

**1 Thessalonians 2:9-13**

*You remember our labor and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.*

*We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.*

**Matthew 23:1-12**

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 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 marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi. 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 instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.*

**This is the Word of the Lord...**

'Humility' is not a word that gets thrown around much these days. Humility is the 'state of being humble' – I think of Fred Rogers or Jimmy Carter. Another dictionary defines humility as "a modest or low view of one's importance". From what I've read about him, I think Mr. Rogers knew what he was doing was important, and didn't necessarily have a low view of his importance, but he also seemed to think that everyone around him had equal importance. Maybe that's the kind of humility this Biblical passage is talking about – we are all equally important in God's eyes.

At Princeton Theological Seminary in the late 90's there were a few different categories of students. There were students who arrived in July or September having just completed college in May. They were the ones most likely to proclaim something like, "I can't wait to be a minister, and serve a church, because it will be so great to work in a place where everyone is a Christian!"

This would get a significant eye roll from students in my category – 'those who had worked in a church before coming to seminary'. This is where you found the Youth Directors. We were also the group most likely to start off a group project by making everyone choose a team name and make up a team cheer.

Our category was not to be confused with Second Career Students. These were your former tax attorneys and teachers, bankers, and at Princeton, former Madison Avenue types who looked professional even on Fridays, had overloaded schedules filled with established family activities, and who really wanted to fit in, so they would always pay for the pizza and beer at the study sessions.

Another category of student were the ones who wanted to get into the PhD program at Princeton so when you had a class with them they were either sitting sullenly in the corner because it was being led by a PhD student that they already thought they were better than, or even worse, if the professor was there that day, you could. not. shut. them. up. And when they got an answer wrong... it was glorious.

Finally, there were the students who were already ordained in their denominations because their traditions didn't require a Master's degree for ordination. Some of them had been the recognized minister of their congregation since they were teenagers and they loved to wear the markers of a preacher around the campus. Clergy collars in the lecture halls, robes and stoles in preaching class – I know so much of their showmanship came from wanting to be recognized for the work they'd already put into the ministry, but still it irked me. It seemed showy to me, and once you add on that all were from traditions that didn't ordain women and half of our class were women... there was definitely an undercurrent of "who do you think you are" that flowed back and forth.

After I was ordained, I didn't wear a clergy collar for a long time because of that. It seemed too showy. What exactly was I trying to prove? My friend who served deep in the heart of Texas and is now in Chicago had a different take on it. Shortly after graduating from seminary, she wrote: "I take great pleasure sometimes in wearing a clergy collar because it still surprises and freaks people out down here in Texas. People in Southern Baptist/ Trinity Broadcast Network land don't know how to handle seeing a youngish woman in a clergy collar. I especially took great joy in wearing it when I was pregnant and... it gets me into hospital rooms without much fuss."<sup>i</sup>

It's true, the collar does get you through the hospital faster. Honestly, I started wearing one, so I didn't have to think about what to wear on Sunday mornings. Having a go-to uniform at 5 o'clock in the morning is very helpful. Wearing the collar in 2017 is not exactly the same as wearing phylacteries and fringes in the year 33, but it does get attention.

I have a worksheet that I use to write my sermons from week to week. One of the questions on it is this: *How is this passage being lived out today in the world or community?*

The question always helps me to drill down to the basics of what's going on in the text. So often in Scripture, the details of the plot don't contextually line up with our world 2,000 years later, but the underlying meaning does. For instance, in 2017 most of us don't understand what it means to be shepherds day in, day out; night in, night out, and our context is far removed from the experience of angels lighting up a formerly dark sky proclaiming glad tidings of great joy. Our reality doesn't line up with the Biblical context, but even if the details of the plot line are not our reality, we know what it means that a Savior of the world was born just for us.

We are living in the middle of a relatively recent push for the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy that would disagree with the statement that context matters when reading Scripture. Our Reformed

tradition and theology and interpretations of Scripture do not agree with this doctrine. One of the 5 solas of the Reformed tradition is *sola Scriptura* – Scripture alone. This doctrine holds that the Christian Scriptures – the Old and New Testament – are the sole, infallible rule of faith and practice. If you were here last week that might seem like a counter-move to *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* - reformed and always reforming. But, in fact, it goes right along with it. *Sola Scriptura* means that only the Scriptures at their core -without any interpretation – have absolute authority. The moment any interpretation is applied – and translation is interpretation – there is room for misunderstanding of God’s intention and the interpreted Scripture is no longer infallible.

Scripture reveals to us the glory of God – we just don’t always read it right. And reading Scripture and saying it only means as you interpret it to mean, is doing Scripture a disservice. When we do that, we are worshiping Scripture, and are not worshiping God.

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul outlines how he has taken care of them and how they should in turn take care of one another. He writes: *We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God’s word, which is also at work in you believers.*

God’s Word “is at work” – that is an action verb. God’s Word continues to be at work around and in us.

The insistence on one’s own reading and understanding of Scripture as the only way to read it – are the phylacteries of today. Memorizing Scripture passages – not to have them inscribed on our hearts, but instead to use them as a weapon *sharper than any two-edged sword* – is the fringes too long of today.

Any time we walk around thinking we know what God really thinks of someone else we need to check our phylacteries. And any time clergy or Christ-followers manipulate Scripture in order to align themselves with a political power – they need to check their fringes.

This passage from Matthew is written about the Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus has already entered Jerusalem in a parade and the whole city is stirred up. The Gospel of Matthew was written to a community that has been exiled from the Temple so the words that they hear coming out of the mouth of Jesus are harsh and swift to judgement. We only read up to verse 12, but Jesus keeps going:

*“Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, Hypocrites!”*

*“Woe to you, blind guides... you strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel!”*

*“Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead, and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (23:23, 24, 27-28).*

According to Matthew, the religious elite may have the authority from God to teach, but they are not doing what God wants them to do. They are not being disciples of the Lord.

So what is the true nature of discipleship?

In the Gospel of John it’s love, love, love.

In the Gospel of Luke it’s welcoming the stranger.

In the Gospel of Mark it’s proclaiming the Good News.

And in the Gospel of Matthew it's feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty something to drink, welcoming the stranger, taking care of the sick, and visiting the prisoner.

It's not aligning oneself with the political party in power.  
It's not memorizing Scripture to use it as a weapon.  
It's not worrying about our or other's salvation.

And here's the other side of the coin - It's also not laying low with the hope that being a good person in general counts as discipleship.  
Sin is pride.  
Sin is also denial of human responsibility.

Not aligning ourselves with the political party in power doesn't mean we ignore politics.  
Good discipleship means we work for justice.

Not using Scripture as a weapon doesn't mean leaving Bible reading to Sunday mornings only.  
Good discipleship mean being people of faith, studying God's Word.

Not worrying about our own and other's salvation because we are saved by faith and not by works doesn't mean not doing anything to glorify God. Good discipleship means seeking justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God.

Matthew 25, beginning with verse 31:

*"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.*

*Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'*

*Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'*

*And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'*

May it be so for you and for me,

In the name of the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> The Reverend Shannon J. Kershner. *Ordinary Time 31, Year A*. Portable Snack April 2008, Kansas.