

Date: October 30, 2005

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 31

**SERMON: Closing the Credibility Gap**

Text(s): Micah 3:5-12; Matthew 23:1-12

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Some people, while watching TV, always hit the mute button on their remote controls when a commercial comes on. But I find the commercials more entertaining much of the time than the programs themselves. I especially like the commercials for Capital One credit cards—the ones where David Spade plays “Mr. No,” and works for a different credit card company. He’s always trying unsuccessfully to get his somewhat clutzy and kind-hearted new assistant to say “no” to customers who try to avail themselves of the promises the company has made them. The pitch, of course, is that Capital One doesn’t play those games and can be trusted to make good on its promises to its customers.

That credibility gap highlighted in those commercials, or the gap between “talking the talk” and “walking the walk” is the focus of both of our scriptures this morning, though with much more serious subject matter than which credit card company is more reliable.

The prophet Micah, writing eight centuries before the time of Jesus, identifies an unholy trinity who are responsible for the corruption of the nation: the political rulers, the clergy, and the religious prophets. Everyone’s got his hand in the till, he says, and all of them are in bed together. Everyone is only out for themselves and no one has the common good at heart. Each one’s greed feeds off the others, so that there is no true word of the Lord to guide the people, and no true justice to be had. Sounds like something out of yesterday’s newspaper almost, doesn’t it? When government and religion make convenient and profitable bedfellows, then the losers are the people themselves.

Matthew, writing to his own Christian community or group of communities, tells us about Jesus warning his disciples of the dangers

of following the example of the most religious people of their tradition—the scribes and Pharisees who do not practice what they preach. The scribes and Pharisees, he says, have great authority in their knowledge of the Law of God. They sit on Moses’ seat, that is, they have inherited the office of interpreters of God’s law by virtue of their study and teaching of the law. So they know what they’re talking about, Jesus says, and he urges his disciples to heed their teachings on the law of God which are sound. They deserve to be listened to because of their in-depth knowledge of the law of God.

But they have one big problem, a credibility problem. Their walk doesn’t match their talk. Their practice of the law of God doesn’t match up to their knowledge and teaching. They know the truth; but they don’t do the truth. The word for this pattern of professing one thing, but practicing another is hypocrisy. They know what the moral thing, the ethical thing, to do is, but they’re only interested in their public image. As long as they have a certain status in the public’s eye, they don’t care whether their private life corresponds to their public image. *“They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplace and to have people call them rabbi.”* It’s not about what God wants or about what is true; it’s about them—it’s about what they want, how they appear, what other people think of them.

Reading this passage, I was reminded of the two guys who were talking together, and one said, “You know, I was at a dinner party the other night, and the host introduced me as Dr. Wallace. I felt like a fool. Do I look like a doctor?” His friend replied, “No, you look more like what you felt like.”

I expect all of us can identify with that. We’ve all played the status game at one time or another, more concerned about how we appear to others than about whether our appearance matches our inner reality.

This desire for status, Matthew suggests,

is due to an inadequate understanding of God, and of our relationship to God. *“But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called master, for you have one master, the Messiah.”*

About 35 years ago, J. B. Phillips wrote a classic little book called *Your God Is Too Small*. He made the case that when we have an inadequate concept of God, then our morality and ethics take on the flavor of the dominant culture around us. Having nothing bigger than ourselves upon which to draw for guidance or meaning, God becomes a privatized reflection of our own inner subjectivity. We can only measure our own worth by what other people think of us or by what the society around us values. And, of course, what society values is largely formed by the entertainment and advertising media or by power-hungry political or religious leaders who mislead us in order to co-opt our support for their personal agendas. Only a God big enough to hold us accountable can prevent us from succumbing to the credibility gap.

If one cause of that gap is a God who is too small, another is a failure to understand ourselves as part of a community rather than as rugged individualists who operate as independent moral agents. When we know that we are bound to one another, there is usually a much greater sense of responsibility for making sure that our behavior measures up to our talk. The stronger the bonds within a family or a group or an institution, the more concern for integrity in relationships there usually is. When people no longer feel part of one another, no longer feel like a community, then the sense of integrity in relationships diminishes. Self-interest takes precedence in dealing with others. Behavior doesn't have to match one's words. One's words are tools to get what one wants from the other person or persons; whether they're backed up by deeds that correspond to the words is secondary

or even irrelevant. We just don't hold ourselves as accountable to people we don't know well as we do to those we know more intimately.

We all live with credibility gaps at some level. Sometimes it's in our work lives; We operate by a different set of ethics or moral principles at work than we do at home among our family and friends. It's just business, after all, we say and as long as we keep “business ethics” in a separate compartment from “personal ethics,” we think we'll be OK. We don't even realize that we've split ourselves into two selves, and how can there be integrity or wholeness in that? Sometimes the credibility gap is in our family life. We tell our children that it's really important to believe in God, and we enroll them in Sunday School so they can learn about God, but if it comes to a choice between Sunday School and sports practice or a friend's birthday party or some other activity, our choice often reveals where our true priorities lie and what we hold to be most important for our children. Sometimes we see that credibility gap when we say we really detest how much consumerism there is in our society, yet have to have the latest gadgets or overspend wildly at Christmas time without any thought for the credit card bills that come due in January.

We'll be enjoying the Halloween masks that our neighborhood children will be wearing when they knock on our doors tomorrow evening, but there is a very real sense in which all of us wear masks. Sometimes we wear them deliberately to keep other people at a distance, to hide our true selves because we are ashamed or afraid to let anyone else get too close. We adopt a *persona*. At other times, the masks are less conscious. We dissemble and masquerade our true feelings because we don't even want to know who we really are ourselves. And those masks widen the gap between talk and walk, because they prevent us from exposing our true selves to one another or sometimes, even to ourselves. They prevent the experience of true community.

We're like buildings with false fronts. We offer an attractive facade to the world, but what you see is not what you get. What you see is only what you see. And unfortunately, that's just as true in the church as outside the church.

Here again, Matthew has the key. *"The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."*

The church is a community of those who know themselves to be a people under God's lordship and authority, and who are able, therefore, to relate to one another in love and service rather than on the basis of self-interest. If we relate to one another as brothers or sisters in Christ, it frees us of the need to wear masks or to manipulate one another with words, saying one thing to each other's face and doing something else behind the back. All of us are children of the same Parent, accountable to the same master, and therefore, we can serve one another in love for Jesus' sake. When we are truly a community of mutuality and accountability, then our walk will match up with our talk. We won't be driven by status or greed or selfishness. Instead, we will begin to see the gap between words and deeds, between appearance and reality, close.

In a few moments, we'll be receiving some new brothers and sisters into our fellowship, and they and we will recite together the Covenant of membership of this church. My prayer is that we will all take that covenant seriously, not simply as some nice words to say or sentiments to express, but as a solemn statement of how we will act toward one another as we walk together as disciples of Christ. The covenant doesn't say anything about always agreeing with one another or always having the same ideas or identical theological beliefs; it does say that we will commit ourselves to be with one in love and mutuality as we seek to carry out our common mission as Christ's disciples.

C. S. Lewis, in his wonderful book about

heaven, *The Great Divorce* envisions heaven a place where we finally and completely become real and hell as the place of ultimate unreality, a shadow world where people are only a pretense of their own selves because they cannot endure the pain involved in becoming real. In his vision, the choice between heaven and hell is completely up to us. Anyone who wishes may be in heaven, but they must be willing to become the real persons they were created to be. And Lewis says that both heaven and hell begin here and now. Both are retro-active, as it were. If we insist on a life that is a life of pretense, a life where the credibility gaps between talk and walk are wide, then one day, we will realize that all along we were in hell and didn't know it. On the other hand, if we are willing to become vulnerable, open to love, trusting even though trust is sometimes betrayed, and forgiving when it is, then one day we will wake up and realize that all along, we have all along been in heaven, and, as St. Paul put it, we shall know one another and God completely, even as we ourselves are completely known. To know as we are known, to love as we are loved—that is true freedom. That is heaven.