

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on the 21st Sunday after Trinity
November 5, 2017

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In explaining this gospel passage to the St Theresa school children I challenge their logic. “Your school is no good because some of the students in it are stupid.” And they do not let me get away with that! It would have been all too easy for Our Lord Jesus, in condemning the scribes and Pharisees, to bring contempt upon the Law of Moses. Lumping the officers with the office was not just the habit of ancient times. It is done all the time. The practice is applied to police officers, certainly to priests, and even to the Presidency of the United States. Notice in all His preaching Christ is not particularly concerned with the immorality and violence of the pervading Roman Empire and its culture. But the Lord sees the corruption of the Jewish religious leaders as a very real danger to the people. Almighty God gave the Law of Moses. Israel had a right and obligation to that Law. It was necessary that there be men from whom the people might inquire of the Law. The prophet Malachi had written “For the priest’s lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.” (2:7)

By ignoring the Pharisees, the people would be in very great danger of cutting themselves off from the Word of the Lord. It has always been true that a wolf in sheep’s clothing presents a different sort of danger than the beast outside the door. The spiritual rot and conduct in the scribes and Pharisees was a greater danger than the hated Roman occupation of Israel. And for us the parallel to the contemporary affairs of Christ’s Church is obvious. The enemy within is a far more dangerous threat to the Gospel of Jesus Christ than the outside secular hedonistic culture. How often we say “we’ve met the enemy and it is us.” This applies to the personal pronouncements of the Holy Father, of cardinals like Walter Kasper, and of most every Jesuit publication.

By painting the scribes in their true colors Christ was actually *defending* the Law of Moses, and setting for His Church the precedent of doing as He did. All through the New Testament the Church is warned of the wolves (Acts 20:29-30), the dogs (Phil. 3:2), and the deceitful workers (2 Cor. 11:13). And this is nothing new. Moses’ seat had been dishonored in the Old Covenant as well. “The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted.”(Psalm 12:8). That cry is echoed in Elijah, Isaiah, and all the prophets. Warning the faithful of deceitful workers is a

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way of protecting and preserving the Gospel, so that it should not be dishonored. With apologies to left-handed people, one of the reasons we rightly call the Catholic Church the Bible Church is that there is still plenty of unfaithfulness to go around! It is what we call a left-handed compliment. When Napoleon vowed to destroy the Church one of the cardinals replied, “Your Majesty, in 1800 years even we have not been able to do that!”

So what is the Lord’s mind on the matter? He is on record in another place on this very predicament as having said, “Let both grow together until the harvest.” (Matt. 13:30). His holy wisdom applies here as well. This is not to say the Church should cease to be on guard against corruption and root it out, whether it be found in the Vatican, in chanceries, rectories, or Catholic universities. But even as that happens, the New Covenant is in effect, as it has been ever since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That was the Lord’s argument. The Law given by Moses continued in full force, and in order to understand the Law the people had to listen to those whose business it was to study the scriptures, their language, history, and interpretation. Good truths are none the worse for being taught by bad preachers, even though we are tempted to be bothered by the packaging. Christ was perhaps not the first to say of the religious leaders: “Do as they say, not as they do.”

In today’s Gospel Our Lord is about to lower the boom on the scribes and Pharisees. But He wants His hearers to understand heavenly food is still heavenly food even if it is not brought to us by angels. Christ solemnly assured us He had come not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it. Listen to Him! As *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “The Bible is one book, and it is about Jesus Christ. In Him God has said everything.”