

Humble Leadership

November 1, 2020

Matthew 23:1-12

Two days from now, thousands, if not millions, of people will be flooding into polling places to cast their votes on who they want in various political positions, how they want their tax dollars spent, whether or not they want more taxes for usage in various areas of life, etc. I will admit that casting your vote can be viewed as a very prideful duty. You get a sticker that says, “I Voted!” with an exclamation mark, as if voting is something you are encouraged to be prideful over. You get to wear that sticker as a badge of honor for the few hours the adhesive sticks to your shirt. If your candidate wins, it’s a point of pride because you helped elect that person that’s going to make a difference through their office. The various items regarding taxes go the way you want them to go, and you feel prideful that your vote mattered. It made a difference. However, maybe some of your nominees don’t get put into office and/or the other items get shot down. It’s possible in that moment you feel that little bit of hurt to your pride. You might think or say, “Why did I even bother to vote? It didn’t make a difference.” Indeed, election seasons are times that make or break a person’s pride. However, as Christians, we are taught *not* to be prideful. We learn that pride is a bad thing. In fact, it’s so bad that it’s classified as one of the Seven Deadly Sins, those actions and states of being that are destructive on multiple levels. Jesus even says as much in the reading for today.

In today’s reading, Jesus seems to absolutely tear the Pharisees down and portray them as the “scum of the earth.” They tie heavy burdens on others but refuse to help bear the loads themselves. They do everything not out of faith but out of wanting to get noticed. They wear their clothes a certain way to get noticed, to appear noble and righteous. They insist on being called by their titles, having the best seats in the synagogue and at social functions, and on being shown nothing but the deepest respect by “commoners” everywhere they go. Jesus insists that their self-proclaimed righteousness and pride not be acknowledged. Jesus portrays them as being the worst sort of people it seems, and such interpretations as that, while easily come to, are at the root of much antisemitic rhetoric. It’s for that reason that many commentaries strongly encourage their readers to *not* think so little of the Pharisees, but rather to see their humanity, and I agree. Something we need to bear in mind whenever we come across passages involving the religious elite is that, while they may be portrayed as being these terrible people, that’s exactly what they are: people.

The Pharisees, the scribes, the religious elite, they are just as human as you and me. They are just as sinful and just as prone to succumbing to pride as we are. It’s entirely possible that this is not who they once were nor is it what they intended to have happen. They became the religious elite because they intended on making a difference. They hoped to keep people on the straight and narrow, to help as many people get to Heaven as possible, to help that great nation of God’s chosen people to find salvation. They saw a problem in their community, in their nation, and they took a stand to try and correct that problem. That’s very noble of them to do so. However, over time, it got to them. Constantly being referred to as “rabbi” and by their title, it was a point of pride. It made their heads swell every time they heard it. They kept getting invitations not only to the best parties, but were offered seats at the head of the table next to the political elite. They were given the best seats in the synagogue and people bowed down before

them at the temple to acknowledge their position and righteousness. All these honors and invitations, it went to their heads. Eventually, their pride took over and their initial intent was no longer to help the people but to be honored by the people and to support their inflated egos. We see this happen even today.

In the modern day, we see this inflating of egos and pride happen in all arenas of life. Professional athletes, movie and music stars, they rise to their positions because they are really good at their craft and love what they do. They hope to inspire children of generations to come to pursue their dreams to do what they love, not what everyone wants or expects them to do. The same goes for politicians. They enter the political arena because they see a problem and they want to make a difference. They want to strengthen our country at the various levels, correct problems they see, and make this country the best it can be. However, after seeing the amount of money they make from being in their position, after getting their umpteenth award, being reelected for the umpteenth time, being interviewed by national television networks and seeing their face on the TV, magazines, newspapers, etc., it goes to their head. The politicians want to be referred to not as “Mr./Mrs./Miss” but as “Senator,” “Congressman/-woman,” “President,” or “Your Honor.” The movie and music stars, the professional athletes, they cease to see themselves as having once been a common person like their adoring fans, and they perhaps lose the sense of their own humanity. It doesn’t happen all the time, but this is still a truth in many cases with the leaders of various spheres of life. So, this raises an important question: How do we properly lead in our lives? How can we be effective leaders without having it go to our heads?

The answer to this question is found in the last two verses: “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” In other words, the key to being a good leader is not power and authority, but rather, humility. As theologian Sammy Alfaro writes, “The way toward true authority in the beloved community is found in humble service to others . . . How different might our world be if so-called Christian leaders and politicians actually took Jesus’ words to heart and decided to use their position of influence and power to serve with humility the communities they represent?” In other words, to be the best leaders we can be, we must remain humble and not let the titles, awards, power, and glory go to our heads. In all that we do, whether as an individual or as a collective, we must remain humble. All of us are leaders to someone else, whether we know it or not, and therein set an example of what a leader looks like. We can teach the younger generations and those who look up to us that leadership is about power and glory, or we can teach that leadership is about service and compassion. This election season is no different.

As I mentioned before, finding out the results of an election can be either an inflation of or a strike against our pride. At the same time, it can also be humbling. Regardless of if your party’s candidates are humble, you can humbly accept the results. Regardless of if Holiday Island is incorporated or the various other items get put into effect, you can make a choice to humbly accept the results. However, the only person that can make that decision for you is you. So, in the days and potentially weeks to come, how will you choose to accept the results? With pride or with humility?