

When I was preparing for this homily, I came across a quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi. A missionary asked him why he rejected becoming a follower of Christ. His response was, “I don’t reject Christ. I love Christ. It’s just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ.”

That’s a startling accusation when you first hear it. But is it really that far off base? If you think about it, we don’t always do a good job of being Christian examples for others. But what exactly is a Christian supposed to look like? What are the characteristics we should exemplify?

Jesus gives us some important advice in today’s Gospel about this. He starts off by telling us that we are supposed to lead God-centered lives. God should be at the center of everything we do. He reminds us that we only have one true teacher, only one Father in heaven, only one master, the Christ.

All too often, we can worship people and things of this earth instead of worshipping God. We have a tendency to substitute all kinds of things for God. We replace God with money, power, sex, drugs, fame, the list goes on and on. These things become our God. They motivate us and we obsess over them. We think about them all of the time and we can never seem to get enough of them. Our lives become centered on these things. It can be the same with people. We can even start worshipping people the same way God should be worshipped. Look at all of the celebrity magazines in the checkout line at the grocery store and all the shows on TV. We have to know every little thing about what celebrities do and think. We treat them like gods because they’re good at singing, or acting, or motivational speaking, or playing a sport.

Unfortunately, I know people that would drive 3 hours to see a concert or a football game but wouldn’t drive 5 minutes to go to church. Sadly, our priorities can get out of whack.

Which brings me to a teaching moment that I can't pass up. Many people that attack our faith and our priests pluck out of context the verse that says, "Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven." They take this verse literally and try to use it to discredit our priests. But Jesus is not speaking literally about the titles themselves. He is criticizing the scribes and Pharisees for calling attention to their practice of religion for the sake of receiving honor from people rather than the approval of God. They were guilty of making religious leadership more of a show than an act of service. They wanted to be seen and admired by others. They were puffed up with self-importance.

Jesus was against sinful desire or affection for titles of honor. There are plenty of examples in the Bible of the title Father being used to refer to spiritual leaders. Jesus is using exaggeration to make the point to not substitute earthly things or people for our heavenly Father.

Going back to today's Gospel, Jesus then advises us to have consistency between our actions and our words. We've all heard the bumper sticker slogans that have grown out of this Bible passage – "Walk the Walk", "Actions speak louder than words", and probably most famous "Practice what you preach". The messages are all the same, "Don't be hypocrites by saying one thing and then doing another."

If you notice, Jesus doesn't say that the scribes and Pharisees are teaching in error. He says, "Do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example." They know the right things to do. They just ignore the inner world where the love of God and neighbor originates and develops. They concentrate on the outer world of externals.

I have a four-year old son and one of the main things that he has taught me is that he learns way more from watching me than he does from listening to me. Our kids are always watching us and they're like little sponges absorbing everything they see. They're even watching

us when we don't realize it. Then they mimic and emulate us. And even scarier is that they can see right through us. They know when we're being genuine and when we're not. It is not enough to just tell them the right things to do. They have to see us actually practicing what we preach. Do they see us praying? Do they see us going to church? Do they see us helping the less fortunate?

As Christians, people are watching all of us to see what being a Christian is about - when we're at work; when we're at school; even when we're out with our friends. They look to us and, to them, we are the spokespeople for our faith. But we have to be careful what type of message we're putting out there for others. We have to make sure that we are spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ through our actions. As St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel always, when necessary, use words." Our actions definitely speak louder than our words.

Lastly, Jesus advises us to remain humble. Humility gets a bad rap in today's culture. The word itself sounds so much like humiliation. There's a lot of personal horn-tooting and amped up self-promotion going around. Our society downplays humility. In the business world, we don't place a high value on humility when we look for leaders. Many people actually seem to regard humility as harmful to leadership.

But humility is essential if we want to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, our ultimate model of leadership. Christ humbly came down from his kingdom in heaven to raise up the lowly. Humility allows us to see what the proud have difficulty seeing – our limitations and weaknesses. In order for others to see Christ in us, we must humbly accept that we have limitations and recognize that we need help, that we need to grow and improve, that we are all in this together and that we must be united to accomplish the task of building up the kingdom of God.

We may have different vocations in life. We may live in different sized houses. We may have different paying jobs. Despite the differences among us, we are all equal in the eyes of God. We are all His beloved children.

Jesus knew it wouldn't be easy to follow Him. I've heard it said, "If you find it easy to be a Christian, you probably aren't one." When we try to live out the world that Jesus envisions, we bump into our conditioned personalities, our lifelong habits, and our history of succumbing to social pressures. None of us are capable of fully exemplifying the ideal we proclaim. The good news for us is that it's not about being perfect and never failing. It is about picking ourselves back up when we stumble and recognizing where we failed. Knowing where we fell short then working diligently to not fall short there again. Because our choices are either give up the project of being transformed by our vision of what could be or go back to the drawing board.

Obviously, we all fall short of the glory of God. We are nowhere near perfect. But, as Christians, we should be chasing the perfection that Christ models for us.

Our God is a loving God that always awaits us with open arms. He gives us food to strengthen us for the journey at this altar in the Eucharist. He gives us an opportunity to go back to the drawing board and become more Christ-like in the confessional through Reconciliation. It is never too late to try to do better. To be better.

Brothers and sisters, the culture we live in tries to take God out of our workplaces, out of our schools, and out of our lives altogether. That's why it is so important for us to take Christ in us out these doors to others. Moreover, we are called to be Christ to others. When people see us, they should see Christ. And we should look hard to see Christ in others. Our love of God and our love of neighbor should set us apart. We should stick out like a sore thumb.

Luckily in our country today, we don't have to worry about legal persecution for our faith. But we must ask ourselves, "If we were put on trial for being Christians, would they find enough evidence to convict us?"