

Hypocrisy

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Matthew 23:1-12

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

5 They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. 6 They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues, 7 and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have people call them rabbi.

8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. 9 And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

## THE MASKS WE WEAR

We’ve just come through the Halloween season. Children and a good number of grownups put on masks and pretended to be something that they’re not. It’s all in good fun. And it’s profitable. Making masks is big business.

But, when we continue to put on masks and pretend to be something that we’re not after Halloween, then that’s hypocrisy. And there are many in our world that continues to support a yearlong mask making business. They want us that we can be somebody else. We can be beautiful if only we wear the right makeup. We can be cool or sexy if only we drive the right car.

If we have a weakness there is an industry (or a politician) ready to tell us what we want to hear. They offer us a mask, a disguise that we can put on to keep us from really looking in the mirror and seeing ourselves as we really are.

The poet Robert Burns said in essence, “O the gift that God would give us, to see ourselves as others see us.” But, we don’t want that gift. At least we’re afraid of what that “gift” would reveal.

How can we be true to ourselves and to our God? How can we learn to take off the mask of self-righteousness? How can we receive that gift to see ourselves as others (and more importantly God) sees us? How can we avoid hypocrisy?

Today’s lesson offers a clue.

## HYPOCRISY IN MATTHEW

Hypocrisy is one of the top ten sins in the Bible. And it may even be the number one sin in Matthew’s gospel.

Even before Jesus comes on the scene we find John the Baptist railing in the desert against the hypocrisy of the Scribes and the Pharisees.

He calls them a “brood of vipers” and tells them to “bear fruits worthy of repentance” lest they suffer the fate of fruit trees that don’t produce. (In case you’ve forgotten, in those days, they chopped down fruit trees that failed to produce good fruit. And then they threw them into the fire.)

John did not mince words when it came to hypocrisy. And Jesus followed in John’s footsteps.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus questions the motives of those people who wear their religion on their sleeve.

He says, “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.” And then Jesus gives some examples.

He talks about hypocrites who give in a very public way so that others will praise them.

He talks about those who pray long and loud so that they can be seen by others.

He talks about those who fast noticeably so that others will praise them for their piety.

He talks about people who make judgments against others when they have no room to talk. He says, “You hypocrites, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s.”

He talks about evangelists who want to become TV stars.

(Oh wait. That’s not true. They didn’t have TV in those days. But, you get the idea.)

## WEARING RELIGION ON OUR SLEEVE

But, when we arrive at Matthew 23 hypocrisy is defined in a different way.

Instead of talking about people who do pious things to be noticed by others, now Jesus talks about people who say the right thing and then don’t do the right thing. Jesus chides the religious leaders who do not practice what they preach.

You could see their pride in the way they dressed. You’ve no doubt heard this phrase, “wearing your religion on your sleeve.” Well, these religious leaders literally wore their religion on their sleeve and on their forehead!

Some Jews wore little leather boxes tied around their heads and their wrist. These boxes were called phylacteries, and inside those boxes were verses of Scripture. This was a way to symbolize that God’s Word was a “lamp unto their feet and a light unto their path.”

In addition to this, the faithful also wore prayer shawls. Again, this was a symbol of a person’s devotion to God, their allegiance to the commandments of God. Jesus himself wore such a garment.

There was nothing wrong with these practices. There was scriptural warrant for what they did.

But, the religious leaders had taken these practices to an extreme. Their leather boxes were longer and larger than the average. Their prayer shawls had practically become robes.

They wanted people to look at them and say, “My goodness, these men are so holy!”

And I'm sure some people did say that. But appearances can be deceiving.

I'm a bit suspicious of people who wear religion on their sleeve today. I have to ask, "Who are they trying to convince?"

Apparently, hypocrisy is a very versatile sin. It covers the sins of commission and the sins of omission.

When we do good things we make sure the cameras are on. When we don't do good things we try to talk a good game. We claim credit for work done and for work not done.

It sounds a lot like office politics doesn't it?

## HYPOCRISY, THE SIN WE DON'T CONFESS

Speaking about politics, in this election season we know all about hypocrisy don't we?

We love to rail against the obvious hypocrites in our midst. The preacher who prays for show and sometimes even dough, the politician who just wants to win, the athletes who don't have to play by the rules because they can score a touchdown, and so on.

The list is long when it comes to the versatile sin of hypocrisy. But, there's something else about hypocrisy. It's the sin we like to pin on others, but it's not a sin that we like to confess personally.

Let's get this out of the way early. We are all hypocrites, and the harder we try to do God's will the greater the potential for hypocritical action.

I've shared with you before. When I first entered the ministry I had a very hard time doing the job. Why do you think I had such a hard time?

I knew that I was a hypocrite. I knew that sometimes I talked a good game but my actions didn't live up to my speech. And sometimes I would talk about what I had done to bolster my standing in the community.

I had a hard time living with the contrast between the public persona and the personal reality. In fact the pain was so great that I wanted to quit the ministry.

What changed? How did I reach the point that now I am almost old enough to retire as a minister?

Did I repent of my hypocrisy and become a better minister? Not really. I'm still a mixed bag. Sometimes I do the right thing for the wrong reason. Sometimes my actions don't match my words.

But, I realized early on that I could not live up to my own expectations or the expectations of the congregations I served. The only way I could survive was to worry less about the approval of others and more about the approval of God.

As a minister I preached a lot about forgiveness, but like many ministers I was loathe to accept that forgiveness personally. Ministers are not better than anyone else. We don't have a more direct line to the Almighty.

The only thing that is different about ministers is that we perform a special function. We have been trained to interpret the Bible and help people understand the Bible. That's why we are called teaching elders.

But, that's it.

You struggle with your kids. We struggle with our kids. You have problems feeling good about yourself. Guess what? So do we. You struggle to make ends meet. We struggle to make ends meet.

Sometimes we don't practice what we preach. And, you know what, sometimes you don't practice what you preach either.

## HEAVY BURDENS

But, here's the problem that Jesus is talking about in our passage for today. The religious leaders back then were pretending to be better persons than they really were. And then they were using their so-called "piety" as a way to gain an advantage over others.

Jesus said that they laid heavy burdens on the shoulders of the people.

In other words, they were using religion to gain personal and political advantage. Religion became a way to get what they wanted instead of a way of doing what God wanted them to do.

Our job as disciples of Jesus is not to control others. Our job is to lighten the burdens of others. We are called to take up our cross, which means to deny ourselves for the sake of others and the proclamation of the gospel. (Matthew 16:24)

But, down through the years the church has on many occasions turned the words of Jesus on their head. Instead of serving others in the name of Christ, religious leaders have managed to serve themselves and the goals of their own kingdom. Instead of making the burdens of others lighter religious leaders have added to the burdens of others.

In Jesus' day it was the strict interpretation of the law that placed a heavy burden on the people. And the religious leaders of the day seemed totally unconcerned about the hardship that they imposed on others.

Remember all those times that Jesus healed on the Sabbath? The religious leaders roundly criticized Jesus for "working" on the Sabbath. They never took into consideration the suffering that Jesus alleviated by breaking their man made rules.

Jesus was dismayed at their lack of compassion and told them, "Man was not made for the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man. Is it unlawful to do righteous deeds on the Sabbath?"

Their rules got in the way of true piety. Instead of lifting people up with their religion, they used religion to put people down. Religion was a burden instead of a blessing.

In the name of Christ wars have been fought. The poor have financed the building of expensive cathedrals. Tyrants have claimed the backing of Almighty God.

#### THE ANTIDOTE TO HYPOCRISY

But, we don't have to turn to history to find examples of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is alive and well in our hearts even today.

In our own way all of us put on the mask of piety in order to win the approval of others. Hypocrisy grows in the fertile soil of public religion.

But, what is the answer to hypocrisy? Should we follow Jesus and prophetically call out those leaders who say one thing and do another?

That sounds like a good idea. It can even be fun.  
But, there's a problem.

Remember that Jesus said when we point out the speck in our neighbor's eye we forget that we have a log in our own eye? We don't have the moral authority to judge the hypocrites because we are a part of the problem.

C.S. Lewis wrote,

“Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good—above all, that we are better than someone else—I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil.”

So what's a hypocrite to do? What's the answer to this pernicious problem that we call hypocrisy? What's the antidote to this plague?

The antidote to hypocrisy is grace.

Matthew does emphasize the moral aspect of faith more than the other gospels. Faithful work well done is rewarded.

But, Matthew also has a lot to say about grace and forgiveness.

In Matthew's gospel Peter asks how many times he should forgive a church member. Would seven times be enough?

And Jesus answers that Peter should forgive seventy seven times! And then Jesus goes on to say that our actions toward others should not be based upon what other people “owe” us. Our actions should be based upon what we owe God.

Since God has forgiven us so much, we should be forgiving toward others.

The religious leaders were not the only ones who were hypocrites. The disciples also fit into that category. When Jesus walked the road to the cross,

Peter denied him and the disciples ran away. Even after the resurrection some of the Jesus' disciples had their doubts.

But, Jesus met their hypocrisy with grace and forgiveness. Jesus trusted these "hypocrites" to spread the gospel throughout the world. Jesus met their failure with love and forgiveness.

This was how Jesus taught his disciples about love and forgiveness. He loved them, and he forgave them. He called them friends. He became their servant.

## SERVICE AND HUMILITY

And he asked those disciples to follow in his footsteps.

It was not their job to create a powerful political kingdom. It was not their job to create a religion filled with rules and regulations. It was not their job to influence others through the power of their religious moral authority.

It was their job to serve others in the name of Jesus. That was the definition of greatness in the kingdom of God. They humbled themselves in order to be great. This was not a false humility that was self-imposed. This humility was based upon a realistic evaluation of their own hypocrisy and failure in life.

We are used to thinking of humility as a virtue. But, in the Greek world of Jesus' day humility was not a virtue to be sought after. Humility was a curse, a symbol of failure. It meant something like "groveling."

The ancient world sought the opposite of humility; they sought pride. The word "pride" originally meant to be high and lifted up. And that's what they wanted. They wanted to be in charge. They wanted to be in control.

When you think about it, isn't that what we want as well? We want to be high and lifted up. We want to be in charge. We want to be in control of our lives.

We are still not so sure about that word, humility. It still seems to suggest a lifestyle that is less than we would like for our family and ourselves.

But, in the end the Christian must reject pride. The Bible talks about God being the one who should be high and lifted up and not us. Pride always leads to idolatry, putting us first instead of God.

As one commentator put it, “To be filled with self is to be emptied of God.” And the converse is also true. To be filled with God is to be emptied of self.

More than that, we need to remember that the entire ministry of Christ is about the transformation of the world’s values. God’s power is revealed in the power of sacrifice.

The poor are lifted up; the high and mighty, they are taken down a notch. The humility of a little child is an example of greatness in God’s kingdom. It is a kingdom in which the last will be first and the first will be last.

### TAKE OFF THE MASK

Instead of letting your hypocrisy become an anchor that weighs you down,  
Instead of always struggling to put on a good front before others because you believe that if they really knew you they wouldn’t love you,

Jesus invites you to do something else.

Take off the mask. Halloween is over.

But, the reign of All Saints Day has begun

That’s the day when we celebrate the promise of God’s future. When that kingdom comes hypocrisy will not have the last word. God will have the last word.

And all his precious and flawed saints will sing to Him in glory ... forgiven and freed for all eternity.

So, go ahead. You can do it. Take off that mask. Come to the one who really loves your face.

Come to Him just as you are with all your faults, and he will give you rest.

Amen.