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Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
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Matthew 23:1–12

## **CAN STEWARDSHIP BE FUN?**

Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you are sorry when you hurt someone. These are the lessons learned in preschool. Phrases borrowed from Robert Fulghum's book said everything he needed to learn he didn't learn in graduate school, he learned in kindergarten. They are simple rules, aren't they? And if we repeat them enough, life lived by these rules becomes easier. If we use them over and over, they almost overcome our tendency to think about ourselves first and foremost. In a strange irony as we practice them, we are actually caring for ourselves in the best way possible.

Jesus takes his disciples back to preschool today. He says, "The greatest among you will be your servant." But what does that mean? What does it mean to have the heart of a servant? What does it mean to be a church made up of servants, those who desire to serve God and their neighbor? We know it means that we help one another if we are aware of someone else's need. I once had a buddy of mine that I would go fishing and hunting with, and he loved to say that he had a pair and a spare of everything in case someone needed it. If we know someone needs something, we want them to have what we have. We want them to have encouragement when they are down. We want to lift up those who are lowly, those who are hurting, those who have great pain.

We as disciples know that we are friendly, compassionate, and merciful. Yes, being a follower of Christ means that sometimes we speak first and sometimes we share a kind word, even with people who would rather not talk to us. We are there for one another in good times and in bad. If we believe anything, we believe in caring for each other. It's our Torah rules, the same way the Pharisees had rules that they held as more important than others.

So how do we keep from ending up like the Pharisees where we have made our own set of rules—our little gospel, if you will? The last thing we would ever want to do is put a heavy burden on someone else. The last thing we want to do is hinder someone in their faith. And yet, when someone comes in our midst and we discover they are a single parent, what do we tell them? We tell them we need lots of their time for our committees. We tell them we need their pledges. We tell them that they must improve their lives through time spent in prayer and in this sanctuary and in our presence. We tell

them all these things while they are telling us how lonely they are. We would be better—we would be following what Jesus is talking about here—if we were to offer to babysit their children, or as one of my neighbors did (not here and not any time recently, but when our daughter was very sick) when she just came over and took the keys to the house and said, “We are going to do your laundry while your daughter is in the hospital.”

How do we get to that next level where people actually want to come here and emulate the life styles that we profess? And why is it so easy to end up like the Pharisees? Do what they teach, Jesus says. Do what they teach. But don’t live as they live. Faith is about living so God is glorified. And when it becomes something else, it is no longer faithful. Faith is about living so God is glorified. What we do, we do so God can be recognized. That’s why we talk about being a disciple more than doing disciple things. When our deeds match our words, Christ is center stage, not us.

If faith starts out as simply wanting to do the right thing, it will fail because it will end up simply wanting to be right. So somehow, some way, we have to come to grips with our hypocrisy. And we all know it’s there, that point in our lives when our words don’t match what we believe. Our lives don’t match what we say is true. We talk about everyone being equal, but we are pretending, aren’t we. We say every life has potential, but we segregate and discriminate against one another still today. It’s one of the hazards of believing something. If we didn’t believe anything, if we didn’t have scruples, then it wouldn’t be so easy to be a hypocrite.

Faith is always under the accusation of being hypocritical, and those who live in the church have heard it all too often. The more we try to live faithfully, the more aware we become of our impure motives. Our private lives and our public lives are just not in sync. It’s like watching a worn-out movie where the sound track and the images no longer are in harmony. The sounds and what we see just don’t match.

Let’s look at the picture Jesus has of the students and the teachers. Allow me to describe, if you will, the way faith gets out of sync with the Holy Spirit. Two people: One is a middle aged woman in worship, she is moving toward the door after the charge and the blessing. You know, that little race we do where we pretend not to be in a hurry. The postlude is still playing, but she is walking; everyone is politely making their way out. And then she sees that elderly man who always wants to talk to her and tell her his problems. She avoids eye contact for fear that he will give her an earful of his difficulties. She thinks church should be a happy place, not filled with grumpy old men. She looks across the aisle at the other line of people moving toward the exit and wonders why it’s moving faster than the one she is in. She sees a woman with whom she

disagrees on almost every issue that's important. She doesn't think very much of her. Her mind wanders. She mentally critiques the sermon. It wasn't much, but at least it was short. She hopes next week will be a little more entertaining. And then she remembers, "Oh no, next week is Stewardship Sunday." She decides right then and there she will call a friend and they will visit another church together. And then they will wait to see if anyone misses them at their home church. She really used to love church, but somehow she's forgotten how that feels.

A few rows back, there is that middle-aged Pharisee, the older gentleman with all the problems. He decides the next time he talks with the lady who is avoiding him, he will be more patient with her. As he is waiting his turn to leave the pew, he notices a little girl next to him with a nose ring, and he thinks how different church is today than when he was her age—all kinds of different people, all kinds of different ideas. He thinks about his faith, and he looks at the little girl and realizes they are all part of the same family. He remembers the words of Jesus: "The greatest among you will be your servant." He asks God to use him, to give him that servant's heart. He thinks about next Sunday. It will be Stewardship Sunday, and he wants that young girl with the nose ring to keep coming back. He hopes she will claim this as her church family one day. He thinks about the love of Christ that he has received, and he decides to smile at a stranger rushing by. They are all on that race to the same parking lot. He stops before he starts his car. For some reason, he can't resist calling his son even though he knows his son never picks up. He leaves a message to tell him how much he loves him, how proud he is of him. Then he notices there is a car waiting for him to back out. It's the man he smiled at. He puts the car in reverse. His bulletin falls on the floor in the front and he wonders what the minister meant when she said, "Stewardship can be fun." He smiled inside himself and backed out, and that stranger, as the old man motioned him to go ahead, smiled back at the him.

Most people went home with different experiences. And the greatest among us is the one who serves. Amen.