

Jesus is very critical of the scribes and Pharisees. They are hypocrites because who put up a good show for outward appearances but inwardly they do not care about the people they are called to serve.

Today we celebrate the feast of Saint Louis King of France, a man who truly cared for the people he served. As heir to the throne, he became King of France at the tender age of 12 when his father passed away. At such a young age he was not prepared to assume power of the country of France so under the guidance of his mother the Queen he was crowned but she was the actual ruler until he reached the age of 21. “At his coronation as king of France, Louis IX bound himself by oath to behave as God’s anointed, as the father of his people and feudal lord of the King of Peace.” Unlike the Pharisees and the scribes that Jesus criticizes, King Louis took his oath as a solemn promise to serve with the heart and mind of Jesus. “He actually interpreted his kingly duties in the light of faith.”ⁱ

King Louis took great care of the people entrusted to him. He cared for the poor and knew them by name. Each day he would invite 13 guests to dine with him. He did not choose the rich and mighty. He chose the beggars and shared his food with them. Knowing the poor on a first name basis, we can equate him with the biblical good shepherd who knows his flock. No doubt, he took these names to prayer with him. And listening to the Lord, he did what he could to alleviate suffering. He built hospitals to care for the sick and provide for the physical well-being of France. He visited the sick and took care of lepers. He built libraries to care for the mind. He built orphanages to care for those whose parents had died. He also built churches to provide for the spiritual needs of his subjects.

Jesus is critical of the scribes and Pharisees because they “neglected the weightier things of the law: judgement and mercy and fidelity” (Mt 23:23). Louis did not neglect issues of justice and the law. He helped to reform laws that held royal officials to higher standards. “He replaced trial by battle with a form of examination of witnesses and encouraged the use of written records in court.”ⁱⁱ

In our own country, we see how divisive politics have become. Often one political party demonizes the other side and refuses to work with them for the common good of all. With gridlock, good laws are stymied and people in need suffer greatly for the failure of the political system. King Louis helped to reform laws so people could not be taken advantage of by unfair interest rates.ⁱⁱⁱ Louis united the people of “France —lords and townsfolk, peasants and priests and knights—by the force of his personality and holiness. For many years, the nation was at peace.”^{iv}

Jesus criticized the scribes and Pharisees for laying heavy burdens on others. King Louis had the authority to exercise power over and against others but in humility he served with great care and wisdom. He much preferred to win people over through persuasion. He is quoted as saying: “In order to avoid contention, never contradict anyone, except in case of sin or some danger to a neighbor; and when necessary to contradict others, and to oppose your opinion to theirs, do it with so much mildness and tact, as not to appear to do violence to their mind, for nothing is ever gained by taking up things with excessive warmth and hastiness.”^v

Each person has their flaws and Louis was by no means perfect. He knew that one day he would stand before the throne of God and be judged for his actions. Thus, he took very seriously Jesus’ call to serve others. “Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who 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 drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited

me” (Mt 25:34-36). In serving his subjects with the care of a good shepherd, especially the poor, King Louis served Jesus admirably. We are all called to serve others with the heart of Christ.

ⁱ <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-louis-of-france/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-louis-of-france/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/catholic-priest-among-defenders-of-st-louis-statue-84040>

^{iv} <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/saint-louis-of-france/>

^v https://www.azquotes.com/author/19602-Louis_IX_of_France