

Power of Bad Example Second Week of Lent Tuesday, March 14, 2017 8:15 AM
Is 1:10, 16-10; **Mt 23:1-12** (Distinguish between example and principle.)

“Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example.”

This is a very hard teaching, especially for the young. **“Do what I say, not what I do.”** At some point in life almost all adults have had to say that to their children, to the people in their care. And children don’t buy it. **“If your words are so valuable and they are so true, then follow them yourself,”** is what children say, and they have a good point. But **Jesus is very well aware of the difference between human behavior that is subject to bad habits, addictions, the results of and consequences of bad choices, and objective truth. “On the chair of Moses” the Pharisees speak the truth.** They have the Torah of God. This is nothing to sneeze at. This is a wisdom.

Now at times and in other contexts Jesus will argue that they don’t quite get the meaning of the Torah or the actual intention of the Law. But here he is just backing up their teaching. Yes, the teaching is good; follow it. But he is observing that they themselves don’t follow it, that **they themselves are caught up in bad habits**, that they seek human approval, another way of saying fame. Fame is one of the four great idols, **false gods: fame, pleasure, power, money.** And false gods distort human life. Unfortunately, once people start choosing them, they become habituated to them very early, in other words, **addicted to them.** There is power there. It’s distorted power, but it’s power. So Jesus is saying, well, **I recognize that there is this very great weakness in people, including leaders, but nonetheless they do have something to offer: good instruction, the Law of Torah, the law of God.**

So we have to be aware of this too, and always **distinguish between example and principle**. When others speak we should **evaluate what they say in terms of principle**. **Is this really from God?** Is this really wise? Is this really shrewd? Is this really prudent? **And if we judge it is, then we should follow it, regardless of their lives**. Their lives may be a mess. It doesn't mean they don't speak the truth. This is one of the great tragedies of the modern period, that people *en masse* have just abandoned principle altogether because of the bad example of their forbearers. **Many modern people think that because of the bad example that they have seen, that the whole body of truths or body of principles espoused in tradition, espoused in the faith are all to be dropped**—and they are dropping. This of course means that scandal has won out, that **they have allowed themselves to be scandalized, to be diverted from seeking principle by the bad example of others**. So this has pulled a warning to us of the power of bad example and an **encouragement to overcome the power of bad example in other people**, and shoot for what is really right for ourselves, **and try to be good example to other people**.