

Saints and their source

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For all the saints in your congregation, today is a crucial moment to name both the importance of the saints--that great cloud of witnesses--and the source of saintliness, our "one instructor, the Messiah" (Matt. 23:10).

At first glance, Jesus' teaching in Matthew doesn't look very promising. He begins with the warning that we should do what the scribes and Pharisees *teach*, but not what they *do*. Preacher, beware the temptation to excoriate hypocrisy: it makes for good pulpit theater, but it doesn't minister grace. A warning can be a word well spoken, but you must follow Jesus' logic through.

This logic comes in his radical claim to be the one teacher, the one messianic instructor, the incarnate agent of God our Father (8-10). So when Jesus says that "the greatest among you will be your servant," he isn't inaugurating a reality-TV servanthood contest. The one speaking is himself already the greatest servant, the servant of Yahweh (see Isa. 53). He is the one who perfectly teaches what he does and does what he teaches (Matt. 23:3); he is the one who lifts our heavy burdens (4, see Matt. 11:28), lays them on his own shoulders and bears them all the way to Golgotha.

Having seen Jesus at the center of this gospel, we cannot see him alone—for he isn't. His exaltation by God (Phil. 2:9) includes all who serve in his name. It embraces all who humble themselves in his spirit and exalts all who are his saints (Matt. 23:12). We see around Jesus an exalted company of those who have obeyed his teaching, followed his example and lived in humble service of God and neighbor. So if you preach Matthew, don't excoriate the

hypocrites. Instead, exalt the great servant and his serving saints.

Another

track for today focuses on the final verse of the epistle, in which Paul makes a bold three-fold claim about the word of God: it is received from God, it is heard through others and it works in us. Each of these is crucial for saints.

First, the word is received.

We've had trouble with this one from the beginning. God freely offered a saving word to Adam and Eve, but they wouldn't trust God and receive the gift. Instead, they tried to sneak over when God wasn't looking and snatch it from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why receive a free and invaluable gift when you can try to steal a cheap imitation instead? The saints show us a different way: they are receivers, not achievers.

Second, the word of God is always heard from others.

We don't like this notion—we'd rather be Moses, having face-to-face conversations with God at the burning bush and on the mountaintop. Instead, we're like the disciples on that first Easter, forced to hear the resurrection gospel told by Mary and Joanna but not liking it much. We want direct access to God; we don't much want to depend on our neighbor's witnessing word.

The saints hear the

gospel from the lips of human witnesses, but they receive it "as what it really is, God's word" (13). (Like Saint Augustine, who received the gospel word through the lived witness of Saint Monica and the preaching witness of Saint Ambrose.) Saints are not originators; they are links in a great chain of witness.

Finally, the word of God works in

us. Here is the place for the preacher to kindle confidence that the Word—that is, Jesus Christ—actually empowers us to "lead a life worthy of God" (12). How better to do that than to tell the stories of the saints—including local saints whose lives made your church, like Thessalonica, "an example to all the believers...not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place" (1

Thess. 1:7-8).