PASTORS: PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

ORDINARY 20

If pastors are to become credible leaders, they must first practice in their own lives what they preach and teach to others.

I. LEADERS LEAD BY EXAMPLE (JOSHUA 3:7-17)
   *Our actions speak louder than words.*
   
   A. APPOINTED BY GOD (7-11)
   B. LEADERS LEAD THE WAY (12-16)
   C. ESCORTING PEOPLE INTO GOD’S PRESENCE (17)

II. LEADERS LIVE WITH INTEGRITY (1 THESSALONIANS 2:9-13)
   *Leaders must live their lives as living examples of the bible’s message.*
   
   A. INTEGRITY IN CONDUCT (9-10)
   B. INTEGRITY IN MINISTRY (11-12)
   C. INTEGRITY IN MESSAGE (13)

III. PRACTICE WHAT WE PREACH (MATTHEW 23:1-12)
   *God empowers and lifts up humble leaders but he will oppose and bring down proud leaders.*
   
   A. IN LOVE WITH POWER (1-4)
   B. IN LOVE WITH PRESTIGE (5-7)
   C. IN LOVE WITH THEMSELVES (8-12)
Pastors: Practice What You Preach

Ordinary 20

Last time we talked about the qualifications of good pastors. I have a lot of things I need to continually work on. This morning, we are going to continue with that theme. In evaluating pastors in your own mind, you should use the qualities laid out in this morning’s texts to measure up how well pastors are doing. This morning, the emphasis will be on character. The main idea of this morning’s texts is this. IF PASTORS ARE TO BECOME CREDIBLE LEADERS, THEY MUST FIRST PRACTICE IN THEIR OWN LIVES WHAT THEY PREACH AND TEACH TO OTHERS. It’s bad enough when people who call themselves Christian behave in ways that are nothing like our Lord and Savior Jesus Whose Name they claim. There is nothing more certain to keep unbelievers rejecting Christianity than for Christians to be hypocrites.

However, it is even more scandalous and destructive when pastors act in ways that are not consistent with the message and the Lord we preach. We pastors have to remember that our mistakes, inconsistencies, and sins are magnified simply because of the position we hold.

Let me give you an example. Many of us when we were rookies got carried away with the thought of our own importance. In fact, we often felt it was our duty to go around fixing everyone and we were often judgmental. It doesn’t take much for God to knock us down to where we need to be and He often uses humble people to do it. One overzealous newbie pastor had to learn the hard way in her first congregation. In her zeal she started to stick her nose into people’s business. Many of the congregation resented this but were afraid to mention it. One day she singled out George, a quiet man. She accused him of being an alcoholic, after she saw his pickup truck parked in front of the town’s only bar one afternoon. She said to George in front of other church members that everyone who saw his truck knew exactly what he was doing.

George, a man of few words, stared at her for a moment and then just walked away. He didn’t explain, defend, or deny. He said nothing.

Later that evening however, George quietly parked his pickup truck in front of the pastor’s house … and left it there all night. You can be sure that she learned a painful lesson and calmed down as a pastor. It was certainly a teachable moment.

I hope and pray that I do not need to learn these lessons the hard way. I hope that I can learn by God simply tapping me on the shoulder and that He doesn’t need to hit me over the head with a hammer to get my attention. These types of sermons are good for me to prepare and preach.

LEADERS LEAD BY EXAMPLE (JOSHUA 3:7-17)

These leadership qualities are clearly a standard that you as the congregation have a right to expect of me. In Joshua 3:7-17, we see that leaders lead by example. To put it another way,
OUR ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS. We have all seen public figures tell us that we should think this or that, we should believe this or that, and that we should do this or that. We have learned to mistrust the basic institutions in our country because the people who are telling us what to think, believe, and do; are not doing the things they want us to do. Their own words and actions don’t match up with what they want and expect from us.

APPOINTED BY GOD (7-11)
For pastors, having our actions match our words is imperative. The reason for this consistency is because we have been given a great responsibility. In verses 7-11, we see that leaders have been appointed by God. Last time we were together, we studied through the death of Moses. And in this text we see God appointing Joshua to lead the nation of Israel into the Promised Land. We have already discussed how pastors are called to churches like ours. Hopefully the congregation is convinced the candidate is God’s choice and the pastor is convinced that God has called him or her to the particular congregation. Whichever way the call to a particular church is made, we are saying that the pastor has been appointed by God to serve a particular church.

Here is where we pastors have to be careful. Notice in verse 7 that God said to Joshua, “Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses.” We pastors must be careful not to draw attention to ourselves or begin to exalt ourselves. It’s hard but it seems to me that we ought to just do our jobs and let God exalt us in the congregation’s eyes … or not.

I think that I am often tempted to be a people pleaser in the sense that I want to minister to everyone, I want everyone to succeed, and I’d like everyone to like me. To get caught up in this kind of thinking and behavior really doesn’t do anyone much good. Pastors shouldn’t go out of their way to be obnoxious or offensive. However, we should stick to the plain simple truth and minister in humility keeping our eyes on God; not on how many people like us. As we look at some of the model leaders like Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah, Nehemiah, Paul, and others, they tend to keep their eyes focused on God and don’t spend a great deal of time trying to make people happy. Again, let me say this in the strongest possible terms. Pastors are not to be obnoxious or offensive as we go about our ministry; but we must be more concerned about pleasing God than we are about pleasing people.

And our job as ministers is to point people in the direction of God. Joshua proved himself 40 years earlier when he and Caleb were the only two spies ready to take the Promised Land because their eyes were on God; not on the people and not on the circumstances. Here again Joshua directed Israel’s attention to God by directing their attention to the Ark of the Covenant. The ministry is not about the pastor or the congregation. The ministry is about God. Much of our time should be getting out of the way so God can deal directly with the congregation as individuals. It is often painful to watch people crash and burn but sometimes that is the way God gets their attention.

LEADERS LEAD THE WAY (12-16)
Joshua demonstrates that leaders must lead the way in verses 12-16. Look carefully at the plan here. One leader was chosen from each of the Tribes. That meant that Joshua gathered 12
leaders, along with the priests who were carrying the Ark. The plan was this. God would lead the way. The priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant were to enter the Jordan River first. They were to stand in the middle of the river, the leaders would cross, and then the whole nation of Israel. No doubt Joshua stayed close to the Ark. We will expand on this principle later but the application for us is that I should never ask you to do something that I have not already done and anything we endeavor to do as a church, your pastors must be willing to do first.

Pastors are meant to escort people into God’s presence. I’m not God and neither is Pastor Mike. We can’t fix you, heal you, or solve your problems. What we are called to do is escort you into the presence of God and then allow God and you to work things out. Only God can do miracles for you. As soon as the priests carrying the Ark touched the Jordan River with their feet, God stopped the flow of the river and the waters backed up and again seem to have formed a wall. Notice the river was at flood stage when God did this. The priests took their position in the middle of the Jordan River, on dry ground. Just like at the Red Sea crossing, every Israelite made it safely through. Not one was left behind.

ESCORTING PEOPLE INTO GOD’S PRESENCE (17)

But I want to point something out here. As the priests held the Ark in the middle of the river, each Hebrew passed in front of the Ark of the Covenant on their way across the river. Each Hebrew had to individually pass before God’s presence. Let me just emphasize this point. I have no extraordinary powers. I can’t give sight to the blind. I can’t make the lame to walk or raise the dead to life. I can’t heal your sickness or fix your marriage. I can’t fix your problems; but God can! We as pastors can merely escort you into God’s presence where God can do these things to you and for you. We must live exemplary lives because OUR ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS.

LEADERS LIVE WITH INTEGRITY (I THESSALONIANS 2:9-13)

What we say and what we do must match because as 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13 points out, leaders live with integrity. In other words LEADERS MUST LIVE THEIR LIVES AS LIVING EXAMPLES OF THE BIBLE’S MESSAGE. Here we are going to build on the premise that our actions speak louder than words. The people would have known that Joshua was not just telling them to go take the land. He was not telling them to just trust in God. Joshua led by example. 40 years earlier he went to spy in the land and he came back and told the community to go and take the Promised Land. Now he was ready to lead them again into the Promised Land. What Joshua said matched his actions. He trusted God 40 years earlier and he trusted God now.

Joshua didn’t receive much challenge at this point though the community wanted to shut him up and even kill him previously. The Apostle Paul consistently faced challenges to his ministry. When challenged, Paul could always shut his critics up by pointing to his lifestyle and challenging them to point out any lack of integrity.

INTEGRITY IN CONDUCT (9-10)
In verses 9-10 Paul challenged them to find fault with his integrity in conduct. Pastors must be willing to get their hands dirty. I have friends who have worked full-time secular jobs in
addition to pastoring their churches. Most of my friends are willing to get their hands dirty in order to help with church projects. They are willing to be the first to give of their money, their time, and extra labor. Paul was a tentmaker by trade. In order not to ask for money, he sewed tents during the times he wasn’t preaching and ministering. Paul was concerned about becoming a burden to the people he was ministering to. Pastors must be men and women who can be trusted not to spend people’s money frivolously. They must make sure not to waste or just throw money at some of their pet projects. Pastors must handle the congregation’s money, which is actually God’s money, with care and responsibility.

I think I told you this before, but there are army chaplains who are spending time in Fort Leavenworth Prison. When I got to Chaplain’s Basic Training, the commander said to us, “Ladies and Gentlemen, there are plenty of chaplains who have found their way to Leavenworth. If you don’t want to join them, stay away from SAM.” All of us were curious to find out who Sam was and why he was so dangerous. Well SAM turned out to be an acronym for Sex, Alcohol, and Money. The chaplains who ended up in jail were there because they got involved with inappropriate sexual behavior, developed drug and alcohol problems, or got caught mishandling money. I think this helped me as I got into ministry. Like in the military, I made a decision to never handle church money and to never know how much individual people gave to the church. It has served me well. I stayed out of jail in the military and have stayed out of the Chicago Tribune during my time at Devon.

The pastor’s walk should be above reproach. For the most part, pastors live in the public eye and we have to know that we are being constantly watched and judged as to how we live our lives. So to summarize this, pastors ought to be hard workers, doing everything they expect from the congregation; and we should live upright and transparent lives. We should model what we expect from the congregation.

INTEGRITY IN MINISTRY (11-12)
In addition to demonstrating integrity in our conduct, verses 11-12 illustrate that we comport ourselves with integrity in the ministry. My guess is that most pastors love the people we minister to and are concerned for your well-being. In other words, most of us are not looking at our present ministries as stepping stones to a higher position or looking to climb the ladder of success. Most of us are not looking to get rich or to use our ministries to get rich. I can’t speak for all pastors but for most of the pastors I would call friend, we love the congregations with the love fathers and mothers have for their children. We try to motivate you to grow through encouragement comfort and persuasion. We have no desire to be dictators or ruthless counselors.

I think our desire is to minister through loving positive reinforcement. We really do like to say things like, “Well done, good job, and you’re doing good.” Most pastors like to speak words of love and encouragement. Our desire is to persuade you into growing in your faith with God. I think for me, a good illustration is the way my friend helps me to lift weights. I will be struggling with a particular exercise. I can’t quite finish the move with the weight so he will nudge it with his hand to help me complete the exercise. And then when I’m done he’ll say, “Good job.” That’s encouraging and that makes me want to add more weight on the next exercise. That’s how I hope to be with you.
There should not be many occasions when a pastor has to use harsh words. If someone is doing something dangerous or their actions are threatening the safety of others, pastors do have to speak sternly. However, once the danger has passed, they should quickly return to the loving and encouraging mode. We should minister with love and never try to manipulate people into doing anything. Where ministers are ministering with integrity, the people should feel free.

**INTEGRITY IN MESSAGE (13)**

We pastors need to be men and women of integrity because there is inherent integrity in the message described in verse 13. God has spoken in many ways. He speaks through nature, He speaks through music, He speaks in worship, and even in our silence. However the two primary ways are through His written Word, the Bible, and through the Living Word, His Son Jesus Christ. The Word of God is what we need to become believers and to grow to maturity. The Apostle Paul said this in another letter:

"14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that all God’s people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (II Timothy 3:14-17 / TNIV).

Paul stuck to the plain and simple truths of Scripture. Our ministry should stick to the Word of God. We are not to add to it nor subtract from it. The Gospel message is simple and true. If we hope to maintain our integrity as pastors, we must conform our conduct, ministry, and message to the Gospel. **LEADERS MUST LIVE THEIR LIVES AS LIVING EXAMPLES OF THE BIBLE’S MESSAGE.**

**PRACTICE WHAT WE PREACH (MATTHEW 23:1-12)**

In Matthew 23:1-12 Jesus laid it on the line for pastors by commanding us to practice what we preach. In other words, **GOD EMPOWERS AND LIFTS UP HUMBLE LEADERS BUT HE WILL OPPOSE AND BRING DOWN PROUD LEADERS.** This seems to be very serious because Jesus talks about this in the negative. It has the sound of the prophet Ezekiel when God pronounced woes on the false shepherds. This is where we pastors have to do a great deal of soul searching and make sure we don’t resemble the negative characteristics described here.

**IN LOVE WITH POWER (1-4)**

Jesus said in verses 1-4 that false pastors will be in love with power. I am going to equate the Pharisees with modern day pastors in the sense that this group along with the scribes and Sadducees made up the intelligentsia of the Jewish religion. They were the teachers and arbiters in matters of law and religion. Jesus acknowledges the legitimacy of such a position. Jesus seems to be saying here that they are helpful in assisting people understand the meaning and application of the Old Testament.
It seems to me that Jesus takes them to task on two counts. First of all, they lay up all sorts of extra burdens on the people that are not found in the Scripture but are their own particular twists on Scripture. In other words, they may take a simple law and add so many extra demands on it; the Pharisees would say the person was sinning when in reality he or she actually kept the law. Jesus pointed this out practically when He was condemned by the Pharisees for healing on the Sabbath. They had determined that healing was forbidden on the Sabbath when the law simply said that people should not work on the Sabbath. Oftentimes Jesus pointed out how unreasonable their interpretations were. For example, Jesus said that if one of their animals fell in a pit or hurt itself, they would rescue it, and fix it. Would healing a person be less important?

And secondly, they were loading down people with burdens that they were not willing to keep themselves. It’s always easier to tell others what to do and solve other people’s problems than it is to fix ourselves.

Here is a good principle for us pastors to follow. First of all, I have no right to tell you what to do or what not to do. Ultimately that is between you and God. You must come to that conclusion on your own. A pastor’s job is to preach, teach, and explain the Bible. Even though legitimate pastors have good solid seminary education, we still don’t know everything. It is important for us not simply to give you what we believe. If we are good honest pastors, we will have studied a broad range of evangelical scholarship. Where there is general agreement among evangelical scholars, we pastors must simply preach the truth. For example, any teaching on the nature of Jesus has to clearly state that He was at the same time both fully God and fully man.

However, when we get to a lot of other topics that relate to specific behaviors, there is often a disagreement as to the exact meaning and application of passages. Here is where a pastor must present you with the different legitimate interpretations and let the course of action you take be based on a prayerful interaction between you and God. It seems to me that would keep us in bounds with Jesus here.

The only time I would step in and tell you what to do or not do is if you were going to take what you believe and tell someone else this is what they have to believe. At that point you have crossed the line and pastors then must protect the sheep from you. I have seldom seen this happen but I have had to step in a couple of times to protect the congregation. Please be careful and don’t let people tell you what to do. God has given you His Word and His Holy Spirit. Each one of us individually has to stand before God. It seems to me here that Jesus wants us each to make our decisions with Him. Good pastors and teachers will be honest enough with you to give you the possible interpretations and applications. Please use your own brain and your own relationship with God to make your decision.

There are some pastors I have seen cross the line but I have seen many more self-designated lay people who have made themselves leaders lead people astray. Because they are able to use religious language and give the appearance of living pious lives, people surrender their decision making process to them. They love having this power over people but Jesus says that good pastors have no love for power.
**IN LOVE WITH PRESTIGE (5-7)**

In verses 5-7 Jesus warns pastors not to be in love with prestige. The common Jew looked up to the Pharisees and revered them. And to make sure they could be easily identified, the Pharisees wore long tassels on their robes and large leather pouches on their wrists and foreheads. The leather pouches contained Bible verses in them. People would be honored to have these Pharisees attend their banquets. And the host would be sure to give them the highest seat of honor.

Whenever people addressed them, they would call them Rabbi, teacher, master, or some other title of respect and honor. I have said before in other sermons that receiving this kind of recognition, honor, and respect is intoxicating. When people address us as pastor, reverend, doctor, father, etc. and when they make sure we are seated at a prominent place for dinner, functions, or special events; we can easily start to feel important and even more important that the rest of the other people. It is easy to get carried away with an overestimation of ourselves. The thing that will help us keep in check is to go before God and let Him point out to us that if we believe the hype, then we are frauds, just fooling people and ourselves; but we can never fool Him. Do I for one moment believe that when I die and arrive at heaven that Peter will open the gate and announce my arrival with, “Attention everyone, the Reverend Dr. John Carlini is now entering the room.”? I don’t think so. God is not interested in our degrees or titles; neither is He impressed by them. It is easy to become addicted to the honor and respect we can sometimes receive as pastors, but we have to be careful to fight the temptation.

**IN LOVE WITH THEMSELVES (8-12)**

In verses 8-12 Jesus commands pastors not to be in love with themselves. Again this has to do with falling in love with power and prestige. I think I understand Jesus’ point here but it becomes difficult to take it absolutely literal without qualifying some of it. He told His followers not to address anyone with the titles of Rabbi, Father, or Teacher. If we just take it absolutely at face value, we run into trouble from the start. Paul referred to himself as Timothy’s spiritual father and he considered himself to be the spiritual father of all the people in the churches he started. We all have men who fathered us physically. What else would we call them? Jesus commanded us to care for our mothers and fathers. Are we not supposed to call them father? Jesus was addressed as Rabbi and Teacher. We address men and women as teachers, rabbis, and pastors. We address our biological fathers as father. We address Catholic priests as father.

I don’t think that’s what Jesus means here. I don’t think Jesus is abolishing titles or qualifications. What He is forbidding is that any human becoming a god to any other human being. For example, if you are constantly asking anyone what you should do, you are giving that person god status in your life.

In our culture, we have letters and titles that symbolize competence in a particular area. We have the title of medical doctor. It means that a person has passed all the course work and practical work that qualifies him or her to treat people for illnesses. We have academic doctors that symbolize that this person has completed the required work to qualify them as competent for the jobs they must do. The title of doctor seems to indicate that a person has reached the top tier of a particular area of study or practice.
The term professor means a person has been accepted and qualified to teach at the university level. Let’s bring it to the church. We have titles such as pastor, reverend, rabbi, father, etc. Traditionally the church and society have tried to protect people from scam artists. To be sure, like everything else in our society, there are mail order ordinations or fly-by-night organizations that will ordain people for money. However, in most branches of Christian and Jewish denominations, there are strict requirements for ordination. For ordination into ministry, people usually need to complete at least 3 years of post-graduate seminary work in an accredited seminary. They are further required to complete an internship and then they must pass an ordination exam and panel of other clergy to be ordained. In this sense the title of pastor means that a person has completed the requirements, tested, and found competent to be the pastor or rabbi of a local church. So when men and women receive the title of pastor, reverend, rabbi, or father, that supposedly means they have proven themselves to be qualified for ministry.

What Jesus is saying here is not that titles are not useful or helpful. What He is saying is that we should never take the place of each individual’s responsibility before God nor should we expect to be treated with more dignity or honor than any other human being.

I have erred greatly during my career by misunderstanding this passage. I think I only partly understood it. I’m not a person big on titles. When people have asked how to address me, I have always said, “Just call me John.” I was always afraid people would put me on a pedestal and I have always wanted to communicate that I am just a fellow traveler. I think I got that part right.

However, when refusing the titles of Reverend, Pastor, or Doctor, I have misled people into thinking that I have no expertise in the areas of Bible study, Biblical Counseling, Theology, spiritual direction, and other areas. That’s okay when dealing with humble people because they already know that and have a desire to learn more. However, there will always be a group of people who are proud and have an overblown estimation of their own talents and abilities. When I have refused titles with these kinds of people, they have interpreted my refusal of titles to mean they had just as much knowledge and competence in these areas as I have. That is simply wrong and dangerous to other people they want to minister to and disciple. These kinds of people actually do want to become gods to people they “minister” to. So it really is helpful to retain titles in order to protect people from false, self-appointed ministers.

The trick for those of us, who have these credentials, qualifications, and titles, is to never get carried away with our own importance and we should not look for any personal gain. We should never use these titles to lord it over any of you. The way we do this is to humbly come into the presence of God. God will exalt those of us who humble ourselves but He will directly oppose those who are proud and He will bring them down. Here is a test for you to decide what pastors and ministries are genuine and which are not. False pastors drag us down, lead us to depression, and enslave us.

True pastors build us up, bring us joy, and set us free. We have to carry false religion but true religion carries us. False religion haunts us; true religion helps us. False religion is a depressing affair; true religion is a joyful affair. Remember this. If you are a believer then God has given you the Bible and His Holy Spirit. Good pastors will escort you into God’s presence and allow
you to make your own decision. False pastors will keep you in their presence and tell you what decision to make. There is a real difference here. GOD EMPOWERS AND LIFTS UP HUMBLE LEADERS BUT HE WILL OPPOSE AND BRING DOWN PROUD LEADERS.

I can tell you that I’ve been on this journey a long time. Sometimes I have done pretty okay; other times, not so much. It really is not easy to fulfill these qualities God lays down for leaders but it is imperative that pastors continue to try our best and let God fill up our lack with grace. IF PASTORS ARE TO BECOME CREDIBLE LEADERS, THEY MUST FIRST PRACTICE IN THEIR OWN LIVES WHAT THEY PREACH AND TEACH TO OTHERS.

Let me quote what God expects of the congregation first:

"7 Remember your leaders who taught you the word of God. Think of all the good that has come from their lives, and follow the example of their faith. 
8Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. 9So do not be attracted by strange, new ideas. Your strength comes from God’s grace, not from rules about food, which don’t help those who follow them” (Hebrews 13:7-9 / NLT).

"17 Elders who do their work well should be respected and paid well, especially those who work hard at both preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17 / NLT).

"17 Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls... Give them reason to do this with joy and not with sorrow. That would certainly not be for your benefit” (Hebrews 13:17 / NLT).

Those are some really demanding expectations of how the congregation is to be towards their pastors.

However, with that comes a great deal of responsibility God lays on pastors:

"1 Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1 / NLT).

"... they (spiritual leaders) are accountable to God ...” (Hebrews 13:17 / NLT).

Pastors are God’s appointed leaders of congregations. In general pastors ought to lead and the congregation ought to follow. But God has set higher standards of judgment for pastors. That should cause us to be careful and diligent at our jobs. Please pray for me regularly. Thanks.