

## Say No to Hypocrisy

**Matthew 6:1-6;16-21**  
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**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Pastor Dave Carlson**

There's an old story about a man from the city who was out driving one day in the country. The road signs weren't very good, and he got lost. So he stopped at a farmhouse to ask directions. "Can you tell me how far it is to the town of Mill Pond?" he asked.

"Well," said the farmer, "the way you're goin', it's about 24,996 miles. But if you turn around, it's about four."

Today's New Testament lesson is all about where you're going in life, and how to know when you need to turn around to get there. Jesus is concluding his sermon on the mount, in which he told people how to gain a place in the kingdom of God, receive comfort, be filled with all good things, stay pure in heart as children of God, rejoicing in all that life has to offer, even though life can be hard and unfair.

And now he's telling us what not to be, what not to do as a child of God, using the Pharisees as examples of what not to do and what not to be. Don't be like those hypocrites, he says.

We of course, would never behave like hypocrites – someone who says one thing but does another, someone who doesn't understand what it means to have integrity and authenticity. None of us likes to think of ourselves as a hypocrite.

And yet, if we weren't in danger of being hypocrites, why would Jesus spend so much time warning against it. No, maybe we better take a closer look at what Jesus is telling us here.

"Beware of practicing your piety," says Jesus – your righteousness – "before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Here we see that righteousness – that living a godly life – has nothing to do with how others see you, or what you think of someone when you see them.

You could have the most put-together person standing right next to someone who looks like a real mess, and you wouldn't know – just looking at them – how godly they are, deep down inside.

Godliness is between you and God, and there's no use in pretending, because that gets you nowhere; there's no reward in it, says Jesus. To be a good and godly person you have to spend time discerning what God would have you do and then work at doing that.

Jesus then gives us three things to work at in practicing godly living. The first is alms giving – giving to those in need. The second is praying – developing your relationship with God. And the third is fasting – giving up things that get in between you and God.

By focusing on each of these three practices, we learn how to ferret out any hypocrisy that may have crept into our lives over the years

Concerning giving to those in need, Jesus says, "... Whenever you give alms do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

"But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

"... Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing...." Jesus is saying to guard – not only against trying to look good in the eyes of others – but be careful not to get too caught up in how you see yourself, when you've done something good.

For example, every once in a while, my wife, Yuri, or I will do something "really special" – like take out the trash without being reminded or vacuum the house before we are wading through dust and corgi fur, or – when we're really being good – getting up early and going to the gym.

And every once in a while, one of us will feel so proud of the accomplishment, we'll mention it to the other. At which point, I say to Yuri or she says to me, "Raise your right hand.... Now reach behind you; that's right, good, good. Now, pat, pat, pat, pat."

It's nice to get recognition for doing good, but it's meaningless if you're just congratulating yourself, or worse yet, begging others to congratulate you, to pat you on the back for being "such a great person."

So you see, doing good and being godly isn't about looking good in the eyes of others or doing it to make yourself feel good. "... Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that," says Jesus, "your (good works) may be done in secret" – even secret from yourself. Forget about it as soon as you do it. "And your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

The interesting thing here is that if we're going around doing good and not looking for anything in return – not even the pride we feel in doing good – than whatever good comes from it – for us or for others – is something only God sees. And we should be happy with that, and that alone.

It's so freeing. We're free to do good for no good reason at all, trusting in God to handle the rest, to bless the outcome, an outcome we may never see. That's doing good works.

And then there's praying. "... whenever you pray....," says Jesus, "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." The hypocrites "pray in the synagogues and at the street corners so that

they may be seen by others,” says Jesus, and so says Jesus “they have received their reward.”

The hypocrites want everyone to know that they have a special relationship with God, and whatever they get out of others knowing it, that’s all they get, and all they’re ever going to get. There’s no reward in pretending to have a close relationship with the Lord.

No, the truth is that God and God alone knows what type of relationship you have with the Lord; God knows what’s in your heart. And that’s all that’s important. If you could have a closer relationship with the Lord, pray about that. Pray, and be truly open to what God would have you do and then do it.

Finally, fasting – giving up something to make room for God’s blessing. Jesus says, “... Whenever you fast, do not look dismal like the hypocrites ..., but (rather) put oil on your head and wash your face so that your fasting may be seen only... by your Father who is in secret....”

God wants to bless your life through your acts of self-discipline, to allow goodness to flow over you like an anointing oil washing over your head, preparing you for the blessing to come. So, what do you need to set aside to receive that blessing? Think about that. And then do it.

The season of Lent is the time when we seek to set aside those things that get in between us and God’s blessing – things like hypocrisy, which is being a false Christian, doing things more for show or to feel good about ourselves rather than just because they are pleasing to God.

Throughout the remaining Sunday’s in Lent, we are going to look at four other things that get in between us and God’s blessing, those being – in addition to hypocrisy – temptation, shame, transactionalism, and condemnation.

By taking time to look at each of these and how they affect our lives, we have the opportunity to say no to what we need to set aside, what we need to step away from and to say yes to whatever it is that will make space for what we will gain, with God’s help.

Just like, when we say no to hypocrisy, we make room in our lives for a greater sense of integrity – with ourselves – and authenticity with others, being true to who we are deep down inside, and being known and loved for who God knows us to be. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

During Lent, dear Lord, please remember me as the child of your creation, born fresh and loving, open to life and people, growth and new being. During this season of reflection, dear Lord, forget my mistakes, selfish behavior, stubborn will and scattered living.

You have created and loved me, but sometimes I forget you, O God. Love me back to you, Lord. Lead me in your forgiving way. Guide me as I journey through Lent; guide me to new living in Jesus Christ.

Lord, we know how much you love us and care for us. So it is with confidence that we pray for ourselves, and also for those we know to be in special need. And for us, O God, forgive us our indifference, heal our deep-felt wounds, give us courage for the Lenten journey, as we travel with Christ – not only to the Cross – but also beyond, to new and blessed life for all peoples. Through Jesus we pray all this, and as he taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**