enjoy myself and honor the birthday festivities.

I have never sat at a head table except for my wedding. Trays of Tongan delicacies were brought out and stacked in front of us, one on top of another. If that weren't enough, as in Tongan tradition for special occasions, each of us at the head table was presented with a whole roasted pig! All this before the Chinese food even came!

Then the music started and beautiful dancers began walking towards us with gifts in their arms. They presented us with blankets, some hand crocheted by women from St. Elizabeths, pieces of handmade tapa, and each of us with a birthday cake of our own! I have never experienced such generosity, respect, and lavishness.

I happily went home with my stomach full of food, and the trunk of my car full of gifts, exuberant and in awe. It seemed wrong, I should not be receiving gifts, The Rev. Viliami should have all the gifts, instead it was shared and distributed to others.

As I sat at the head table, and here, when I wear this cleric collar, am I separating myself and distancing myself like the Pharisees who wore phylacteries only for people to see how holy they were? Jesus admonishes that they do all their deeds to be seen by others.

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

By the way, what is a phylactery? It's a tiny leather box containing even tinier rolled up passages of God's law.

These leather boxes were worn around the forehead and left arm. This was worn to remind people to be faithful to the law of God.

Jesus says the Pharisees wore their fringes long.

These fringes were attached to the four corners of a man's prayer shawl. This was meant to encourage a man to pray regularly and remember God's law. Having a phylactery or wearing fringes were not wrong.

But for Jesus, what was wrong was emphasizing how religious you were by how broad the phylactery was or how long the fringes were. The message was "we are better, we are holier!" But it was not real, because it was all on the outside. It's like us coming to church every Sunday carrying a huge bible, and a huge bible dictionary just to show how devoted to God we are.

Scribes and Pharisees liked to be called Rabbi because a Rabbi was declared to be a wise man and worshipped.

And if we're honest with ourselves, we all want to be worshipped. We want to be worshipped for our professional accomplishments, the label on the clothes we wear, what our kids do, or how young we look.

In Matthew 23, Jesus knows he is about to die and he shares with us one of his last public sermons. As a result, he talks about things that matter the most—humility and pride.

Humility is putting the needs of others before your own, and thinking of others before yourself. It also means not drawing attention to yourself, and acknowledging that you are not always right.

If you are humble, everything else in your life takes care of itself. If you are full of pride, your life will eventually unwind.

It seems as though every day someone is in the news being charged with stealing or embezzling money from one company or another.

Is it their pride that makes them brave enough to take what doesn't belong to them?

Is it their pride that makes them live a lifestyle where you need more things and more money?

Bishop Bob drives an entry level economy car and so did the late Bishop Chang and I'm satisfied with driving Fr. Darrow's 14 year old Toyota Camry that I inherited.

If you are humble, you will look to Jesus. If you are proud, you will not.

When we tell our kids to be patient, kind, and forgiving towards each other, are we also patient, kind and forgiving towards our spouses, our neighbors, or strangers?

We say others are unfriendly but are WE unfriendly?

We say others are rude but are WE rude?

We say others are late but are WE late?

Power affects and tempts us.

Ego affects and tempts us. We must make every attempt to ensure that God rescues us from falling into the trap of power and ego when it ensnares us. Jesus reminds us that all who humble themselves will be exalted.

We think that greatness comes from clawing and scratching your way to the top. This is not how Jesus describes greatness.

True greatness is foot washing.

True greatness is doing the dishes and helping your neighbor move.

True greatness is humble service.

True greatness is dedicating your life to making this world a better place to live in.

Remember that all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

Amen.