

Matthew 23:1-12 - Revised Standard Version

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

Bound With Heavy Burdens

I. Burdens of Life

In Native American creation stories, the turtle symbolizes the world. The earth is founded upon the back of a great turtle. It is a loving image. All the earth being carried, born upon the back of this creature that seems to embody ageless wisdom. I was thinking about the turtle in relation to this week's Gospel reading too. The turtle has the appearance of carrying its home with it and it's just the right size for its body. It is not trying to lug around a mansion fit for twenty turtles. It can't fit too much stuff in there. It's just the right size, just the right shape, just cozy enough to tuck itself in at night or if it needs to duck out of sight.

You know, we all carry around our house too. Not the physical house, of course, but the house of our mind, our dreams, hopes, past memories, ideas about the future, and all the emotions that go along with these things. We can sometimes carry around great long to-do lists like a heavy scroll that keeps getting longer and longer and few things ever get checked off. Some of our burdens may be related to the effort it takes to try walk a holy or a wholesome path in a world full of destructive ways.

II. Heavy Undue Burdens

We are probably all familiar with the Ten Commandments in the book of Exodus. You may not be familiar with the other six hundred and three commandments in the Torah. (The Torah is the first five books of our Bible, which make up the Jewish Pentateuch.) That may seem like a lot of laws, but it was nothing compared to the hundreds of laws that were added to them later.

In Jesus' time, the Pharisees were a sect that sought to uphold all the laws and follow them to the letter. That is admirable. However, they also liked to show off their piety and so they could be admired by people. They wore large ornaments and long fringes on their garments and were more performative — seeking exaltation for themselves, rather than glory for God. They missed the mark there. But what was worse was that they were leading other people in the wrong direction. Their religious practice focused on the husk of a religious life, rather than the kernel. They didn't practice what they preached. They looked down on other Jews who did not demonstrate the same zeal as they. They reaped the benefits of authority while the poor made the sacrifices of daily labor.

It is a persistent theme in the Gospels, where Jesus points out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. They expect people to follow the letter of the law, but they themselves have lost the spirit of the law. These are the heavy burdens they place upon others. This is why Jesus warns his audience to listen to the Pharisees but not to act like them.

III. Anger At Hypocrites

Again and again, we find Jesus using strong words against the Pharisees, calling them hypocrites and a brood of vipers. These were the men who were supposed to be setting a good example, but their behavior was self serving.

I can identify with Jesus in this respect. We don't have Pharisees nowadays telling us what religious laws to follow, but we have leaders who do this all the time in other forms. We have millionaires and billionaires who fly above the earth in private jets while preaching to the common person about turning down their thermostat or not driving in cars. We have a government that bails out billions in corporate debt while students and regular people suffer under mountains of debt. We have elected officials who vote to spend billions on war and send our young people off to fight while children go hungry and people struggle to have a simple decent place to live and our veterans return without proper care or support. During the pandemic, it was maddening that leaders who told us not to leave our homes were then seen dining in public and having lavish parties. These leaders put heavy burdens on the common person. Just as Jesus says of the Pharisees, **"...they preach, but do not practice. They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger."**

We all have burdens to bear, but some are laid upon us by authorities who have no intention of bearing such burdens themselves. That is hypocrisy. We are under no obligation to imitate hypocrites and false guides. We are obligated, rather, it is our responsibility, as children of God and followers of Jesus to see them for who they are and discern wolves from sheep.

IV. Discernment

One of the great patterns in the Gospel of Matthew, is that when Jesus is speaking to and about the Pharisees and the authorities, he never exposes their ugly, pretentious behavior without also following up with a vision of the kingdom of God. You see, to just focus on the ways of the world would be to forget that there is a kingdom that we have in our midst if we will but call it forth through our vision and our faith.

Look at the sun, how it gives without us asking. How it consumes itself, offering its being so that we may have light and warmth. Look at nature, how the trees spring out of the soil of seemingly dead matter, to offer their fruits each year. The pattern of God's creation is one of generosity, of abundance, of gifts offered to us without us even asking. It is the same with the life of Jesus, a gift without measure, offered for us. This is the pattern that we are given. This is the life that we are called to live. We are called care for and love one another, to **"Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ. ¹¹He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; ¹²whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."**

V. Jesus' Yoke

We are not called to bear the burdens of the kosmos. We are called to the Eucharistic life, to humbly love and serve God and one another, and to receive the blessings that flow to us in abundance.

Jesus said, **"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is *light*."** (Matthew 11:29-30) I know that in this passage, Jesus is saying his burden is not heavy like the burdens the world lays upon us. But when he says his burden is "light," I can't help but imagine his burden is light itself. The Light of the World bears the light. We are called to be lights. Jesus said, **"you are the light of the world...let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."** (5:14,16)

So as the turtle carries its shell, carry the yoke of Jesus so that your burden may be light and you may shine to the glory of God.

I would like to conclude with some thoughts written by Henri Nouwen:

"The world lies in the power of the evil one. The world does not recognize the light that shines in the darkness. It never did; it never will. But there are people who, in the midst of the world, live with the knowledge that he is alive and dwells within us, that he has overcome the power of death and opens the way to glory. Are there people who come together, who come around the table and do what he did, in memory of him? Are there people who keep telling each other the stories of hope and, together, go

out to care for their fellow human beings, not pretending to solve all problems, but to bring a smile to a dying man and a little hope to a lonely child?

It is so little, so unspectacular, yes, so hidden, this Eucharistic life, but it is like yeast, like a mustard seed, like a smile on a baby's face. It is what keeps faith, hope, and love alive in a world that is constantly on the brink of self-destruction."