A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*True Power*

Matthew 21:23-32

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In today’s gospel reading, we are confronted with the one thing that bothers Jesus most of all about the people he has to deal with. On the list of human tendencies, there’s one that burns him up and breaks his heart more than just about any other every time he encounters it—their hypocrisy. We see it especially in the gospel of Matthew, and particularly again in today’s story.

As you know, if you follow the life of Jesus, he has confrontations with all kinds of different people. To our ears, they are something of an interchangeable group of interlocutors: scribes, pharisees, chief priests, elders. Then there are the Roman officials and their various representatives: Pilate, Herod. And there’s the crowds who follow him until they don’t and turn against him. Even his own disciples don’t stick it out. Peter denies him. Judas betrays him. Jesus’ whole ministry, his whole life, is dealing with people from various perspectives who oppose him, reject him, and those who eventually conspire to end him.

All of this is, in total, the fruit of fallen humanity. Jesus came to save people, even those who didn’t think they needed saving by him and who resisted it until the very end. He didn’t come expecting to be received gladly by everyone, though that would have been wonderful. He came full well knowing that humans were the kind of creatures who would look out for their own interests without even knowing what their true interests should be. He seems to have known early on, that his ministry would lead to rejection and death.

Even those who followed him then, and those who follow him now all contain multitudes of contradictions. Few of us attain sainthood in this life, and those who come the closest are those who feel the distance between their holiness and God’s holiness the most painfully. It’s been said that even our righteousness is like dirty rags. Jesus came for people like this—like you and me. We’re people he calls to be holy, to be perfect even, yet his patience with us is longsuffering. His grace is deep and far and wide. And his desire to receive all people, all sinners, into his compassionate heart is worth his suffering and death. From time to time I hear someone say, if I go to church and sing a hymn or say a prayer or just go through the doors, I’m a hypocrite. Well, maybe you are. If you are, you’re a whole lot like a whole lot of people Jesus died for and is redeeming. We all struggle to live up to our ideals and our faith. But probably, you’re not the kind of hypocrite Jesus had in mind when he called people hypocrites. He had a special holy anger for those whose hypocrisy, like Doc Holliday said in Tombstone, knows no bounds.

We think of Jesus as sweet and kind, compassionate with a lamb on his shoulders and a child on his knee. And he is that, but he was also pretty sharp-tongued, blistering in his condemnation of those who he thought needed condemning in hopes that he would wake them up—rattle them—that they might, too, come in humility and be redeemed.

If there’s one thing that really bothered him, really got in his craw; if there’s one thing that drew out of him his sharpest critiques it is this: religious and national leader hypocrites. Hypocrisy. He cannot stand it. He cannot abide it. And he will not remain silent about it. Hypocrisy is more than not being able to live up to your ideals. At least it is in the Scripture. That’s the struggle of life and is part of the journey of spiritual formation. Hypocrisy, the way Jesus talks about it, is blatantly saying you ascribe to an ideal and holding others to do it as well, but arrogantly having no actual intention of doing it yourself if it doesn’t serve your interests. In the Bible, the word hypocrite literally means a play-actor, a pretender. Someone who lives with a wink and a grin. The word appears about 30 times. 17 of those are in the Gospels. 14 of those are in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew’s Gospel, from the moment Jesus is born under Herod’s nose until his death, Matthew’s Gospel is sharp critique of human authority and power and those who wield it poorly, pretending to be something they’re not.

Matthew pits the compassionate servanthood of Jesus against those in power who abuse their power while hurting others, all the while taking the name of the Lord in vain.

It never ceases to burn him up. Take today’s story from the Gospel of Matthew: a confrontation between Jesus and the chief priests and elders of the people. Those two groups in particular, the priests and elders, were the most compromised, most duplicitous, and therefore the most dangerous people that Jesus knew. They would act in one circumstance as if they lived their lives by the high ideals of the nation and of God, and then, when the circumstances changed, they would change their tune to preserve their ruling, elite status. What Jesus saw when he saw them wasn’t a group of people doing their best to serve God and their neighbor in complex times, fallen creatures in need of mercy and forgiveness, and in need of a second chance. He saw in them a people who hid behind their power to make the world turn out right for themselves while using, not serving, but using everyone else to keep their power. And his sharpest critiques were reserved for them—especially in Matthew.

In the parable Jesus tells, they are like the son who says “I’ll do what my father asks,” but doesn’t do it, and appears to have no intention of doing it. It’s not an oversight from a scatterbrained and distracted person; it’s not an unfortunate situation where he just couldn’t follow through on his best intentions. It’s a strategy. The son represents when hypocrisy becomes strategy. This is just one example among so many in Matthew where Jesus takes the words and actions of the leaders and basically says to them and everyone else: it matters how you live; it matters how you lead; it matters how you represent God.

Why is blatant hypocrisy so deeply troubling to Jesus? Of all the problems in the world, why is hypocrisy the one which breaks our hearts and grinds our gears—both in others and in ourselves. There are reasons on three levels.

First, humans seem to be born with an innate sense that life ought to be fair. I don’t mean so much in an existential sense that everyone gets everything equally. I just mean that there are some rules and we all ought to follow them for the good of the community. I remember playing pick-up basketball in middle school. In sports, especially pick-up sports there are always arguments about fouls. But as long as everyone is pretty much playing with the same spirit, then the game can continue on. The game being played is more important, actually, than which teams wins a particular contest. There was one kid on the little half court that would call a foul every time you were close to him when he shot. “Foul,” he would cry out and take the ball for his team again. Foul? I didn’t even touch you. But to what court do you appeal your case in a game of pick-up when you call your own fouls? To make matters worse, if you called a foul on him, he would announce “false-call” and take the ball for his team. He was a little bigger and stronger than most of us. Or at least he was brazened enough to use what power he had to bend the rules to his own gain. Or not even bend them, just make them up and then break them when he wanted to. Did the fact that his team won the game justify the way he played? Maybe his team went home happy that they won. But in reality, he broke the game.

On one level, there’s a kind of universal sense that just because you have power, you shouldn’t be able to use it to make up whatever rules you want. In the history of the world, those who have lived under dictatorships haven’t had the luxury of imagining a world that runs so fairly, but those who have tasted democracy in a constitutional government have this hope, this ideal. Jesus’ context was a complicated tenuous reign of global empire over compromised local control, but the idea of saying what you mean and doing what you say applied even then.

The second reason hypocrisy is so troubling to Jesus, especially among those in power, is that every time hypocrisy becomes strategy for those in power, no amount of pretzel turning sophistry changes the end result that somewhere along the way, it always benefits those who are in power and never benefits those who aren’t. The ones who are hurt are the poor and the powerless, and Jesus has particular concern for the poor and powerless and the marginalized.

In the parable Jesus tells, he compares the actions of the chief priests and elders on one hand to tax collectors and prostitutes on the other hand. The stark difference between the two groups couldn’t be more apparent, and guess which group Jesus consistently finds closer to the heart of God? So did all the prophets who came before him. They all railed against national leaders and national government when it served the interests of the powerful and disregarded the poor and powerless—they steamrolled them. We might think of Jezebel and Ahab stealing the land from poor Naboth. The prophets thundered against the priests who assured “peace, peace,” when there was no peace. And they spoke searing words of truth when someone like David sees and wants Bathsheba and so has her husband Uriah abandoned on the battlefield and killed.

The prophets kept insisting to anyone who would listen and even when no one would listen that righteous societies are set up not to empower the powerful but to protect the minority. When those in power simply makes up rules and then change them when they want, even if they’re allowed to do it, it’s at least a violation of the spirit of fairness and somewhere along the way, damages the tenuous concern for good of the whole manifest in the minority voice. And even more concerning to people of Jesus and to all the prophets, they could see clearly that you can be sure that the ones who eventually will suffer as the wounds of the arrogant use of raw power, those wounds cut deeper on the marginalized, the poor, the oppressed.

The ministry of Jesus, the Spirit of Jesus, is all about identity with and remarkable advocacy for those on the bottom rungs—always oriented his life and prayers and actions and sermons and parables and his sharp barbs always on behalf of thos who he thought had no voice. Sometimes in theological circles it’s called “God’s preferential option for the poor.” Most of us would be more familiar with the way Matthew’s Gospel presents it: Jesus’ blessing in the beatitudes in Matthew 5, of the poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who mourn. And with those he identifies with in Matthew 25: the hungry, the thirsty, those in prison. What is woven all through this Gospel is hypocrisy in the seat of power almost always is employed to serve the interests of those in power, but the ones who suffer are the ones Jesus consistently identifies with.

So, we must ask, how does that call forth a response? Does that explain why we are so trouble by not only our own hypocrisy but when we see it blatantly abused in others? And if that is true, that is where our identity comes from, then good. We are hearing the voice of Jesus that is leading us to a disturbance and this is the Spirit of Jesus calling us to remember who he is and what he is about.

The third reason the way and Spirit of Jesus are so disturbed by hypocrisy particularly amongst leaders, simply comes out of who he is, the very nature of Jesus Christ and who he calls his people to be: people of integrity. He is the way, the truth, the life. He is the living Word of God. He is the holy one of Israel. It is the Apostle Paul who recognizes this in Jesus and who calls us to be the kind of people who embody this way of life.

In our reading from Philippians this morning, we heard a tremendous call upon us all:

*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.*

*In humility regard others better than yourselves.*

*Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.*

If Paul had just stopped there, and if we didn’t stop short of embracing this as a Rule of Life, how different would our lives be if we looked not to our own interests but the interests of others? Would our lives be so much worse? How different would our relationships be if, in humility, we regarded others as better than ourselves? Would our relactionships be impoverished? If doing nothing from selfish ambition or conceit were the standard for how our leaders lead how different would our politics be? Would we create a better society or a worse one?

Listen again to these words of high calling:

*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.*

*In humility regard others better than yourselves.*

*Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interest of others.*

And as lofty and as searing as that vision is, you know the Apostle Paul doesn’t stop there. The Gospel is not about marginally better politics, though that wouldn’t be so bad. The gospel is about a transformed world of transformed people.

Let this same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

The hope, the dream, the purpose of our lives is to lead to a world in which every knee should bend, in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and every tongue confess Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father.

Matthew’s Gospel from beginning to end is the Gospel of where true power lies. True power is not measured in whether you can win a contest or get your way. Look for true power in the one who lays it down. Remember, true power isn’t the way the strongman; true power is the way of love.

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