Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled” (Matthew 23:12).

Is 1:10, 16-20; Mt 23:1-12

The Pharisees hold a unique place in the Gospels as critics of Jesus and his teachings. Their name means “separation,” and they held themselves apart as models of perfection in the law. They were scandalized by Jesus’ association with sinners and his perceived laxity by healing on the Sabbath and excusing his disciples from ritual washings. They were persistent in trying to trap Jesus in error. He calls them hypocrites in today’s Gospel for loading obligations on others and doing nothing to help them.

With Jesus’ emphasis on mercy and forgiveness, it may seem strange that he attacks the Pharisees with such negative language. He accuses them of misleading people regarding God; they are blind to their own faults while accusing others of failure; they plot against Jesus while pretending to be righteous and pure; they sin against the Spirit by accusing Jesus of colluding with Satan; they don’t practice what they preach. They have narrowed their approach to God to the externals of keeping the rules, but they have missed the mystery of love. They have closed themselves off from what God reveals to the simple by assuming they are better than others.

We recall that Jesus’ message was “Repent and hear Good News.” Without first repenting by acknowledging our inadequacies, we cannot hear the saving news of God’s mercy. Only sinners can open their hearts to the gift of divine love. The self-

righteous do not need God because they are earning their own way to a reward they imagine they have achieved by their own goodness. While this may work with some lesser goals, like mastering the details of the law, it makes no sense when approaching the majestic glory of God. We must surrender our hearts to a relationship with our own Creator. It is a pure gift, a transformation only God can offer us.

Lent is the season of entering the wilderness of our own helpless inadequacy. Only by stripping away the delusions of our own pride and superiority can we enter the absolute simplicity of the inner life of God. Jesus saw sinners taking heaven by storm while the Pharisees remained outside in the specious certitude of their own worthiness. Jesus could not reach them in their solitude and self-assurance. Only by his death could he hope to crack open their isolation from God’s love for them.

Not all Pharisees were enemies of the Gospel. Nicodemus humbled himself by coming to Jesus at night to try and understand him. Paul was a self-proclaimed Pharisee who persecuted the church before his conversion. Many Pharisees joined the early church. The term “Pharisee” has come to describe an attitude of self-righteousness and even hypocrisy, but we know that many of them came to believe in Jesus.

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