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“We wanted to present ourselves as a model for you, so that you might imitate us”
(2 Thessalonians 3:10).

2 Thess 3:6-10, 16-18; Matt 23:27-32

There are risks in presenting yourself as a model, least of which is inviting people to scrutinize you for any failings. St. Paul was confident that the new Christians in Thessalonica would find in him a faithful witness to the Gospel he was preaching. In today's Gospel, however, Jesus holds up the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites precisely for not living up to the high standards they claimed as spiritual teachers and models.

Hypocrite, a Greek word for actors who wore masks on stage, described these models, one thing in appearance, another in fact. Their pious, public faces hid lives of corruption and contradiction. Jesus uses some of the harshest language in the Gospels to describe their hypocrisy. They are like whitewashed tombs, stately and shining on the outside but inside “full of dead men's bones and every kind of filth.”

Jesus' greatest indictment of them is that they were supposed to help others find God. Instead they blocked access and burdened people with intricate theological stumbling blocks and their own scrupulosity and legalism. They did not practice what they preached. The God of mercy was kept distant and unapproachable as a fearsome judge only reachable by these special, professional intermediaries. They extracted money from poor widows, neglected their own parents and made a

mockery of religion's purpose to promote justice and show compassion.

Politics and religion, perhaps because they are paths to power, attract more than their share of charlatans. Only by exposing their contradictions and deceptions can they be rooted out. True models must be transparent and humble enough to share the common foibles that make them believable to ordinary people. Paul does this in his letters, doing what he asks others to do, listening to his critics and acknowledging his mistakes. He lived by the mercy he preached, having gone through his own painful conversion to become an Apostle.

The Scripture readings in the coming days will offer more challenging images of hypocrisy authenticity. The Word is a living voice addressing us and our own world right now. We will celebrate St. Monica and her son, St. Augustine, whose stories include tears and a difficult conversion inspired by God's mercy. We will also hear about the demands of servant leadership. Those who stay awake and do what they are supposed to do by caring for others will be honored, while those who abuse their authority will be called out as hypocrites and punished.

To be good models helps us to be better people. Parents, teachers and all public figures have an important role in forming others. Good and evil are both contagious, so community depends on good people to inspire and set an example for others, especially the young.

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