

The Sermon On The Mount

The Beautiful Tune We Love So Well And Play So Poorly

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:3 ESV)*

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”
(Matthew 7:24–25 ESV)*

Religious Hypocrisy

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Matthew 6:1-18

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you I would love for you to open it now to Matthew 6:1-18. As I mentioned last week, we are entering into a NEW SECTION in the Sermon on the Mount. For the last several weeks we’ve been tracking with Jesus as he systematically RAISES THE BAR in terms of what it means to be RIGHTEOUS within the covenant community. He was not satisfied with the definitions and standards being presented by the Pharisees. He said:

“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20 ESV)

Their bar is the lowest common denominator. Their bar is about LIMITS and LOOPHOLES – but Jesus says, I am here to show you the way of PERFECT LOVE.

So Jesus is taking us HIGHER here and as beautiful as that is, that actually represents a bit of a challenge. D.A. Carson puts it this way, he says:

“It almost seems as if the greater the demand for holiness, the greater the opportunity for hypocrisy.”¹

Isn't that true?

And so here, in this next section, he turns his attention toward the DANGER of religious hypocrisy. “Don't bother DOING all of this stuff I've been talking about if you are only DOING IT so as to earn the favour of other people.”

And you say, wait a second! I thought this was all about being SALT and LIGHT in the world? I mean, didn't Jesus say, at the start of the previous section:

“You are the light of the world. ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14–16 ESV)

So, aren't people SUPPOSED TO SEE our acts of righteousness? Aren't they SUPPOSED TO SEE our good works SO AS to give glory to our Father in heaven?

And the answer is YES! They are supposed to SEE – but you aren't supposed to DO IT SO AS to be seen. You are supposed to do it because you love God and want to honour him. You aren't supposed to do it so that people will love and honour YOU.

That's religious hypocrisy!

We're talking about MOTIVE here, not EFFECT. According to Jesus, there is no credit, no reward and no lasting impact from deeds of righteousness that are done explicitly FOR the approval of other people. That is religious hypocrisy – that is the YEAST of the Pharisees – that is a disease that must be attacked and defeated at the root.

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Sermon On The Mount: An Evangelical Exposition Of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 55.

That's what we're talking about today. So let's pray and then we will listen together to the Word of the Lord.

“Heavenly Father, we ask for your help today in the hearing and receiving of your Word. Lord we ask for the conviction of the Holy Spirit to fall on hearts this morning. We ask that the Scriptures would be sharper than any two-edged sword, PIERCING to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow and discerning the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. We ask for our good and for your glory and we ask that now in Jesus' name, amen.”

Hear now the inspired, infallible and inerrant of God, beginning at verse 1 of Matthew chapter 6; we'll read all the way through to verse 18. This is Jesus speaking:

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

² “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷ “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread,

¹² and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

¹⁶ “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸

that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:1–18 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

We’ll come back next week and drill down on verses 5-15 so that we can talk about the Lord’s Prayer but I wanted to begin with the section as a whole because, as you can plainly see, the burden of this passage as a unit is to deal with the ever-present danger of religious hypocrisy. Let’s begin by defining our terms.

Definition:

What do we mean by religious hypocrisy? People today tend to use the term “hypocrisy” in a different way than it is typically used in the Bible. It is very common today to hear the charge that Christians are hypocrites. They SAY that sex should only happen between a husband and wife inside the bonds of covenant marriage but lots of Christian teens are getting pregnant out of wedlock – what hypocrites! Or they SAY that we should all turn the other cheek but I’ve seen plenty of people with that little fish thing on their bumper giving me the finger when I cut them off at the intersection – what hypocrites!

But that isn’t really what the word hypocrite means – at least not in the Bible. In the Bible the word hypocrite doesn’t refer to someone who falls short of an agreed upon standard – by the way, what is the word for that? What is the word we use for someone who falls short of the agreed upon standard? We call that person a SINNER! Are Christians sinners? Absolutely! But that’s not what a hypocrite is – a hypocrite, according to the Bible is someone PLAYING A ROLE. A hypocrite is someone who is ACTING for the benefit of other people. They are PRETENDING to care about righteousness, when in fact, all they care about is LOOKING righteous.

That is hypocrisy! It is a word borrowed from the world of Greek theatre. It means to PLAY a role for the benefit of an audience and the Pharisees in Jesus’ day had it down to an art form – and Jesus called them out on it. He said:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which **outwardly appear beautiful, but within** are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ So you also **outwardly appear righteous** to others, **but within you** are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (Matthew 23:27–28 ESV)

Are you seeing that? That is hypocrisy! Hypocrisy is about doing good things – SO AS TO BE SEEN BY OTHERS.

That was a major issue in Jesus’ day. It was characteristic of the Pharisaic approach to religious life and Jesus considered it a contagious disease. He said:

“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” (Luke 12:1 ESV)

Again and again in the Gospels he can be found telling his disciples to LOOK AWAY from the example of the Pharisees – to REJECT their entire approach to life and godliness – because AT ROOT it was not about honouring God it was about seeking out honour for yourself.

That’s what hypocrisy is all about and that’s what this entire section is all about.

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people **in order to be seen by them**” (Matthew 6:1 ESV)

That’s religious hypocrisy!

Alright, so based on what Jesus goes on to say, how can I know if I am a religious hypocrite? Let me give you 3 diagnostic tests.

3 Diagnostic Tests:

And by the way, I hope that doesn’t feel CRASS to you – it shouldn’t. The Apostles compared the Bible to a mirror. You are supposed to look into it and make appropriate changes. The Apostle Paul told his people quite bluntly:

“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.” (2 Corinthians 13:5 ESV)

So this is standard operating procedure for the Christian. We are supposed to use the standards and definitions provided by Jesus as diagnostic tests. So let’s do that. How can you know if you are a religious hypocrite? That’s the question. Well, according to Jesus:

1. If you need to be recognized for all your deeds of mercy, you might be a religious hypocrite

Look at verse 2-4 again. Jesus says:

“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret.” (Matthew 6:2–4 ESV)

That phrase translated in the ESV as “give to the needy” is a little bit misleading. The Greek word used there literally means “deeds of mercy” – it includes giving money, but it is MORE than that. It refers to the time you spend at the Soup Kitchen, or the pie you baked for the shut in – it is all of that. All of that all encompassing love and mercy stuff that Jesus had been talking about earlier – all of that MEANS NOTHING, Jesus is saying, IF you do it SO AS to be seen and praised by others. That is the ESSENCE of religious hypocrisy.”

So the diagnostic question obviously is: IS THAT YOU?

Do you NEED people to know about the good things that you do “for others”?

Or let me say that another way: Are you capable of doing a good deed without telling anyone about it? Have you ever done a good thing that didn’t make its way into a story – a story in which you appear as the hero?

That’s the issue.

When you give something to the church – are you looking for a bronze plaque?

When you donate to the charity – do you do it with an oversized cheque and do you wait for the photographer to arrive from the local newspaper?

That's what we're talking about here. We're talking about motive. We're talking about audience. Who are you doing this FOR? What are you hoping to get out of it? Honour for you? Or honour for the Lord?

You know, it's interesting, one of the things that COVID changed is the way we do the offering in the service. We used to pass those wooden plates around and you would drop your offering envelope in there - and we would all notice if you didn't. And we would all hear the THUMP that identified the big givers.

When you stop and think about it – who in the world came up with that system? That is a system designed TO TEMPT us with the sin of religious hypocrisy. Let me ask you a question, if you were like me and like a lot of people who got paid every other week, did you ever feel the need to explain yourself on the weeks where you weren't putting anything in? I felt like that. Every other week when that plate went around and I just took it and passed it to the next person – and I sit in the front row – so if there is nothing in the plate when I pass it to the second row there is nowhere for me to hide and in my heart there was a little Pharisee saying: “Maybe you should put an empty envelope in there on the off weeks” – is there anyone else who felt like that?

That's the voice of your inner hypocrite! And the best way to kill that voice, Jesus says, is to do your giving in secret.

Can I ask a funny question: is it maybe a good thing, that we had to switch to online giving? Before the pandemic only about 10% of our giving was online, now it's well over 90%. And no one sees what you're doing now, right? Does your inner Pharisee feel hard done by that? Mine

does. But maybe it was a good thing. Now – we need to figure out how to position giving as an act of worship – we’re not just paying bills – we are worshipping and honouring our Creator – so we have some tweaking to do – but maybe the change was actually an act of mercy. Maybe it was God “leading us NOT into temptation.”

Either way, it’s a good diagnostic question. Do you NEED – do you CRAVE recognition for your righteous acts?

The second diagnostic test that Jesus gives has to do with the how and the why of prayer.

2. If your prayers sound more like personal testimonials or poems, you might be a religious hypocrite

As I said earlier, we will come back to verses 5-15 next week so I’ll be reasonably brief here, but there is an important diagnostic test I want you to see with respect to religious hypocrisy. Look at verses 5-8:

“And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁷ “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Matthew 6:5–8 ESV)

The basic issue here, again, is the issue of audience. Who are you praying to? Are you praying to God or are you praying to the people around you? That’s the question. If you are praying to God that’s going to sound a certain way, and if you are praying to others then that’s going to sound a certain way – and you know the difference don’t you? You do if you’ve ever been to a Christian prayer meeting.

Let me bring this down to street level for you:

If you automatically switch into KJV mode whenever you open your mouth to pray, you might be a religious hypocrite – unless you are the only person left in the English speaking world that still talks like that on an everyday basis or unless you think the KJV is God’s native language and you are just being accommodating to him – ok - but otherwise it is real hard to make sense of that. It sounds for all the world like you are acting in a Shakespearean play which is literally what the word hypocrisy means. You are playing the role of the extremely pious person. That’s hypocrisy.

Or if your prayers sound like personal testimonials. You know that one: “Dear Lord, the other day when I was lifting that little girl out of the well on my way to the Soup Kitchen at 4 am after fasting for 3 days straight, I said to myself, self, it is an honour and a privilege to serve the Lord.”

Ok – no one’s buying that. That was clearly a prayer to us because God knows your schedule – he was there for all of that, so he didn’t need the recap – we did. So recap received, reward given in terms of our admiration – and prayer disqualified.

That’s religious hypocrisy.

A prayer to God does not require any recaps or highlights from your week – that is clearly for us. And a prayer to God does not require Shakespearean English – that is also clearly for us. A prayer to God should be simple, honest, open and to the point. It can and should be respectful, and it can and may include Scripture verses in whatever translation you have memorized them in - but it need not be ostentatious and it should not bring glory to yourself.

If your prayers sound like testimonials or if they are filled with flowery language – then, according to Jesus, you might be a religious hypocrite.

The third diagnostic test that Jesus gives comes out of the illustration he offers about fasting. He seems to be saying here that if you exaggerate the hardships you endure as a believer, you might be a religious hypocrite.

3. If you tend to exaggerate the hardships you endure as a believer, you might be a religious hypocrite

Look again at verses 16-18:

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret.” (Matthew 6:16–18 ESV)

There are certain religious activities that are good – they are fine – but that are also dangerous because of their capacity to be transformed into performance art – and fasting would definitely be at the top of that list. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day were really concerned about FASTING – and the disciples of John the Baptist were also really concerned about fasting – to an extent that the disciples of Jesus clearly were not. Later in Matthew’s Gospel the disciples of John the Baptist will come and ask Jesus a question:

“Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” (Matthew 9:14 ESV)

Why do we make a really big deal about fasting but you don’t? That’s a really good question and I think the answer has something to do with timing but also something to do with risk. Fasting has always been the playground of the hypocrites. It certainly was in the Old Testament. In Zechariah 7 a delegation of Jewish leaders from a neighbouring town came to Jerusalem to seek counsel from Zechariah and the other prophets. The question was framed this way:

“Should I weep and abstain in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?” (Zechariah 7:3 ESV)

According to the historians, there was a FAST that was observed within Judaism in the fifth month of their calendar remembering and lamenting the destruction of the temple in 586 BC by the Babylonians. But now that the temple was being rebuilt, the religious leaders in the next town over wondered whether this particular fast should continue so the delegation came to the prophet seeking an answer from God – and the answer they got was more than they bargained for.

The story goes on to say:

⁴ Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me: ⁵ “Say to all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, **was it for me that you fasted?**’ ⁶ And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat for yourselves and drink for yourselves? ⁷ Were not these the words that the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and prosperous, with her cities around her, and the South and the lowland were inhabited?’”

⁸ And the word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying, ⁹ “Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, ¹⁰ do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.” (Zechariah 7:3–10 ESV)

Isn't that an interesting answer? God says: “This fast that you are asking about – this big deal where you WEEP and ABSTAIN and make such a big fuss – was it really for me that you did all of that? Or was it for you? Do you secretly LOVE being seen as so invested in the temple at Jerusalem? Do you secretly LOVE getting to play the role of the holy martyr? Because do you know how I would like you to respond to the destruction of the temple? Not with a big noisy fast but with a noticeable increase in your PUBLIC JUSTICE. How about you start being kind to widows? How about you take some orphans into your home? How about you stop being such a jerk to immigrants? I would much prefer that to your noisy fast.”

That's a pretty interesting answer isn't it and it does raise the question: why do you religious people tend to make such a big deal out of your fasting? Because fasting is NOT a major deal in the Bible. Do you know how many times the Apostle Paul mentions fasting in his letters to the churches? What would you guess? 1 time? 4 times? 8 times?

Answer: 0 times.

So you can do it – it's a good thing – but beware of the impulse to make it a MAJOR THING because that impulse flows from the ROOT of religious hypocrisy. Fasting appeals to us because of its potential as performance art. It gives us the opportunity to play the MARTYR and to MAGNIFY our suffering before the world. How unlike our Lord Jesus, of whom the Scriptures say:

“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.”
(Isaiah 53:7 ESV)

That’s THE JESUS WAY so, my friend, if you can’t stop talking about all your sacrifices and about all the hardships you bear for the cause of Christ – beware, you might be a religious hypocrite.

Prescription:

So we’ve defined our terms, we’ve provided some diagnostic tools, now what do we do if we’ve convicted ourselves in the process?

And by the way, I won’t ask for a show of hands, but is there anybody here who has not felt convicted in the process? If one of those diagnostic tests did not prick your heart then you’re either Jesus or your fooling yourself because religious hypocrisy is one of the most insidious sins known to man. We all lean in this direction.

So – what do we do?

Thankfully the answer is pretty straightforward: the cure for religious hypocrisy is repentance and reorientation.

Repentance means you have to name it. You have to be honest with yourself about your score on these tests. A repentant person is going to say: “You know what? I do tend to give my resume a little bit at prayer group. I do that. I confess. Have mercy on me O God.”

Or he’s going to say: “You know what? I do tend to need recognition for all my deeds of mercy. I do want my volunteer mug. I do want my bronze plaque. Ahh! I confess! O God have mercy on me!”

That's the first step. Own your score on those tests and take them to God in an attitude of humility and repentance.

And then reorient.

Take this question seriously:

“When you fasted ... was it for me?” (Zechariah 7:5 ESV)

Or when you prayed, was it for me? When you gave was it for me?

Take that question seriously and if you don't like the answer then make changes. Reorient. Make sure that everything you do and everything you give and every way you serve is really about the LORD - and him only. Clear the stage in your heart. Empty the auditorium in your mind and live the rest of your life and do your deeds of righteousness before an audience of ONE.

Oh God, help!

Let's pray together.