

August 25, 2015 Louis, Joseph Calasanz

1st Reading 1 Thessalonians 2: 1-8

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that his preaching and approach to them was sincere and without deceit or trickery. His preaching was conditioned by his previous humiliation at Philippi, right before his visit there, and also by great opposition in Thessalonica. Paul and other ministers there tried to please God rather than men in their preaching. Rather than seeking honor from the Thessalonians, Paul and other preachers were as “gentle as nursing mothers fondling their babes.”

Gospel Matthew 23: 23-26

More of Jesus’ diatribe against the scribes and Pharisees. He calls them “blind guides” and says they “strain out a gnat and swallow a camel” in making rules to govern insignificant things, while allowing important matters to go unregulated. Appearances were more important than reality to them. “You clean the outside of the cup ... and leave the inside full of (extortion, excess, intemperance, avarice, incontinence, loot, lust, robbery, uncleanness, and self-indulgence.)” (*These are all different translations for the sinful attitudes which are allowed to remain in “the cup” by the Pharisees. Somewhere in my memory the words are “rapine and all iniquity,” which pretty well sums it up, I think.*)

The two readings are poles apart. Paul is describing how gently he and his aides had taught and preached to the Thessalonians, whose previous religious experience had been with pagan gods. Then we watch Jesus lambaste the Pharisees and scribes, who had been preaching how to observe the Mosaic Law, but whose emphasis was on the minutiae of the Law, rather than the main idea of reverence and love for God.

(It seems obvious that Jesus’ anger at the Pharisees did not center on their teachings themselves so much as the misplaced emphasis, which would discourage the faithful, and so discourage them from approaching God. The Pharisees made it difficult for the faithful to avoid ‘sin’ – their version – because of the misplaced emphasis. (As an example, Jesus’ criticism in this instance had to do with the laws governing the cleaning of eating utensils, but the ordinary Jews of that time were merchants, farmers, fishermen, shepherds, etc., who didn’t have the means to their disposal to observe these laws. And water in those days and place would certainly be at least as precious as it is today.) So, in a sense the Pharisees interfered with God’s action on the souls of their hearers, by imputing misplaced guilt to them.

Paul, on the other hand, told the Thessalonians that he and his aides had been gentle with the Thessalonians. So, two extremes in preaching. What’s the right way to preach, then? To begin with, Jesus is God, so he’s got to be right, right? But, this is not an ordinary teaching sermon – he’s correcting those who acted as God’s representatives in explaining the Law. But, instead of bringing people to God, they’re making it difficult for people to approach God, by laying extravagant guilt trips on them, which reflect the Pharisees’ values, not God’s. Jesus’ message to the Pharisees is essentially, “Don’t get between God and His people.” This deprives God, in a manner of speaking, of the love and reverence He deserves from His creatures, us.

But Paul’s approach also has some dangers. If we emphasize God’s love and mercy, new believers may get the idea that “God don’t care,” as a little girl once said to me. (She was going off her Lenten fast.) But, our service to God must recognize the

great gulf between Him and us, and that part of love is doing what the loved one wants. In this case, it's keeping the Commandments.

In practice what this means is that our consciences are still the chief means of deciding how we relate to God. But, we have to have 'informed' consciences, rather than relying on our own ideas, because our desires and ideas will also affect how our consciences judge things. Religious authority can help in informing our consciences, but the weight given to that authority has to be only part of our moral decisions.