

The Problem with Words Matthew 23:1-12

Words, words, words, it often seems to me that my life revolves around the words I am called upon to say. Each and every Sunday I look for words to proclaim the Word. In our tradition, the Reformed tradition, the proclamation of the Word is a crucial part of worship. When you look at some Reformed tradition architecture you will find the pulpits, the place where the Word is proclaimed hold center stage. Thankfully, for me, in this sanctuary, it is the Table and the Cross which are the central focus. If you look at the history of religion throughout the ages and collected all the words associated with them you would find volumes upon volumes of Scriptures of all kinds, each with many volumes of words containing explanations of those Scriptures. That doesn't include all the volumes written containing prayers, hymns, chants and mantras. There are even religions which are supposedly "wordless", like Tao or Zen Buddhism. But they too have their own collections of words. As Christians, we may be some of the wordiest religious people in the history of the human family. If you gathered together the written deposit of all the preachers and teachers and bishops and popes throughout the centuries, it would fill a very sizable library. And that would be just from those who attained a certain degree of fame so that their words were retained for posterity. Now, of course, it is not even necessary to go to a library to survey this multitude of words. They have been digitalized and are available online for anyone to access and read from their home. And we as Presbyterians with our need for things to be done decently and in order with our official books and declarations are no exception to this accumulation of words. I think that it's probably a safe guess that wherever you find religion you're going to find lots of words gathered around it. It seems to me that the very plentiful number of words available to us can be part of a very real problem in our faith. As disciples of Christ, we Christians say all kinds of things that sound profound. We say things that sound beautiful. But at the end of the day many people find that the words we say sound hollow because when all is said and done, those words have not made a difference in the way that we are living. Many folks find that our lives indeed do not match our words. How many of us were told by our parents, "Do as I say, not as I do?" How many of us as parents said the same thing to our own children? Saying and doing, as any child understands are not the same thing. I think that most of us realize that in many areas of our lives. We may recognize when we are saying, but not doing what we say. We don't want others who might look up to us to emulate that particular aspect of our lives. Doing and Saying we know are different things. When you look at our gospel lesson for today, it's far too easy to leave in back in the original setting of that Temple courtyard. It seems obvious that those Jewish scribes and Pharisees were the ultimate hypocrites. They were the learned men of the faith, but they not doing what they were teaching that was found in the Law. Listen to this passage as found in Eugene Peterson's *The Message: Matthew 23:1-3*. Now Jesus turned to address his disciples, along with the crowd that had gathered with them. "The religion scholars and Pharisee are competent teachers in God's law. You won't go wrong in following their teachings on Moses. But be careful about following them. They talk a good line, but they don't live it. They don't take it into their hearts and live it out in their behavior. It's all spit-and-polish veneer." Jesus' quarrel with the Pharisees and religious leaders is not in the things they are

teaching, but in the way they fail to act upon those teachings in their own behavior. Another common saying we all know which applies here is practice what you preach. Jesus is not pointing out those scribes and Pharisees because they were inherently evil, or because as some have tried to say, that Jewish law no longer mattered—indeed Jesus reminded his followers more than once of the importance of the law as given to Moses—no, Jesus singled out the scribes and Pharisees because in all their humanness they provided him with such rich fodder by repeatedly falling so very short of the ideals that they preached. And isn't that one of the most dangerous temptations for all of us. The temptation to use religious words and rituals to make ourselves think that we have it all down, when in reality our lives don't come anywhere near to matching what we say. It's the temptation as a more modern saying goes of talking the talk without walking the walk. Listen again to Peterson's interpretation of Jesus' words from Matthew 4-7. "Instead of giving you God's law as food and drink by which you can banquet on God, they package it in bundles of rules, loading you down like pack animals. They seem to take pleasure in watching you stagger under these loads, and wouldn't think of lifting a finger to help. Their lives are perpetual fashion shows, embroidered prayer shawls one day and flowery prayers the next. They love to sit at the head table at church dinners, basking in the most prominent positions, preening in the radiance of public flattery, receiving honorary degrees and getting called 'Doctor' and 'Reverend'. Jesus is taking to task these leaders who are concerned with their own status instead of the issues of those who they are supposed to lead. The great commandments to love God and neighbor are not part of their daily life. That's quite an indictment. I look at my collection of stoles for the liturgical year and wonder if my pleasure in them is an indication of how far I am from what I should be. Many of the stoles are a gift from someone, some represent a place I visited and thus has a special meaning, but some are just ones which spoke to me because of the symbolism and the beauty with which they are made. The stoles which I don on Sunday morning really have no value in living out the commandments of God. This brings us to a central problem with words and the ease with which we say them. It is so easy to not connect our actions and behaviors to the words we speak. Does my life reflect the Word which I proclaim? You see, I don't think the scribes and Pharisees were intentionally being hypocritical. They just did not connect the dots of their behavior to what they had learned and taught. The problem with telling our children to do as I say, not as I do is that it rarely works. For children and adults, actions always speak louder than words. That's the major problem with words—making our actions match them. Last week we closed the service with a hymn which is known by two names—We Are One in the Spirit, which is the opening line or They Will Know We Are Christian by Our Love. Those are some of the words which we say, they are some of the hopes we have for our lives together, but how often are we really known as Christians because of the love we show for others? What if we could just say, do as I do? Truly, what a great day it would be if we demonstrated the teachings of our Lord so clearly in our actions that there was no need for any words at all. Let that be our prayer for our lives. Amen.