Old Testament lesson – Micah 3:5-12
New Testament lesson – Matthew 23:1-28

No Curve

I know the World Series just ended, but no, the sermon title has nothing to do with why some pitchers never make it to the big leagues. It's actually closer to the way I used to teach. I seldom, if ever, used a curve to grade my tests or my classes. I usually designed them so that most students could pass, but it took some real skill and work and knowledge to earn an A or even a B. But there were always students who earned those higher grades.

In both of our lessons today, it's almost as if God is announcing grades for a couple of groups of men in ancient Israel. The first group, in Micah, is the class of professional prophets who were an established part of the national religion of Israel. In our NT lesson, the object of Jesus' judgement is the Pharisees, who were actually a group of very religious laymen, bur also well-established in Jewish society.

Here in these two passages, both you and I are represented in a sense. I am a professional religious person. I conduct religious services, like a priest of ancient Israel. Yes, the ceremonies are quite different. But they are somewhat priestly in nature. I also speak to the people of God concerning the Word of God. Am I inspired as Micah was, or am I simply "divining for money," as he accused the prophets of his time? Perhaps I am something in between, not quite as directly inspired as Micah, but still trying to speak messages that agree with the Word of God as revealed in Scripture.

And what about the laypeople of our church? How similar are you to the Pharisees? I hope you are very different indeed from those hypocrites. But what will the words of Jesus in our lesson reveal about us? I say "us," not because I am not a professional, but because I am a man who is no longer a full-time professional, so I need to examine my own life in light of the judgements against the Pharisees.

So, off we go. First the prophets and leaders of Micah 3.

What were they up to? Well, not much of anything good, apparently. In the first five verses of the chapter, Micah paints a truly gruesome word picture of the leaders. He speaks about them in cannibalistic terms, tearing the skin off the people and the flesh from their bones, flaying their skin, eating the flesh, and so on. Disgusting stuff. I can understand why the people who designed the lectionary did not include vv. 1-5.

However, they are in there to show in a very graphic way just how wicked the leaders of Israel and Judah have become.

Then Micah goes after the prophets. They seem to be out for personal gain. They are fine as long as they are well-fed. But if someone does not "put something in their mouths," the prophets go to war against them. Micah does not say exactly what that consisted of, but it could not possibly have been anything pleasant. I would not even speculate.

Things are not going to go well for these prophets. Life will become dark. The sun will disappear for these men. They will have no vision and no divination. I take this to mean they will no longer experience the presence of God, nor will they have any divine insight.

This seems to imply that they *did* have vision and divination at some time in the past. What happened to them? Did they start off well, eager to serve God, listening for his word, anxious to pass it along to the people? What went wrong in their hearts and minds to make them greedy for gain, only looking out for themselves?

Perhaps you know pastors or preachers like that. I have known such people, or at least known of them. Perhaps you have heard of something called the prosperity gospel or the "health and wealth" gospel. Such preachers claim that if you just have enough faith you will never be sick, and you will eventually become wealthy. It usually involves giving money first, so that God will multiply your gift. And guess who they say you should give that seed gift to? Sometimes

they will send back some healing cloth, as Paul did in Acts 19. I wonder what will happen to people who distort the gospel and sometimes go so far as to sit in judgement of Christians who become ill. One can hope they will be disgraced and put to shame, as Micah pronounced for the false prophets of his time. Unfortunately, that will damage the cause of the true gospel, because most people can not distinguish between true and false prophets.

Micah has more harsh words for the leaders of Israel. Their sinful ways will bring destruction on Israel and on Jerusalem. Many of our leaders do not seem all that different from those of Micah's day, which is one reason to pray for them to have more wisdom and morality than they sometimes seem to exhibit. Based on the number of text messages they send out asking for money, I wonder if they are also greedy for money or just for power.

But Micah was filled with power and with the Spirit of the LORD, with justice and might. It is unfortunate that we do not seem to have any such prophets today in our nation. I have heard some who will rail against one group or another. But they seldom have a sense of balance in their proclamations of "truth to power." That is unfortunate, because there is no faction or group or party that could not use a good dose of God's prophetic correction.

In our NT lesson, Jesus is acting in his role as God's prophet to the people, including the Pharisees. He combines positive and negative messaging in this lesson. He tells the people how to behave and how not to behave, using the Pharisees as a prime example of how *not* to behave.

That would have seemed surprising, even shocking to many people. The Pharisees were considered paragons of virtue and morality by the general population, but even more so by the Pharisees themselves. They were laymen, non-professionals in terms of religion. Many members of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jewish religion and community, were Pharisees.

Members of the Sanhedrin were paid, but one of the seven moral qualifications of being a member was a loathing for money, even one's own money. These two things might have set up an interesting conflict of interest. Apparently, the Pharisees were very careful to fulfill the laws about tithing, even giving one tenth of herbs that they might have grown themselves. So Jesus did not fault them for following that part of the Law.

However, they neglected more important matters of one's religious obligations, such as justice and mercy and faith.

In a similar way, he does not fault them for praying as such, but for the way they did it. They prayed in public, to be seen by the people. That's the wrong reason to pray, isn't it? They wore clothing that showed off how "righteous" they were. We all know people who just seem to exude genuine righteousness. They don't have to show it off. It is just part of who they are.

That wasn't the Pharisees. They were show dogs, dressed and groomed and trained to look good. They had papers and were well-thought of, until Jesus came along. He pointed out their inner lack of righteousness. Inside, he said, they were full of uncleanness – full of dead men's bones, something every Jew knew was unclean.

Jesus held up the Pharisees as examples to avoid. Don't behave like them. Listen to their teaching; they know what they are talking about, at least sometimes. But they don't practice what they preach. So pay attention to them in two ways: listen to what they say, and observe how they behave. Their words might be good, but their behavior will not match.

He tells his followers to be better than that. Don't seek to be placed above others, as rabbi, teacher, father, or master. He is not saying not to have children or never seek to teach others what you know. But do not seek a position or use a position that makes you consider yourself better than others.

This is a very good passage to consider two of

the questions we should always ask ourselves when reading a passage of Scripture. Is there some example to follow: Is there some example to avoid? This passage has both.

Our OT lesson mostly has examples to avoid, though I suppose Micah himself could be an example to follow, to be filled with the Spirit of the LORD and with his power. We could use his other examples for guidance when we vote for leaders, but as I mentioned a couple weeks ago, usually our vote boils down to choosing the lesser of two evils.

Since I am no longer a full-time professional church leader, and have not been one since 1994, the NT lesson also applies to me. Perhaps the greatest criticism Jesus makes of the Pharisees is that they are hypocrites. But what is a hypocrite?

I think most people have a pretty good idea of what it is. For many people, their definition of hypocrisy is like that of art: they can't really put it into words, but they know it when they see it. But do we?

In classical Greek the word for hypocrite was related to playing a part in a stage play. So it came to mean acting a part in life. That is what Jesus accused the Pharisees of doing. They were playing the part of the righteous person, when in fact it was all for show. They prayed in public to be seen by others. They announced their almsgiving. They made sure they had the best seats at festivals and feasts. They made a big deal of anything related to their observances of the Law of Moses.

But inside themselves, he said, they were still unclean. They neglected important matters of the faith, such as justice, mercy and faith itself.

You probably are aware that one reason some people don't come to church is a similar charge about Christians. "The Church is full of hypocrites," they say. "I don't want any part of it."

I know I have mentioned before my two favorite responses to that criticism. First: "We're not full of hypocrites. We have plenty of room for at least one more." Or this one: "You're right. We do have a lot of hypocrites. What we need is someone to show us how to do it right. Why don't you come and do that for us?"

Of course, the accusation of hypocrisy is just a smokescreen, and either of these two responses will reveal that. But does the accusation have any substance? Yes, unfortunately, it does. To one degree or another, nearly every church member is guilty of some hypocrisy. We all play a bit of a role on the stage of life.

Think about what the name "Christian" means. It means someone who is Christ-like, or a little Christ. Do you think you fit that description? I don't. To be truly like Christ we would walk around healing people, casting demons out of them, and teaching godly wisdom at the drop of a hat. At the very least, we would easily and often share the good news of the gospel. Sound like anyone you know? Me neither.

Now, here's the real kicker. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, you will not make it into heaven. He said that a person must do all the law, not part of it, not most of it – *all* of it, to be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

I was a fairly strict grader when I taught. But God is even stricter. He has absolutely no curve on the test to enter heaven. Passing grade? 100%.

This sermon may sound like a recycled sermon. I am certain that I have not said anything in this sermon that I have not said before. But sometimes, it is good to revisit a topic as important as this. There is absolutely no way anyone enters heaven on their own merit. We need to be reminded frequently that we are sinners. That's why we have a confession of sin as part of worship every week. I have attended churches where they have done away with that. I think they don't want to make people feel uncomfortable or even guilty.

Do you know why people feel guilty? We feel guilty because we *are* guilty. We are guilty of

more sin than we realize. If we go around in life thinking we're good people because we are better than someone else, we have missed the boat of Jesus Christ completely.

If there is a car wreck with two identical cars worth $20,000, and one could be fixed for $21,000 but the other would would need $35,000 worth of parts and labor to repair it, both of them are totaled. It takes the same amount of repair work to fix me as it takes to restore the drunken homeless person or the serial killer or the corrupt government official. The repair price is the same for each of us. Jesus paid that repair price.

Jesus passed the test for us to enter heaven. If you are living your life thinking you are a good person and you're going to heaven because of that, you are just a Pharisee wearing modern clothes. You need to take that confession of sin in the bulletin and repeat it until you realize it is absolutely true for you and there is no way you are going to pass the final exam. That test has no curve whatsoever.

If you want to pass, you're going to have to cheat.

You have to turn in Jesus' test with your name on it. I know I said it's cheating, but it really isn't. It's actually the way God designed it to work. It was actually the whole point of his life and death and resurrection. God knew the test was too hard for us. He knew that before he created us. And if he had any doubts, they were cleared up when Adam and Even both failed the first test with just one question, one rule to follow. There was no curve on that test, and there will be no curve on our final exam.

Boy. It's a good thing Jesus offered to take the test for us. Amen.