

Hypocrisy Mt 23:1-33

How many times have you seen people die on a TV show or movie? Lots. Do those people actually die? Of course not. As soon as the directors says “Cut!” they get up and walk away. They are just acting, playing a part.

The Greeks had a word for play actors—hypocrite. Hypocrites are people who make an outward show for others to see.

In Matthew 23, we have a rather long description of hypocrisy. Jesus originally spoke these words to a group of Jewish religious leaders—the scribes and Pharisees. Scribes were lawyers; they were the experts in the OT law. Pharisees were the strictest sect of the Jews. They specialized in keeping the law and the traditions of the elders.

.2 Jesus said that the scribes and Pharisees “sit in Moses’ seat.” I.e., they had the authority to interpret, teach, and enforce the OT law, the law of Moses. The Jewish teachers sat in the synagogue as they taught. They had legitimate authority to teach; Jesus does not dispute that fact. In vs. 3, he tells his audience to follow their instructions—“observe and do.”

The scribes and Pharisees were very religious people, but many of them were also hypocrites—they claimed one thing but did another. Cf. .3b “for they say and they do not” – i.e., “they do not practice what they preach.” Hypocrites want to appear to be religious, but their behavior does not match what they say.

One of the main complaints about religious people is that they are hypocrites—they act one way at church or in public and another way when at home or in private. They have an external, insincere form of religion; it’s only on the surface. For many people, that’s a true criticism; their religion is all for show; it has no substance.

Can anyone charge us with hypocrisy? We must admit that we often believe and teach better than what we do. Our behavior often does not come up to the standard of what we say we believe. In other words, we are not perfect; we fall short of the standard of Christ-likeness. Yet if we are sincere followers of Christ, we are not hypocrites. The fact that we fall short of perfection does not mean that we are insincere play actors.

Still, some of us this morning might be guilty of hypocrisy. We say one thing and do another; we fail to practice what we preach. Some of us perhaps need to repent of the sin of hypocrisy and seek to change our attitude and behavior. Hypocrisy is another in a long list of sins of the spirit. As we go through this text, we must consider whether we might have some of these same hypocritical attitudes and behaviors.

As we look at Matthew 23, let’s consider what this text tells us about several

I. Characteristics of hypocrites

A. They do not practice what they preach. I.e., they tell others to do things that they are unwilling to do themselves. .3-4

1. .3b “for they say and they do not.”

2. .4 “For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne.”

The Pharisees were infamous for adding a complicated set of traditions to the law, and these were a heavy burden that they loaded on the backs of the Jews.

3. .4b Then, after binding these heavy burdens on others, they do not carry them themselves. What they expect from others, they do not require of themselves.

One of the marks of a hypocrite is that he tells others to do what he is unwilling to do himself. They “say and do not,” they preach but they do not practice. Perhaps they keep the rules in public but not in private. Hypocrites are different people when no one is watching them. Their religion is external; it’s an act, a mask or a costume.

Is that true of you? When you are at church or out in public, you behave in a certain way, but at home or in private, you are a totally different person.

B. .5-7 They seek recognition and approval.

.5a They are doing all these things “to be seen of men.” They are not practicing their religion out of sincere conviction. They are doing them to gain approval and recognition. Note several ways that they do this:

1. .5b They seek recognition/approval through religious ornamentation or decoration.

a) “Phylacteries” – this was a small box or leather pouch that the Jews would bind on their arms or even on their foreheads. These containers would hold a small slip of parchment with a verse or two of Scripture on it. This is based on a literal understanding of the OT verses in which God tells the people to bind his words on them.

Duet 6:6-8 And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart:... And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes.

They would use large phylacteries to show how religious they were.

- b) .5b They would “enlarge the borders of their garments.” The Jews were supposed to have a fringe on the bottom of their robes (Num 15:38). This fringe was to distinguish them from the other nations and to remind them to obey God’s law.

To widen this fringe—or perhaps use long tassels—was a way of showing a heightened respect for God’s law. The Pharisees in particular were proud of their adherence to the law and the traditions, and they showed their pride in wearing a wide border or long tassels on their robes.

So these religious decorations were an external demonstration of religion.

Illus.: Sometimes we see people wearing religious decorations today—perhaps a cross or a pendant. Some who wear such decorations are clearly not genuine Christians.

- 2. .6-7 They seek recognition/approval through prominent positions and titles.

In that culture, the scribes and Pharisees were highly esteemed for their devotion to the OT law. They enjoyed occupying the uppermost rooms at the feasts and the chief seats in the synagogues.

- a) .6 They loved the best spots, the places of distinction, the places of honor.
- b) The chief seats in the synagogue would be reserved for the elders, the most highly respected people in the community; it was a place of honor and distinction.
- c) .7 They also enjoyed honorable titles. The title “rabbi” literally means, “my great one.” Rabbis were teachers, and in those days, the rabbi was a very highly esteemed person holding a prominent position in society.
- d) Jewish people had a high regard for the teachers of the law. And so to be recognized as a teacher or scholar was a great honor. Some people enjoyed that public recognition.

There is nothing wrong with having honorable titles or positions of authority, especially if you have earned them. But hypocrites use those titles and positions to hide what they really are on the inside. They appear very honorable, but they are actually dishonorable.

Hypocrites are very concerned with public approval. They want others to see how virtuous they are. Today we sometimes call that “virtue signaling.” E.g., politicians want to signal to everyone that they have the approved opinion on various topics.

C. .13-16a They lead people astray

The charges here are very significant and damning. Here is where we see the real dangers of genuine hypocrisy.

1. .13 They are false teachers, shutting up the kingdom of heaven by their false doctrine. It’s bad enough that they are not entering the kingdom themselves. It’s far worse to prevent others from entering.

Quote: By imposing external restrictions of Rabbinic traditions on their converts, they were preventing these people from seeing the truth.¹

App: False teachers still do that today. If they are not preaching the true Gospel message, then they hindering the salvation of those who follow them. By imposing their man-made traditions instead of teaching God’s word, false teachers obstruct the salvation of their followers.

And even if you are not a false teacher, your hypocritical behavior might lead others to reject the Gospel.

2. .14 They are insincere.
 - a) They were insincere in their charity.

¹ Louis A. Barbieri Jr., “Matthew,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 74.

“devouring widows’ houses.” -- Widows were among the weakest and most vulnerable people in that society, and the scribes and Pharisees were taking advantage of them, oppressing and exploiting them, not protecting them. They use religion to defraud the vulnerable.

- b) They were insincere in their worship.

Their prayers are a “pretense.” Pretense—false motive, an excuse to conceal true reason. Prayer, one of the most significant elements of their religion, an act of worship that should be totally sincere, was just for show.

App: Religion for some is just a false front that allows them to defraud and abuse others. We find many examples of that in our world today—people claim to be religious, but they use their religion for fraud and abuse.

- 3. .15-16a They are corrupt leaders.

- a) They made great efforts to gain followers—“compass sea and land” to make one convert. And those who they successfully convert are even worse than they are. They are leading their followers astray.

- b) .16a They are “blind guides.” What happens when the blind lead the blind? They both fall into a ditch (Mt 15:14).

- D. .16-22 They are concerned about minutia but neglect the main things.

They majored on the minors. They were sticklers for the details but ignored the most important principles.

- 1. They did this with oaths/vows. They were making oaths (promises, vows) without intending to keep them.

- a) .16 They apparently taught that an oath/promise/contract was not binding in certain cases. If you swore by the temple, the oath was not binding; you could get out of it. But an oath sworn on the gold of the temple was binding.

- b) .18 Likewise, some taught that an oath sworn on the altar was not binding, but an oath sworn on the gift on the altar was binding.

Hypocrites try to weasel out of their promises by appealing to technicalities, nuances, and fine lines of distinction.

E.g., Bill Clinton—the meaning of “is.”

Today, a child might say that he made a promise, but he had his fingers crossed. A hypocrite might say that he does not need to keep his promises because of various technicalities, fine lines of argument and nuances.

This kind of practice is deceptive and dishonest. Those who are committed to honesty and integrity do not use fine nuances and technicalities to allow them to break their promises. If we make a promise or a vow, we must keep it.

2. .23 They did this with tithing.

Here's another fine distinction that the Jewish leaders made.

- a) They were very careful to tithe off the increase of their herb garden. Tithing from the increase of your crops was a requirement of the law (Lev 27:30), so it was good that they were so meticulous about keeping this requirement.
- b) Even though they were extremely strict/careful about such small matters, they neglected the weightier matters of the law—things like judgment, mercy and faith.
- c) .24 They were guilty of “straining [out] a gnat and swallowing a camel” – i.e., they were very careful about the smallest detail of the law, yet were violating the biggest, most important parts of the law.

One of the marks of hypocrites is that they seem to be more concerned with little issues than with big ones. They “major on the minors.” They neglect major responsibilities by fulfilling minor responsibilities.

These Jewish leaders were actively plotting Jesus' murder, and yet they are concerned with tithing off their herb gardens and maintaining their ritual cleanness.

App: This is perhaps one of the most common aspects of hypocrisy. We can be super sensitive about minor issues while ignoring primary issues altogether. We can be so concerned about minor details of the faith that we neglect other major areas.

E. They are outwardly “clean” but inwardly defiled .25-28

1. .25 Hypocrites present a good exterior, but inwardly, it's a different story.
2. .27 A whitewashed tomb appeared nice on the outside, but inside it was full of death and defilement.

Jews were very concerned about dead bodies. Touching a dead body would make them ceremonially unclean and unable to participate in religious rituals. Scribes and Pharisees very strictly obeyed the laws regarding keeping clean.

To say that one is full of dead men's bones and uncleanness was a very serious insult to those who were so concerned about being clean.

That's how hypocrites are—nice looking exterior, dead and defiled interior.

3. .28 Here is a good general description of a hypocrite—outwardly appearing to be righteous, but inwardly full of iniquity. They are play actors, playing a role. They are insincere, pretending to be one thing when they are the opposite.

4. .29-31 They want others to think that they were supporters of the prophets—they were the good guys—but in reality, they were just the same as those who killed the prophets. They want others to think well of them, but in reality, they are just as bad as anyone.

.29b Note: “garnish the sepulchers” – i.e., decorate the tombs. That is an accurate description of a hypocrite—he's decorating a tomb, and the tomb in this case is himself. Inside, he's full of death and decay, but outside, he looks great.

Here is the basic definition of a hypocrite—the exterior looks fine, but the interior is a mess. They seem to promote what is good, but actually, they are destructive and dangerous. They are nothing but fine looking tombs.

F. .33 They are in danger of eternal destruction—“the damnation of hell.” In fact, they are subject to “greater damnation” (.14). They knew the OT Scriptures very well, and yet they were in the process of violating some of the main teachings of Scripture.

They looked good and did some good things, but what were they really? Behind the scenes, they were nothing but serpents and vipers.

What are the characteristics of hypocrites? They focus on externals instead of on the inner man. They major on minor rules and regulations instead of on fundamental Christian principles. They focus on activities and laws instead of on inner character. They are proud and corrupt rather than humble and sacrificial. They say one thing and do another. They don't really care about the law, salvation, the needy, prayer, the temple, the truth, tithing, or weighty spiritual matters. Within, they are full of dead men's bones and uncleanness, extortion and excess. They are serpents and vipers even though they appear to be righteous. Ultimately, their religion is a fraud, a sham, and they are in danger of the damnation of hell.

True Xns can also be guilty of hypocrisy, at least in some elements of our lives. If any of these characteristics is true of us, the right response is repentance and change.