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Humility and Service

The mindset that dominates our society—“What about me?”—is dramatically different from the attitude Jesus encourages in his followers: “What about them?” As Jesus did for us, he encourages us to do for others: “Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” The temptation to think first of self and then of others is strong and we battle against the sinful self every day. As we walk with Jesus in faith, *humility* and *service* follow. As we walk with Jesus in faith, we gain the gift of eternal life with God.

Sermon

Matthew 23:1-12

How ridiculous it must have been for Jesus as God in the flesh—the one who possessed all the glory of the universe—to see these guys prancing around town like they were God’s gift to mankind. Jesus had just dismantled the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes one by one back in Matthew 22, and now in our text today, Matthew 23, he turns to his disciples. With the religious leaders still within earshot, he starts off by addressing those who exalt themselves.

Their Hypocrisy

Jesus doesn’t explicitly use the word “*hypocrite*” yet, but he is describing everything that hypocrisy is, and then once he’s described it, in the verses that come after our text today he’s going to call the religious leaders hypocrites 6 times. These first verses are all about *hypocrisy*.

And although I’m sure you know what the word “*hypocrite*” means, you may not know *why* it means that: Our English word *hypocrite* is just a transliteration of the Greek word “ὕποκριτής,” which means “actor” or “role-player.” Hypocrites were literally Greek stage actors who would put on plays, and in order to play their role, they wouldn’t wear make-up, but rather they’d wear masks. They’d wear masks to pretend to be something they weren’t. That’s what hypocrites do—they project outwardly something that’s not true inwardly. They put on a show.

And while I’m not sure he intended all the theological undertones, this is exactly why Shakespeare wrote, “All the world’s a stage,” because as humans we wear masks everywhere! All the world’s a stage—the question is, *who is your audience?* Men, or God?

Jesus makes it clear whom the Pharisees had as their audience: V. 5, “Everything they do is done for people to see.” Now, he concedes that the source of information they teach is correct, insofar as they are speaking the Word of God. So, absolutely listen to them—don’t go throwing out the scriptural baby with the hypocritical bathwater—but don’t follow what they do, because that Word they preach—ya, they don’t practice what they preach. They’re just using Scripture as their self-righteous mask. And I mean that figuratively, but also much more literally than you might think. Let me explain.

We just had a lot of trick-or-treaters recently in the streets dressed as things they’re not. The pharisees did this, too: Jesus says, “they widen their phylacteries and elongate their tassels.” (What in the world are those things

you may ask? Well, they were these little leather boxes with bible passages in them that they'd strap to their foreheads and arms. Tassels hung from their clothes.) Do you see what they're doing here? They were making their lives a stage for religious theater. They loved having the best seats and being greeted with the best titles—anything to get the most attention and applause from their audience.

The Gospels are full of Jesus calling out the Pharisee's hypocrisy, but calling out hypocrisy is not just for Pharisees of Jesus' day. This was a concern throughout the New Testament: This was the issue with Ananias and Saphira's dishonest offering, when Peter refused to eat with Gentile Christians in Antioch, and something Paul repeatedly warns about. Christian Pharisaism is a constant threat for all of us. The antidote to that threat, Jesus talks about next.

Your Humility

At v. 8, Jesus shifts his attention from the hypocrisy of the religious leaders: "But you..." he says. "They are like this; but *you* are to be like this..." and he starts laying out a new and different way of life for the Christian that's characterized not by hypocrisy, but humility. He says things like, "The greatest among you will be a servant," and "Those who humble themselves will be exalted." And I don't think it's anything new for you, Christians, right? I think we all know that generally we're supposed to be humble as Christians and serve one another; and yet, there are several ways we can miss what Jesus is intending when he calls us to humility, so I want to focus on 3 common misconceptions about humility in particular:

1. Humility as Self-Gain

Humility that's covertly for self-gain in the end is no humility at all. That's just another mask. That's just another thing for people to see.

For example: Two guys have a doctorate. One insists on being called a doctor and says, "Thank God I'm not like other men who don't have a doctorate," while the other says, "Thank God I'm not like other men who insist on people acknowledging their doctorate." Which one's a Christian Pharisee? Well, they both are! They just took different routes to the same destination.

Do you ever have it where you do a load of dishes, and you open up the dishwasher and everything looks pretty clean... that is until you pick up one of the bowls or cups and discover that the inside is actually still filthy? That's what dressing up your hypocrisy with humility is like. It may look good on the outside, but it's still just masking the reality on the inside.

2. Humility as Self-Hatred

A lot of us internally think that we're properly practicing humility if we're hating ourselves. A lot of us are self-hating people-pleasers who reason deep down that maybe if I just keep lowering myself below everyone else, maybe just maybe in some strange way then I'll have some value. And my question for you there is... where in the world is Jesus in that picture? Jesus isn't inventing a new way to salvation when he says, "whoever humbles themselves will be exalted," as if we can somehow hate ourselves to heaven, because if your humility is still looking to yourself than that's just self-hatred, not self-humiliation, and there's a big difference.

Notice how Jesus puts it in V. 8. He says, "*But you* are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters." Now, Jesus is primarily painting a picture of humility as something where you don't exalt yourself above others, but he also doesn't then say to consider yourself as worthless compared to others. No, he paints a picture of brothers and sisters all equal in status below our one exalted Teacher. Would you call another brother or sister who's been justified by Christ worthless? Of course not—so why do it to yourself?

It's true that Philippians 2 says, "In humility, consider others as more important than yourselves." But Paul then qualifies that that means considering them more important to serve than yourself, that does *not* mean considering them more important in value before God. We serve one another "loving our neighbor as ourselves." So, if you're hating yourself, that doesn't make for a good recipe for loving others. (If you find

yourself struggling to give grace to others, maybe it's because you haven't been allowing any for yourself. We're sinner-saints as Christians, and our lives don't have to be full of self-loathing and self-hatred because of the sinner we still struggle we, but rather our lives can be characterized by joy for the sainthood Christ has bestowed upon us.)

3. *Humility as Self-Forgetfulness*

Perhaps you've heard the popular quote often attributed to C.S. Lewis (but actually isn't his), "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less." Have you heard that? There's certainly wisdom in this, especially for how it combats the last point we just talked about—how humility isn't thinking less of yourself, but at the same time, the resolution it provides isn't quite seeing the full picture either. Humility isn't just self-forgetfulness; actually, it starts with self-acknowledgment.

Consider this quote that's actually from C.S. Lewis: "If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud... If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed." True humility doesn't start with forgetting oneself, but with analyzing oneself and recognizing one's own pride, conceit, and hypocrisy. The truth is that all of us struggle with putting on masks for the audience of others rather than God.

In our epistle reading today, Paul, a former Pharisee, says, "We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness." You know why he appeals to God as his witness? Because God can see behind the masks.

Three times in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "...your Father, who sees what is done in secret." Heb. 4 says, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." You can't fool God like you fool everyone else, deciding what people see by the masks you put on. He judges you on the basis of what's hidden away behind the mask—the gossip, the judging, the pride, lust, greed, and drunkenness—the thing the others don't see. His word, like a double-edge sword, cuts right through all those outward layers you've put on and leaves your true self, the hypocrite, laid bare before his judgement. Without our masks, what are we to do then...?

If the first step of true humility is self-acknowledgment, how does that not then just lead to self-hatred or seeking self-gain every time? Because after self-acknowledgment, you know what proper humility does? It looks away, and it looks to Jesus. Throughout this section on humility, Jesus points to himself as the key element to true humility. He offers what no teacher of this world ever could. He offers hope to hypocrites.

His Righteousness

Such is the grace of God in Jesus Christ:

Jesus didn't just sit in Moses' seat repeating God's law for you to do, he fulfilled God's law when he did it in your place for you.

The teachers of this world clothed themselves with wide phylacteries on their foreheads and arms and long tassels to be seen by the masses; but Christ was clothed with a crown of thorns on his forehead, nails in his wrists, and he was stripped bare as he hung outside the city before just a few in the dark.

He became what he was not, so we could become what we are not. Although he was the exalted King of Glory, there he hung in humility with a sign above his head, mocking, "The King of the Jews," becoming a hypocrite, that we might be exalted in his place.

The greatest among all of us was the Suffering Servant, who, if anyone had a right to walk around with pride, it would be him who literally had equality with God, and yet did not use that as something to be exploited. Instead, he humbled himself all the way to the point of death, and not just any death, but a death of public shame on a cross. But those who humble themselves will be exalted, and on Easter, God exalted the perfectly

humble Jesus and gave him the name that is above all names. He reigns on high as the one who is worthy of all our praise as our Lord and Savior.

The teachers of this world will use their false-positions of authority to weigh you down with heavy burdens and then offer you no solutions, but the High King of Heaven says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened—you who struggle with self-hatred and guilt—and I will give you rest. I will give you value. I will give you forgiveness. For my yolk is easy and my burden is light. “

Conclusion

As Christians we take off the masks we’ve been wearing and humble ourselves because we look to Christ for our value. He doesn’t just wash us on the outside but cleans us to our very core—to our souls, making us all equal children of the Father because we all bear his perfectly humble identity through faith. “All the world’s a stage,” and we use that stage of our lives to give glory to our God in everything we do, showing the world what’s behind the mask—a sinner saved by a truly gracious God.

This sermon was preached by Seminarian Micah Otto.