

"Can I preach what you practice?"

When I was asked to speak here at the Liverpool fellowship day, I felt humbled to be asked and then the moment came when it hit me, the subject, 'Can I preach what you practice?' I thought what a catchy subject and then I thought about it more and prayed, 'Father be with me'. What a difficult subject to preach on, [how do I know what you practice outside of the assembly?](#) I can preach on what we all should be practicing inside and outside of the assembly but I don't want to do that this morning.

Instead I would like for us to take a look at a very good example of a bunch of so called godly people who didn't practice what they preached. But as we go along I'm sure that we all can learn from these people and then you can answer that great question, [can I preach what you practice?](#)

I love that story about three preachers who were out in a boat fishing one day and they all decided it was time to confess their sins to each other. One preacher says, 'well I'm really struggling with alcohol, every weekend I really struggle not to have a few drinks, please keep me in your prayers'. The second preacher says, 'well I'm really struggling with pornography, every night I just can't help but go on my computer to look at naked women, please keep me in your prayers'. The third preacher says, 'well my struggle is gossip and I just can't wait until this boat gets back on shore.'

I guess the moral of that story is that we all have our struggles but there is a huge difference between struggling with something and blatantly just doing something which you know is sinful. Because when we as Christians preach one way to live and then live our lives in another way, we end up being hypocrites. And loved ones this is something we need to be careful of, if I'm going to preach what you practice, then be careful that you're not a hypocrite. You see the word **hypocrite** comes from the Greek word **hupokrites**, which basically means an actor under an assumed character.

In other words, someone who is putting on a show. Someone who pretends to be something he or she is not, and really has no intention of becoming the person they are trying to be. Jesus spoke to hypocrites in His day, in particular some scribes and Pharisees. They were supposedly the more religious people of that time and yet some of the toughest words Jesus ever spoke were directed toward them

In **Matthew 23** Jesus didn't hold back his words to them. He called them **hypocrites seven times**, he called them **fools twice** and **blind guides five times**, he also called them **serpents, brood of vipers once**. Strong words from Jesus in one speech to these people. But [did you know that we can still learn some lessons from these so called godly men?](#) And I'm not just talking about their bad example of followers of God, but we actually learn something good, even from a hypocrite. **Matthew 23:1-3** "Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples. "The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees are the authorized interpreters of Moses' Law. So you must obey and follow everything they tell you to do"

You see one of the problems we have is sometimes we hear things about a person and then we totally ignore everything that they have to say. We say things like, 'who is he to preach to me about pornography, when he goes out and gets drunk every now and then?' 'Who is he to talk to me about relationships when his own relationship is in a mess?'

You see Jesus wanted us to know that we shouldn't just go ahead and disregard the message being preached if the messenger seems to be a bit of a hypocrite. There are times loved ones when we need to look beyond the messenger and listen to the source of the message.

Because if I'm preaching what you are practising right now, then now would be a good time to reevaluate what your practicing. Look beyond the messenger and listen to the message. You see nobody wants to be told they are a hypocrite, but these religious leaders were just that, hypocrites.

Matthew 23:3+4 "So you must obey and follow everything they tell you to do; do not, however, imitate their actions, because they don't practice what they preach. They tie onto people's backs loads that are heavy and hard to carry, yet they aren't willing even to lift a finger to help them carry those loads."

If I'm preaching what you're practicing, then again maybe it's time to stop abusing people with your authority. In other words, you force people to live in such a way that you're not willing to live yourself.

When these religious leaders spoke from Moses' seat in the synagogues, they were speaking with authority. But the mistake they were making was they were binding things on others they themselves were unwilling to observe. They weren't practicing what Moses preached. And all that creates is an atmosphere of disrespect for all authority, including the Word of God. And so, if we want to practice what I'm preaching today then we need to keep God's word in highest regard. **Matthew 23:5** "They do everything so that people will see them. Look at the straps with scripture verses on them which they wear on their foreheads and arms, and notice how large they are! Notice also how long are the tassels on their cloaks!"

Let me share with you a description of a person who claimed to be a Christian and see if you can guess who I'm talking about. **He made free use of Christian vocabulary. He talked about the blessing of the Almighty and the Christian confessions which would become the pillars of the new government. He assumed the earnestness of a man weighed down by historic responsibility. He handed out pious stories to the press, especially to the church papers. He showed his tattered Bible and declared that he drew the strength for his great work from it as scores of pious people welcomed him as a man sent from God. You see Adolf Hitler was a master of outward appearance in religion, but he had no inward reality of religion.**

When these religious leaders did their works, they did them to be seen by others. They loved to wear religious clothing that gave the outward appearance of devotion. And if that's what we practice then we're certainly not practicing what the Bible preaches.

When Jesus is talking about us being the light of the world, He says in **Matthew 5:16** "In the same way your light must shine before people, so that they will see the good things you do and praise your Father in heaven". In other words, He says if as Christians we truly desire God's approval, we need to do things to glorify God. And there are times we can do that by doing things that only God sees us doing. Because if your practice of religion is to do things so that others can see what you're doing, then again maybe it's time to change what you're practicing.

Matthew 23:6+7 "They love the best places at feasts and the reserved seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them 'Teacher.'" You see when it comes to attention seeking and looking for the special treatment, these guys had it down to the tea. The Pharisees loved the special treatment they received from others. They loved having the best seats in the house, they loved having honorary titles, and they loved all that.

And loved ones if I'm preaching right now what you're practicing then you really need to listen to Jesus' words as we find them in **Matthew 23:8-12** "You must not be called 'Teacher,' because you are all equal and have only one Teacher. And you must not call anyone here on earth 'Father,' because you have only the one Father in heaven. Nor should you be called 'Leader,' because your one and only leader is the Messiah. The greatest one among you must be your servant. Whoever makes himself great will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be made great".

Jesus says he doesn't want us to use religious titles. He says if you want to be great then do it using humility. You want to be great in God's kingdom, then go for it but start from the bottom up by serving people. When the disciples were arguing about who would become the greatest in the kingdom, Jesus said to them in **Luke 22:25+26** "The kings of the pagans have power over their people, and the rulers claim the title 'Friends of the People.' But this is not the way it is with you; rather, the greatest one among you must be like the youngest, and the leader must be like the servant."

Jesus basically asks the disciples **do you really want to rule over people like these guys do? Do you really want to put yourself into that position where all that power might go to your head?** Jesus says, "not so with you." In other words Jesus was teaching them and us that if we as Christians really want to practice what Jesus preached. Then we need to respect His teaching and not use religious titles or expect special treatment, but serve others with humility.

A certain Irish priest, newly arrived in New York City, was walking through a bad section of town. He suddenly felt a gun against his ribs. Then he heard a voice, "All right mister, gimme your money!" Quickly the priest grabbed for his wallet. As he did, the hold-up man noticed his clerical collar and realized he was robbing a priest. The thief was overcome with shame. He said, "Forgive me, Father. I didn't know you were a priest." To which the victim replied, "That's all right, Son. Just repent of your sin. Here, have a cigar." The thief replied, "Oh, no thank you, Father, I don't smoke during Lent."

Now as amusing as that is, in many ways the teachers of the law and the Pharisees were just like that priest. **Matthew 23:13** "How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You lock the door to the Kingdom of heaven in people's faces, but you yourselves don't go in, nor do you allow in those who are trying to enter!"

Jesus told them that they were not practicing what they were preaching. They failed to truly show others the way to the kingdom of heaven, and they failed to go in themselves. In fact Jesus says to them earlier in **Matthew 15:3-6** that they were proclaiming one thing and asking people to follow what they were proclaiming but indirectly they were making a none-sense out of the Word of God.

No wonder Jesus had a go at them following on in **Matthew 15:7-9** "You hypocrites! How right Isaiah was when he prophesied about you! These people, says God, honour me with their words, but their heart is really far away from me. It is no use for them to worship me, because they teach human rules as though they were my laws!"

The point I'm trying to make here loved ones is that if we're not practicing what the Bible preaches then we need to change what we're practicing. We need to make sure that our teaching saves not only ourselves but anyone else we teach. And that's not just me talking that was Paul's advice to his young friend Timothy when he writes in **1 Timothy 4:16** "Watch yourself and watch your teaching. Keep on doing these things, because if you do, you will save both yourself and those who hear you."

I heard a wonderful story a couple of weeks ago about Members of the Methodist Women's Church Circle who were disturbed because a widowed church member and her three small daughters were staying away from services. Finding the reason to be a lack of suitable clothes, the ladies' group corrected the situation in a most generous fashion. When the little girls still failed to appear at Sunday school, some of the ladies called to inquire about their absence. The mother thanked them sweetly for the clothing and explained, "The girls looked so nice, I sent them to the Presbyterian church."

Now that is a perfect example of someone who was using religion for all the wrong reasons. **Matthew 23:14** "How terrible it will be for you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You devour widows' houses and say long prayers to cover it up. Therefore, you will receive greater condemnation!"

If your practice of religion involves taking advantage of the less fortunate than we are, then again maybe it's time to change what you're practicing. These guys were doing nothing short of taking advantage of these poor widows and trying to impress people with their long prayers.

These are the sorts of teachers which Paul warned Timothy about in **2 Timothy 3:4-6**. You see loved ones as Christians we need to be practicing what is right and honourable, not only in the Lord's eyes but also in what is right and honourable in the eyes of men. **2 Corinthians 8:21** "For we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man."

Let me ask you if you're studying the Bible with another religious person **do you try to convert them to Christ or to the church of Christ?** I think one of the biggest mistakes we make sometimes when we're studying with other religious groups is that we try to convert them to our doctrine.

Now to a degree that is good but it never ceases to amaze me how some people will go straight into studying instrumental music with the Baptists. Or they will go straight into a study of spiritual gifts with the Pentecostals. My point is that sometimes we want people to trust our doctrine more than trusting Christ to lead them to truth.

You see one of the many dangers with that approach is that our doctrine doesn't always make better people but Christ does. I don't know if you have ever noticed but when Paul is dealing with problems of doctrine in the church he never starts off by addressing the problem. No what he does is, he starts off by talking about Jesus.

In other words, he gets their thinking about Christ right first and then he goes on and address' the problem. And if I am going to preach what you're practicing, or if we're studying with other religious people we need to get their thinking straight first. This was one of the Teachers of the Law and Pharisees mistakes; they didn't get their own understanding of what was being taught in the Old Testament first.

Matthew 23:15 "How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You sail the seas and cross whole countries to win one convert; and when you succeed, you make him twice as deserving of going to hell as you

yourself are!" Jesus says that these guys didn't make people better, they made them worse. And they made them worse because their whole emphasis was on the traditions of men, rather than upon the word of God. And we today can make the same mistake, we can know the Bible to a degree but because we so often neglect God's word, we end up starving those who God sends us to teach.

We end up teaching people our own little agendas; we end up focusing on things like, **'Yes we need to sing at least two songs before we have an opening prayer.'** **'No we can't sing choruses during worship just hymns; we have to have two Scripture readings, one from the Old and one from the New.'** **'Oh no we can't use the NIV; it has to be the King James Version because that's the only Bible which is truly inspired.'** My point is that we need to be careful not to put ourselves or traditions between God's word and anyone we teach. But what we need to do is what Paul did in **Acts 20:27**, when he let them know **"the whole counsel of God."**

Now like I said at the start of this sermon Jesus doesn't mix His words with these guys, He tells them how it is. And He continues to do that in **Matthew 23:16-21** **"How terrible for you, blind guides! You teach, 'If someone swears by the Temple, he isn't bound by his vow; but if he swears by the gold in the Temple, he is bound.'** **Blind fools! Which is more important, the gold or the Temple which makes the gold holy? You also teach, 'If someone swears by the altar, he isn't bound by his vow; but if he swears by the gift on the altar, he is bound.'** **How blind you are! Which is the more important, the gift or the altar which makes the gift holy? So then, when a person swears by the altar, he is swearing by it and by all the gifts on it; and when he swears by the Temple, he is swearing by it and by God, who lives there; and when someone swears by heaven, he is swearing by God's throne and by him who sits on it"**.

Now I'm not going to go too much into detail with this part of our text because it's really self explanatory. But basically put, Jesus tells them that they were making fine distinctions between the types of oaths one could swear. **And don't we see this practiced in the religious world today and sometimes even within the Lord's church?** People say that some commands of God are essential to salvation, while other commands are not so important.

Now when I first became a Christian I used to hear people say that the church of Christ were known as **'people of the Book'**. But we don't seem to hear that much now a days but I'm convinced that people still believe that. Because I have known people say, **'you guys really go by what the Bible says don't you'?**

And loved ones that's the way it should be, instead of teaching people Bible subjects which we **'think are right'**. Or teaching people Bible subjects which **'seems right to us'**. **1 Peter 4:11** **"Those who preach must preach God's messages."** Instead of **'thus says the preacher'** it should be **'thus says the Lord'**. We should be teaching Bible subjects according to what the Bible actually says, instead of our own opinions, feelings or thoughts. Or dare I say it, **"Let us speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Bible is silent"**

Because more often than not we end up practicing what has never been preached in the Bible. And we end up with lots of inconstancies in our doctrine, just like these guys were doing during Jesus' time on earth. **Matthew 23:23** **"How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You give to God one tenth even of the seasoning herbs, such as mint, dill, and cumin, but you neglect to obey the really important teachings of the Law, such as justice and mercy and honesty. These you should practice, without neglecting the others. Blind guides! You strain a fly out of your drink, but swallow a camel!"**

Jesus rebukes them again and tells them that they have neglected the **"important"** matters of God's law. They stressed tithing, but neglected justice, mercy, faith and in that way they would strain out a fly, but swallow a camel. And we can easily be just as guilty of the same thing, by stressing **"lighter"** matters, and neglect the **"weightier"** matters. And we can also get it wrong the other way around when all we do is stress the **"weightier"** matters, and neglect **"lighter"** things.

Jesus tells us how it should be in **Matthew 5:19** **"So then, whoever disobeys even the least important of the commandments and teaches others to do the same, will be least in the Kingdom of heaven. On the other hand, whoever obeys the Law and teaches others to do the same, will be great in the Kingdom of heaven"**.

I heard a story about a certain pig farmer who refused to have anything to do with the church because all he ever saw was a bunch of hypocrites who belonged to it and he always named two or three people by name. One day the preacher of the church came by to buy a pig from him. After looking over the farmer's entire swine herd, the preacher pointed to a scrawny, sickly, ugly little runt and said, **"I want that one."**

The farmer protested vigorously, "Why, Preacher, you don't want that one. He's the scrawniest runt I ever saw. Look, here are some fine pigs over here." "That's all right," said the preacher, "I want that one." After the purchase was completed, the preacher said, "Now I am going to haul this pig all over the country and tell everyone that this is the kind of pig you raise!" "Hey, Preacher, that's not fair," the farmer protested. "I raise fine pigs. An occasional runt doesn't ruin my whole stock." The preacher said, "I am only following your example of condemning a whole church because of the small spirituality of a few of its members," needless to say the farmer got the point.

And I'm wondering if these hypocrites whom Jesus is addressing ever got the point. **Matthew 23:25-28** "How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You clean the outside of your cup and plate, while the inside is full of what you have gotten by violence and selfishness. Blind Pharisee! Clean what is inside the cup first, and then the outside will be clean too!" "How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look fine on the outside but are full of bones and decaying corpses on the inside. In the same way, on the outside you appear good to everybody, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and sins."

Again, Jesus reminds us that if our religion is focused only on the outside then we are not practicing what Jesus preached. These guys were more than willing to put up with extortion, self-indulgence, hypocrisy and lawlessness but they drew the line of no tolerance when it came to keeping the traditions of ritual cleansing.

So let me ask you, does your practice of religion focus on all the wrong areas? Do we get stressed out because we think we need a building to worship God? Do we get stressed out because we only have a few members who turn out to support out gospel meetings? Do we just accept anyone into the Lord's church without finding out anything about them? My point is this, if we want to be known as the 'people of the Book' and not the 'church of hypocrites' then we need to be practicing what the Bible preaches.

I remember a few months ago when I read the historical survey of the churches of Christ in the British Isles by Joe Nisbet and others. I was so impressed and encouraged by the faith of all those saints of yesteryear. But you know being impressed and encouraged means nothing unless we try to live by faith like they lived by faith.

Matthew 23:29-31 "How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You make fine tombs for the prophets and decorate the monuments of those who lived good lives; and you claim that if you had lived during the time of your ancestors, you would not have done what they did and killed the prophets. So you actually admit that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets!" Jesus tells them that it was great that they honoured the ancient men of God of yesteryear, but they weren't willing to live like them. In fact Jesus tells them they were living more like their ancestors who murdered the prophets.

And if that wasn't a slap in the face enough, Jesus goes on and tells them in **Matthew 23:32-34** "Go on, then, and finish up what your ancestors started! You snakes and children of snakes! How do you expect to escape from being condemned to hell? And so I tell you that I will send you prophets and wise men and teachers; you will kill some of them, crucify others, and whip others in the synagogues and chase them from town to town."

Jesus really gives them another serious rebuke and tells them that they are going to do even more harm than their fathers. And like we know from the **Book of Acts** all of what Jesus predicted came true. And when Jesus says in **Matthew 23:35-39** that, "Upon that generation would come the judgment for the murder of all God's prophets" we saw that fulfilled in **70 A.D.** with the destruction of Jerusalem.

You see they honoured the people of Old but weren't willing to live what they preached. And today we not only honour them and men like Jesus and Peter and the others saints, but are we willing to live what they preached? Or are we just like the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees back then who refused to obey the prophets of old words?

Yes we can learn a lot from these guys provide we practice what the Bible preaches. Yes I can preach what you're practicing provided we all take on board what Jesus has been telling us this morning. Yes there will always be saints who abuse authority; there will always be saints who don't teach the whole word of God, there will always be saints who are inconsistent in their practice of religion.

Yes there will always be hypocrites within the Lord's body but as someone once said to me, 'there's always enough room for one more.' Because I have heard people say to me, 'oh I won't ever become a Christian because there are too many hypocrites there.'

Well there may well be hypocrites in the church, but that is no reason for you not to follow Jesus, you don't have to be one. Think about it, [did the hypocrisy of Judas Iscariot allow the rest of the apostles to leave Jesus?](#) Because again it never ceases to amaze me how people will use the hypocrite card as an excuse not to go to church regularly. You know ask yourself, do we allow the presence of hypocrites keep us from enjoying other activities. Oh, no I'm not going to play in the golf competition this week because there are a load of hypocrites in that competition. Oh, I'm not going to go on holiday this year to Spain because there are a load of hypocrites who will be in the same hotel as me.

Because here is the real question loved ones, [which would you rather choose, would you rather spend a short time with hypocrites in the church, or spend eternity with hypocrites in hell?](#) And so, loved ones, [can I preach what you practice?](#)

The truth of the matter is, I don't know because only you and I know if we just pay lip service to God and His word or if we truly are practicing what the Bible preaches. And for any who are here who are not yet Christians, I pray that you don't let the hypocrisy of some Christians keep you from the blessings of salvation in Christ Jesus.