

Today's Gospel presents us with a bit of a dilemma, since Jesus forbids his disciples from using the titles "father" and "teacher." And yet, we find ourselves using these titles all the time. I think it's even possible you may have been confronted by a Protestant at some time, wondering why you still call us priests "Father." If we took this instruction of Jesus literally, not only would we be forbidden to call all priests by the title Father, we would also be forbidden from using the word "teacher" to describe those who help us learn at school. And if we were to take it to its logical conclusion, we would even be forbidden to call our male parent "father." When Protestants have asked me that question, "Why do people call you Father," I just ask them if they had only used their dad's first name when talking to him, since they couldn't call him dad or father. That usually would end their questioning. So it's not likely that Jesus meant this literally. Even after this episode, He still allowed His disciples to call Him Rabbi, which means teacher. So then what did He mean?

As always, we must look at the context of Jesus's message; we need to look below the surface. What is the main theme of Jesus's teaching today? Well, the context is Jesus's teaching about practicing what you preach. He is warning His followers against hypocrisy. He points out that the Pharisees do not practice what they preach, and He is instructing His disciples to be sure that they do not follow their example. The Pharisees insisted that the people call them Father or Rabbi or Master - they loved their titles; but the problem was they seemed to be more concerned about the honors and privileges that came from a position and title, but didn't concern themselves in living out the principles that the titles espoused. And especially when it came to the things that they taught, Jesus doesn't counter what they say - He even tells His disciples to pay attention to their teaching - but He says don't follow ***their example***. Remember what He reminds His disciples to generate in their lives before and after this episode: a deep sense of humility. That is part of living a life without hypocrisy, a life with integrity.

Hypocrisy is one of the great sins of the New Testament, one which Jesus is constantly accusing the Pharisees and scribes of. For Jesus, one of the great tragedies of all would be for His own followers to fall into the same trap. That is why He stresses the point. Christ knows that for His followers to be able to spread His Gospel beyond His death and Resurrection, they will

need to be teachers and preachers of integrity, without a hint of hypocrisy. How often has it been the downfall of the Church, and of her leaders, when lack of integrity is exposed, when hypocrisy is uncovered? So even today, we followers of Jesus must heed our Lord's warning against hypocrisy. We must always make every effort to practice what we preach. Our deeds must always match our words if they are to be most effective. Any teaching is always more effective when actions match words.

But there is one more point I want to bring up today, one which I already alluded to: Jesus tells His disciples that even though the Pharisees may not be practicing what they teach, His followers must still pay attention to their teaching. In other words, what they teach is good, even if they don't heed their own words. Jesus realizes that there may be a danger that they will throw the baby out with the bath water; they may disregard the whole teaching due to the hypocrisy of the teacher. But Jesus warns them not to do so. While reminding them to live lives of integrity and humility, He also tells them not to disregard right or correct teaching, even when and if it's delivered by a hypocrite. And that's a warning for us too.

In our day, how often do we disregard the whole person, everything they may say or do, because we dislike some particular thing they may have said or done? I've seen it happen when we don't like church leaders, or politicians, or next door neighbors. Do we reject them entirely, lock, stock and barrel, when something turns us off? I've seen this happen over and over. Pope Francis is keen on the word "discernment." I think that can apply even to these instances. While guarding against hypocrisy ourselves, we also must heed Jesus's warning to discern what is good and right, even if we don't like the messenger, or the way the message is packaged.

When I was ordained a deacon almost 23 years ago I still remember what the bishop said when he handed me the Book of Gospels: *"...receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ, whose herald you have become. Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach."* I think those are words that all of us should ponder, and practice. *"Believe what you read, teach what you believe, and practice what you teach."*

~Fr. Tony Wroblewski, 11/4/2017 Homily