

THE HYPOCRITE IS A BAD ACTOR!

Today's Text: Matt. 23: 1-36

Extracts:

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat. Therefore, whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but *do not do according to their works, for they say, and do not do*. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But *all their works they do to be seen by men*. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi,'" [Matt. 23: 1-7]

*Actors and actresses are people who make it their career to play roles. The roles they play may be of true or fictional characters, and how well they do is measured by the extent to which the acting is close to the role. For example, when Jamie Foxx played Ray Charles in the biological movie, **Ray** (2004), you could hardly differentiate the actor from the man. Every year, the American Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences recognizes and rewards excellence of actors (among others) with the Academy Awards, popularly known as the Oscars.¹ The best actor/actress award goes to those who have excellent performance in a leading role in the year under consideration. Foxx won for **Ray**.*

*A hypocrite has been defined by the **Encarta Dictionary** as "somebody who pretends to have admirable principles, beliefs, or feelings but behaves otherwise." In that sense, the hypocrite is trying to act the role of a different person. S(he) is trying to be what s (he) is not in real life, except that, while it is a career for a Hollywood actor, it is **a way of life** for the hypocrite. The good Hollywood actor may win an Oscar for playing an acting role quite well but the hypocrite can never win one because you cannot feign high principles all your life. Sooner than later, you are found out and disgraced.*

Examine your Christian walk right now. Are you being yourself or playing the hypocrite? Are you trying to impress others or your God? Do you think that you can feign your way to heaven, just because those around you have not found out about your true self? This week's lesson will enable you to answer those questions and more!

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academy_Award

1. Background: The anatomy of hypocrisy

In last week's study, we examined the unsuccessful attempts by the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Herodians to trap Jesus with political and theological questions [Matt. 22: 15-46]. Having put them in their places, Jesus is in this week's study shifting His attention to the multitudes and His disciples [Matt. 23: 1]. His aim was to assist them to know how to identify a hypocrite so that they would not be deceived or misled in their walk with Him. That is of much interest to us also because there is as much hypocrisy today in the body of Christ as it was in those early days. In fact, things have got worse because you can hardly draw the line today between the church and the world. Therefore, the anatomy of hypocrisy that Jesus dissected for His listeners will also help us to identify the trait in us and those around us. Let us take the key points in the Lord's discourse:

a) *Hypocrites do not practise what they preach*

The scribes and the Pharisees sat in Moses' seat, that is, their teachings derived from the Law of Moses. Therefore, the people should observe and do whatever they told them. However, Jesus warned the people, "But do not do according to their works; *for they say, and do not do.*" They laid unbearable burdens on other people's shoulders but they themselves would not move them with one of their fingers [vv. 2-4].

Many church leaders make rules for the congregation but exempt themselves from following them. Some leaders stay in their offices during worship until it is time to give the day's sermon. After the sermon, they go back into their offices, leaving the rest of us "poor folks" to complete the worship service! The leaders who are preaching humility or sexual purity are among the most rebellious and sexually depraved in the congregation. Some are too big to come to the weekly Bible classes. If you cannot show good examples, who will come to God in truth?

b) *They play to the gallery*

Hypocrites seem to be under the mistaken impression that their righteousness before God is determined by their ability to impress their audiences! So, "all their works they do to be seen by men." For example, the Pharisees enlarged the borders of their garments, loved the best places at feasts and sat in the front seats in the synagogue. They loved greetings in the marketplaces where men (and women) called them "Rabbi." There was no iota of humility in them [vv. 5-12].

Most of us are quite susceptible to similar tendencies. Our inordinate pursuit of ranks and titles has nothing to do with our spiritual growth but to impress. Somebody who could not finish high school obtains degrees from an unrecognized Bible College and suddenly begins to be addressed

as “Rev. /Dr.’ It is when he opens his mouth to speak that his poor expressions betray his illiteracy! In some churches where people with higher ranks sit in front, some young people who still have running noses (in spiritual matters) rush to be rapidly promoted to higher ranks. Yet, they cannot pray for themselves, not to talk of preaching a sermon! Some of us bend church rules and practices to please our highest contributors or political supporters. We are playing to the gallery.

Even the early disciples were not immune from this affliction. For example, Paul had an open confrontation with Peter at Antioch over the matter. Before a delegation of Jewish converts from Jerusalem came there, Peter ate with the Gentiles. But, as soon as the team came, Peter “withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision.” Even Barabbas and the rest of the Jews “also played the hypocrite with him” [Gal. 2: 11-13].

c) *They can win converts but cannot keep them*

Hypocrites can “travel land and sea to win one proselyte” but, after s(he) is won, they “make him [her] twice as much a son of hell” as themselves [Matt. 23: 15]. For example, they can attract people who are desperate for physical healing or greedy for material blessings but, thereafter, they have nothing to offer them towards salvation. The scribes and Pharisees emphasized rituals over knowledge of God, and “devour(ed) widows’ houses and for pretence (made) long prayers” [vv. 13-22]. They insisted on tithes to the minutest details of compliance but “neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith” [v.23].

The apostles set an early example of how to deal with this kind of problem. We are told, “When the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Jews by the Hellenists (i.e., the Greek-speaking Jews), because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.” The apostles immediately apprehended the problem by choosing seven Spirit-filled deacons to take on administrative chores while the apostles gave themselves “continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” As a result, “the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith” [Acts 6: 1- 7].

d) *Consequently, hypocrites are mere painted sepulchres!*

It is obvious that those who exhibit the above characteristics are nothing but “whitewashed tombs which in deed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.” So, whoever outwardly appears righteous but is inwardly full of hypocrisy and lawlessness is a painted sepulchre [Matt. 23: 27-28]. How could the

scribes and Pharisees have considered themselves righteous when they murdered truth (told by the prophets that were killed by their ancestors) only to turn around to mourn its (truth's) death (by building the prophets' tombs and adorning the monuments of the righteous) [vv. 29-32]? That is like the man who murdered both his parents asking for sympathy because he had become an orphan!

A Nigerian newspaper recently reported the proceedings of a divorce case in a customary court in Lagos.² The man, an evangelist, was the spiritual head of a branch of his denomination while his wife who had been married to him for 15 years was the head of the female members of his congregation. They had had a son who unfortunately died. Now the woman was suing for divorce on account of her husband's domestic violence against her. In his defence, the man said, "The petitioner is my friend who on her own volition, decided to bear my surname for her convenience. There is no form of marriage either legal or customary between us and I challenge the petitioner to produce any such marriage documents in the court." Most true believers would have a problem with his defence. For example, did Adam have a wedding ceremony or a legal marriage certificate when he married Eve? This evangelist has spent 15 years living with a girlfriend that he was sleeping with. How did he explain his life of fornication to his congregation? That is hypocrisy at work.

2. Why the hypocrite can never win God's *Oscar*!

Hollywood stars can win *Oscars* because they are competing against performance standards set by human beings. Hypocrites may be better actors than Hollywood stars but they will never win God's awards for the following reasons, among others:

a) *God's standards are spiritual, not physical*

God's ways are not our ways and His ways and thoughts are as far away from ours as the heavens are higher than the earth [Is. 55: 8-9]. For example, we can measure time with a time piece, such as a clock or a watch because we are counting hours and days. God counts eternity that has no beginning or end. How do you measure that? That is why a day and a thousand years are one and the same with Him [2 Pet. 3: 8]. So, human performance from God's perspective is beyond human comprehension or measurement. How can you then try to impress Him?

² Omobola Tolu-Kusimo, 'Cleric Disowns Wife of 15 Years in Court,' http://www.nguardiannews.com/news/article02/indexn2_html?pdate=040709&ptitle= ; Saturday, July 4, 2009.

Take the example of when God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint one of the sons of Jesse as king of Israel in place of Saul that God had rejected. On arriving in Bethlehem, Jesse lined up his seven grown sons. As soon as Samuel saw the eldest of them all, Eliab, he said to himself, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is before Him.” But God told Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for *man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*” In the end, God chose David, the teenager that was not even among those lined up for the prophet **[1 Sam. 16: 1-14]!**

Hypocrites are looking in the wrong direction to impress God because they pay attention to the outward instead of the inward. Jesus characterized it this way, “You cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence.” Rather, they ought to “first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also” **[Matt. 23: 25-26]**. What defiles a man comes from within, for “out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness (and) blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man” **[Matt. 15: 17-19]**. How can you deal with such sins by your own effort unless with the redeeming power of the blood of Jesus. Therefore, the hypocrite needs to repent and ask for God’s forgiveness if s(he) wants to win God’s *Oscar*.

b) *Hypocrisy cannot last for long*

Unfortunately, hypocrites are the last to know their true self! According to a well-known management principle (The Johari Window), there are many things that others know about you that you can never know about yourself. For example, you can never smell your own breath, no matter how offensive it may be. Yet everybody else can smell it even from a distance! In like manner, your mannerisms (how you talk or smile, the perfumes you love, your colour combinations, etc) may mean different things to different people. That expensive perfume that you splash on your body and underclothes every morning may smell like an insect repellent to your colleagues! That hand that you rest on your female secretary when you talk to her she may read as sexual harassment! Therefore, your public show of righteousness can easily be deflated by what others know of your dirty private life that you have tried to cover up or hardly know about.

God catches you before human beings do since He looks at the heart. For example, Jesus taught His disciples (and us) during the Sermon on the Mount that once you look lustfully at another man’s wife, you have already committed adultery with her **[Matt. 5: 28]**. By that rule, most of us so-called faithful spouses are hypocrites!

c) *The end of hypocrisy is defeat and exposure*

A false life is a precarious one. Sooner than later, the truth will come out and “be sure your sin will find you out” [Num. 32: 23]. Ask King David over his adulterous affair with Bathsheba.. God told him, “You did this thing secretly but I will [expose your punishment] before all Israel, before the sun” [2 Sam. 12: 12]. Ask Ananias and his wife Sapphira who lied to the apostle Peter about the actual proceeds from their sale of land. Peter said to the man who brought the money, “Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?... Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? *You have not lied to men but to God.*” He died right away. A few hours later, his wife, who did not know what had happened to her husband maintained the same lie and she too died [Acts 5: 1-10].

Jesus said of hypocrites. “Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?” [Matt. 23:33]. The hypocrite may be able to impress the world but cannot deceive God. Sooner than later, s(he) has to face His judgment. The sentence for the unrepentant hypocrite is clear: humiliation on earth and eternal residence in the unquenchable fire of hell.

3. Conclusion: Always be your true self before God!

You can impress your spouse or children or siblings. You can deceive your colleagues or congregation into seeing you as their role model. Sooner than later, your true self will be revealed and it will not be in pleasant or favourable circumstances. Those who used to respect you will develop retrospective hatred for misleading them all the while. Even in Hollywood, you will never win an *Oscar* because you are a bad actor. Your life style did not match the role you had played all the while.

Before God, your righteousness is as filthy rags [Is. 64: 6]. Repent and return to Him. The time has come for you to give up hypocrisy and return to God, confessing, “You are my Father. I am the clay and You, the potter. Do not look at my iniquity forever” [vv. 8-9].

Your acting days are over. Jesus is calling you to return to His Father. Do not reject the call.