



# Partners in Service

November 2 • 2008

Jesus insisted that word and deed corroborate each other. Disciples are credible witnesses when their loving actions mirror their words. Religious leaders have authority when their teaching takes form in their love toward God and neighbour. Disciples are called to be partners in service, learning and growing together as they love God and neighbour.

## Focus Scripture

**Matthew 23:1–12**

Additional Scriptures

Joshua 3:7–17

Psalms 107:1–7, 33–37

1 Thessalonians 2:9–13

## Focus Scripture: Matthew 23:1–12

In this text, the scribes and Pharisees claim Moses as the authority for their teaching. In Jesus' time, scribes served as religious lawyers, scholars, and teachers. The Pharisees were influential Jewish religious leaders who focused their lives on learning scripture and following religious practices. After the Jerusalem temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the Pharisees exhorted the community – who included the first readers of the gospel of Matthew – to live as God's holy people, distinct from the surrounding Roman society. This account of Jesus' teaching speaks to how Matthew's community experienced the scribes and the Pharisees.

Jesus noted the lack of congruence between the teaching and the practice of certain scribes and Pharisees. Their teaching was acceptable as it was grounded in the Law of Moses. Jesus was not critical of God's law. However, the regulations about what would mark the Jews as "holy" or "separate" had become more than ordinary people could bear.

Jesus understood that God's love invites confession and assures forgiveness. This was how the law removed guilt and debt, putting people in a right relationship with God. Jesus speaks against religious leaders who would place barriers between God and God's people. Jesus' teaching about the law preserved God's grace and compassion, the essence of God's law. Jesus enacted this teaching each day, interpreting the law with compassion (Matthew 11:28).

In their zeal for a holy people and holy nation, some Pharisees preferred the benefits of power to a reputation for godly compassion, enjoying the attention their garments and religious practices attracted. Jesus observed that the outward signs (phylacteries and prayers shawls) displayed by certain leaders to mark them as God's holy people were not supported

by their actions. They were not practicing what they taught about God's way of justice and compassion. For Matthew's church and our church today, such use of power can mislead, corrupt the reputation of God's law, and cause oppression.

Matthew identified Jesus as the authoritative teacher. Matthew understood that growth came through teaching and learning. Those who learn, teach. Those who teach, learn. How might today's teachers and leaders be aware of self-interest and take practical steps to avoid serving it?

Leadership practices evolve to suit situations and communities. Moses' leadership identified him as a charismatic, servant leader. He was both prophet and priest. As noted in **Joshua 3:7–17**, Joshua appointed tribal councils and priests to share the work of leading the people of Israel. With the transition to Joshua, institutional leadership replaced charismatic leadership. Moses knew God's presence on personal basis. Joshua knew God's presence in the Ark of the Covenant. In **Psalms 107:1–7, 33–37**, the psalmist declares that leaders find their authority by honouring God's work.

Paul knew that godly leadership empowers others. In **1 Thessalonians 2:9–13**, Paul gives a clear account of how his use of power reveals congruence between word and deed.

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All disciples – leaders and followers – are called to learn and grow together as partners in service of Christ. Honouring everyone's contribution helps the community to grow in faith and deeds of love. To what extent does your church operate as a community of partners in service of Christ? In what ways does your church honour the contribution of each member?

**Gracious God, you have told us what is good. Jesus has shown us what you require of us: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with you. Enliven our spirits with your Spirit to love you more dearly and to serve you more fully. Amen.**

Replacement biblical background page for **All Saints Day** is on the **Congregational Life Paired Readings CD** provided with this resource.



Replacement biblical background page for **Lutheran, Episcopal, and Anglican** congregations using the **paired reading stream** of the Revised Common Lectionary is on the Congregational Life Paired Reading CD.

If you have Internet access, visit [www.spiritseasons.com](http://www.spiritseasons.com) to access *Spirit Sightings* for connections between current events and the focus passage.

