

“The Phylactery Taking Over My Head”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
concerning Matthew 23:1-12; Micah 3:5-12  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
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In case you haven't heard the word “phylactery” used recently in a sentence, let me remind you: phylacteries are those small boxes containing Scripture passages worn on the forehead or on the left arm by Jewish men during prayers.

Jesus mentions phylacteries as a way to expose the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, whom he accuses of wearing extra-large phylacteries on their heads with extra-long tassels dangling from their prayer shawls—not as an expression of sincerity but as a show of religiosity. If Jesus were talking today, perhaps he'd choose to poke fun at the proliferation of bumper stickers, or the popularity of tattoos written in biblical Greek, or perhaps those crosses outlined in sequins so commonly seen around Texas.

The problem, of course, is not the symbol itself. The objects are neutral. The problem is the hypocrisy that hides behind the show, the effort to parade one's spirituality rather than live it, the idea that faith is a badge of honor rather than a challenge and a calling.

I think of another one of Jesus' lines: “Don't try to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye when you've got a log in your own,” and I picture this comical scene in which the Pharisee's phylactery is so large it can't quite stay up and it slips off his forehead and down in front of his eyes. But the Pharisee is so determined not to let anyone see him caught in a mistake that he pretends the slippage hasn't happened. He can see just fine. He continues calling out mistakes in his fellow man, pointing fingers and hurling condemnations—the louder he shouts and the more adamantly he points, the less anyone will notice his own state of blindness. Speak with authority, and the people will think you know what you're talking about.

We're pretty sure we know what sort of people Jesus means when he condemns these so-called “teachers of the law.” I'm thinking, in particular, of a certain politician. I rarely name names, but since elections are over . . . his name is Roy Moore. (Did you think I was going to say someone else?) Roy Moore is a Southern Baptist former Alabama state judge and the founder and president of the Foundation for Moral Law, a non-profit organization from which he has collected more than a million dollars in private payments to himself.

Recently the Washington Post reported the stories of four women who had been propositioned by Moore as minors. In response to the allegations another Alabama state official defended Moore, stating, “Take Joseph and Mary. Mary was a teenager and Joseph was an adult carpenter. They

became parents of Jesus. There's just nothing immoral or illegal here. Maybe just a little bit unusual." Moore himself responded, "The forces of evil are on the march in our country. We are in the midst of a spiritual battle with those who want to silence our message." Moore's brother defended him, saying Moore was being persecuted, just like Jesus. One of Moore's platforms has been his fight against sexual immorality, by which he means the legalization of same-sex marriage.

Talk about having a phylactery in your eye.

Obviously, these are the sorts of people Jesus is talking about. Thankfully this passage has nothing to do with us, and we can all go home now smugly satisfied. That's why I go to church, so I can feel like I'm better than someone else.

Oh wait. Wait, wait, wait. That darn phylactery slipped down in front of my eyes again. Let me move it out of the way. What was that, Jesus? Were you saying something? To me?

We're not really the type of church to flash our faith around like it's a prize we've won rather than a grace we've been given. We're not really the type of people to plaster crosses all over so people will know we are Christian.

In fact, many of us are more likely to be embarrassed by our faith than proud of it. We'd rather be pegged as a nice decent secular humanist than a Baptist. Unless of course we are given enough time to explain, "Not that kind of Baptist! Not that kind! We go to *Lake Shore*. You've probably read about us in the paper. We're always riling up the *other* Baptists."

It feels sorta nice, doesn't it? To be among the enlightened of our city? A beacon on a hill, if you will. But because I try to be honest when I read the Bible, now I'm sort of wondering what Jesus would say. Whether he'd be as impressed with us as we are with ourselves.

I mean, is it such an admirable thing to be so proud of what we are not? Or is there still MORE to this being church business that we've yet to tap?

I'm poking a bit of fun at our idiosyncrasies here, partly because I own them as my own, and partly because I think Jesus would probably do the same. I'm not so sure we're supposed to take ourselves as seriously as we do.

I love what my yoga instructor says at the end of each class: "The teacher in me honors the teacher in you." Jesus' problem with the teachers of the law in this passage is that they have ceased to be teachable. "Don't call yourself a teacher," he tells them, and I don't think he says

that to be demeaning but to point out that you've got nothing to teach if you've got nothing to learn.

The temptation to stop being a student can seduce anyone. Each generation tends to think the younger generation is ignorant and spoiled and that the older generation is stubborn and stuck in the past. White people like to think that because we are repulsed by white nationalists, we are definitely not racist and when people of color try to tell us differently we get defensive, which is one way of saying, "I've got nothing more to learn." Financially-comfortable church people like to think we've done our part for the poor because we've given money to charity or volunteered, but we're not always quick to admit there's so much about the challenges of poverty we've never experienced. Those of us with a formal education don't always regard the less educated as our teachers too.

Jesus is constantly challenging our assumptions that we've figured it out, which is why we call him, "Rabbi." Just when we think we know who he's talking to, he gives the lesson a spin so that we are asked to look inside ourselves. In this way, he follows the tradition of the Old Testament prophets whose job it was to challenge the status quo and poke holes in the way things were so that the people's imaginations might expand to dream of a world like the one God envisions. For the self-assured, such prophecies are an uncomfortable critique of the work they are doing. For those with ears to hear, the words of the prophets are an invitation to adventure and transformation and life-long learning. What might we still have to learn from the prophets in our midst—be it Jesus, be it Micah, be it the young student with something to teach us?

For those with ears to hear, the words of the prophets never cease to be relevant. Take our Old Testament reading for today. When the prophet Micah condemns the prophets who "lead my people astray; they proclaim 'peace' if *they* have something to eat," I am, of course, reminded of Martin Luther King Jr.'s criticism of the "white moderate" who is "more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice." When Micah mentions rulers who distort what is right, I think of many things, but this week in particular I think of the zealous defense of the second amendment that refuses to allow for common sense gun laws. I think of the way ideology has gotten in the way of protecting our children's lives; the way religious people are quick to offer up their prayers and condolences to victims but averse to affecting change. I think of how, as a nation, we've become so slow to listen, so quick to speak, and so quick to become angry.

May we hear again the Gospel call to be students of the Christ, who is our lifeline to God, our fountain of grace, and our pathway to true and genuine peace. Amen.