**Readings for November 5, 2023 – 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Practice What You Preach

*Jesus often points out hypocrisy, teaching his followers what not to do in their daily lives. Notice that he does not disparage the teachings or heritage of the religion, but only the behavior of its leaders (and really as an example of the pitfalls we can all get into).*

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**Opening Prayer:** Dear Lord, you taught and modeled the importance of humility and honesty in what we say and do. Give us the grace to live out our faith honestly, measuring greatness only by deeds of love. We ask this through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Reading 1 - [**Mal 1:14b-2:2b, 8-10**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/malachi/1?14)

A great King am I, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.
And now, O priests, this commandment is for you: If you do not listen,
if you do not lay it to heart, to give glory to my name, says the LORD of hosts,
I will send a curse upon you and of your blessing I will make a curse.
You have turned aside from the way,
and have caused many to falter by your instruction;
you have made void the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts.
I, therefore, have made you contemptible and base before all the people,
since you do not keep my ways, but show partiality in your decisions.
Have we not all the one father? Has not the one God created us?
Why then do we break faith with one another, violating the covenant of our fathers?

Responsorial Psalm - [**Ps 131:1, 2, 3**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/psalms/131?1)

R. **In you, Lord, I have found my peace.**
O LORD, my heart is not proud, nor are my eyes haughty;
I busy not myself with great things, nor with things too sublime for me.
R. **In you, Lord, I have found my peace.**
Nay rather, I have stilled and quieted my soul like a weaned child.
Like a weaned child on its mother's lap, so is my soul within me.
R. **In you, Lord, I have found my peace.**
O Israel, hope in the LORD, both now and forever.
R. **In you, Lord, I have found my peace.**

Reading 2 -- [**1 Thes 2:7b-9, 13**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/1thessalonians/2?7)

Brothers and sisters: We were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children.
With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you
not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well, so dearly beloved had you become to us.
You recall, brothers and sisters, our toil and drudgery.
Working night and day in order not to burden any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.
And for this reason we too give thanks to God unceasingly,
that, in receiving the word of God from hearing us,
you received not a human word but, as it truly is, the word of God,
which is now at work in you who believe.

Gospel - [**Mt 23:1-12**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/matthew/23?1)

Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees
have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you,
but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice.
They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people's shoulders,
but they will not lift a finger to move them.
All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels.
They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues,
greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation 'Rabbi.' As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.'
You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. Call no one on earth your father;
you have but one Father in heaven. Do not be called 'Master';
you have but one master, the Christ.
The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled;
but whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Related Reflections

We must take care to avoid reading this Gospel passage without knowing its historical context. At the time of Matthew’s writing, possibly after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70, the evangelist had several issues to deal with in his community of Jews who followed Jesus. Roman occupation at this time was reinforced. Judaism was in a great spiritual and political upheaval and was undergoing consolidation, both in authority and orthodoxy.

It is easy to understand how the relationship deteriorated between Jewish authorities of the time and the Christian Jesus movement. Thus, Matthew’s Gospel, written for his own community, is an attempt to help the emergent Jewish sect of Jesus’ followers (not yet called Christians) live the faith in their new circumstances.

It is important to read the harsh critique against the leaders of the larger Jewish community in this historical light. Furthermore, it is vital that the reader today enter into the passage and understand, “We are the Pharisees,” the well-intentioned people who struggle to integrate faith and life. This is about us!

The passage begins by assuring the community of Christian Jews that the way to be faithful to the Law of Moses is to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus, who came to fulfill the Law. For us today, it is an admonition to move beyond the Ten Commandments to ponder and live as Jesus did, particularly as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount (and the Beatitudes). We are instructed to practice what we preach, that is, to avoid the pitfalls of hypocrisy. Lack of compassion, acting unjustly, walking over others to succeed, false piety, and arrogant pride are not part of the vision of Jesus for his followers.

Jesus offers an alternative way of life for his community: respect for others, attention to weaker members, compassion for the sinner, and continual forgiveness are the ideals we are to pursue. Leadership in the community does not automatically follow from titles of honor, because all authority comes from God. In Jesus’ vision, everyone in the Christian community leads through serving the rest. What set apart the community of Christians? Servant leadership, living what we preach, and integrating faith, life and faithfulness into the way of Jesus.

* From Prayer Time, Cycle A, Renew International

No one can practice everything they preach. It seems that we can envision future human possibilities with great clarity. We can even have inner revelations that powerfully show us a new way of being alive. But when we try to live it out, we bump into our conditioned personalities, our lifelong habits and our history of succumbing to social pressures. Pir Vilayat Khan, a Sufi teacher, points out that even a holy teacher may fall from grace when faced with supporting a family, and paying taxes.

Therefore, practicing what you preach means repenting of your practice. We do not do it right. Therefore, we either give up the project of being transformed by our vision of what could be, or go back to the drawing board. Going back entails purifying ourselves of the material that keeps us from living the truth we know and the vision we see. This repentance should not be a stigma, branding us as failures. It comes with the territory of following something large enough for you to betray. When you preach an egalitarian community of love under one God and one Master, keep the sackcloth and ashes handy.

* John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels,* Liturgical Press

***Related scripture: Matthew 11: 28-30***

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”

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Discussion Questions

Do you know someone who has done a good job of integrating faith and life? What characteristics and values seem to guide their daily living?

Who is our greatest role model for living this way? (This may seem like a simple question, and it is!)

Talk about the image of justice and love that Jesus presents in contrast to the actions of the Pharisees? (See related scripture, on the previous page).

Also take a look at how St. Paul describes the ministry of those early church leaders (second reading). How can we live more “gently” among others? What does that look like in our homes, our work, our communities?

Talk about the Psalm. What hope does it give us? What is the fruit of living humbly?

Matthew also shows us that Jesus values those who are meek and humble. Why do those two things seem so hard for us to imitate?

Do you ever relate to God as a gentle mother?

**Closing Prayer:**

Spirit of the Living God, captivate our imagination and energize our spirit, so we will learn to take our inner convictions and live them out more fully day by day. Jesus, Savior and companion, help us to follow your way of service, to open our hearts to forgive, and give us the grace to integrate your way, your truth and your life into all parts of our lives. We ask this through Christ our Lord, Amen.

(Adapted from Prayer Time, Cycle A, Renew International)

***Repeating our weekly focus prayer (adapted from St. Anselm):***

Oh Lord, teach us to love those who hate us, and pray for those who do us wrong. May we be the children of your love. Amen.

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***Thoughts for the Coming Week:***

Determine one specific way to live out your faith this week in an area of life that may seem difficult for you. And can you do this quietly and “gently,” without any show or recognition?

Think about the ways in which Jesus carries our anxieties and burdens, rather than “laying heavy burdens on people’s shoulders.” What do you want to say to Jesus for the way he showed us love, compassion, forgiveness and especially, humility?