

March 13, 2016

*I Have Sinned: Hypocrisy*

Matthew 23:23-28

**Opening Words:** One of our basic human spiritual needs is for forgiveness. It is one of the things that draw us to Christ. Jesus did not come into the world to be our role model. Jesus did not come into our world to be our teacher. Jesus did not come into our world to entertain us. Jesus came into the world to save us from our sins. Never forget, Jesus is our Savior. Colossians 1:13-14 says, *"He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."* Lent is a time to confess our sins and repent. This is message number eight in my nine-part sermon series, *I Have Sinned!* This morning, we look at hypocrisy. Our Gospel lesson is Matthew 23:23-28.

**Matthew 23:23-28**      "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. <sup>24</sup> You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

<sup>25</sup> "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. <sup>26</sup> Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

<sup>27</sup> "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. <sup>28</sup> In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

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Let me begin with this anonymous poem.

We are writing a Gospel a chapter each day  
By deeds that we do and words that we say;  
People read what we write, whether faithless or true...  
So what is the Gospel according to you?

If that poem makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

This morning we find ourselves in the twenty-third chapter of Matthew. Jesus is talking to the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. His point is clear: leadership and responsibility go hand in hand. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees are doing everything right externally. They are doing everything wrong internally. In other words, they are hypocrites. They give their tithe, but they have forgotten about justice, mercy and faithfulness. They have cleaned the outside of the cups, but are consumed by self-indulgence. They are burying the dead correctly, but they are really spiritually dead

themselves. They look good on the outside, yet they are ugly on the inside. In other words, they are hypocrites. This story makes us uncomfortable because we don't want to be hypocrites. Mark Twain once said, *"We are all like the moon; we have a dark side we don't want anyone to see."* I don't want to be seen as a hypocrite and neither do you. We want to be seen by God and the world as sincere Christian disciples. Our future as a church is dependent on your sincerity. There is something extremely powerful about sincerity.

Webster defines a hypocrite as "one who gives false appearance of having admirable qualities, beliefs or feelings". In other words, we are hypocrites when our words and deeds don't match. We understand hypocrisy because our society seems to be filled with hypocrites. Americans can tolerate just about anything, but we will not tolerate hypocrites. Listen to the next line in this message. Today, I am not going to talk about unfaithful spouses, corrupt politicians or wayward clergy. Instead, I am going to talk about the hypocrisy that exists within the church. You know it is true. We talk about our passion for Jesus, but our deeds don't always match. We are more interested in church politics, practices and happenings. Could it be we are more interested in the church building than we are Jesus? Could it be we have substituted church membership with true discipleship? The two can be a million miles apart. You can be involved in every church activity and still not know Jesus.

The other day, I was out on a pastoral visit. The person I was visiting asked the question so many have asked, "Why is the church dying?" It is an excellent question with no single answer. There are a variety of reasons why the church is dying. It would make a wonderful sermon series. Sometimes churches die because the population in that area drops. We see that right here in Mahoning County. Our county's population has dropped by 70,000 people since 1980. It is impossible to maintain the same number of churches with fewer people. It is true of any kind of business. Sometimes churches die because the population has shifted. Within this district we have several churches that have found this to be the case. The neighborhood that once supported that church changed. If the faces in the church and the faces in the neighborhood don't match, there is a problem. Sometimes churches close because the style of worship the church offers doesn't speak to younger generations. Our society has become very informal. Go to a wedding reception and count the number of people who wear jeans and a t-shirt. An informal society finds traditional liturgy boring. Sometimes churches die because that community finds the church to be hypocritical. You may not like that fact, but that is what research has uncovered.

There are many websites; [americanpreachers.com](http://americanpreachers.com) is just one. They give us ten reasons why people don't go to church. We have looked at it in the past, let's look at it again today. Let me just give you the top six:

1. Christians are judgmental and negative
2. Church is boring
3. Church is exclusive

4. Christians are homophobic
5. People don't trust organized religion
6. Churches are filled with hypocrites

Instead of being dismissive of the unchurched, maybe we should listen to them. Maybe they have a point. We say we are passionate about Jesus, but how passionate are we about Jesus? How passionate are you about Jesus? That is a hard question. If we are not passionate about Jesus, then we are hypocrites.

Today, I want to look at hypocrisy through the back door. The opposite of being a hypocrite is being sincere. That means our words and our deeds would match. Through the eyes of God, sincerity is extremely important for two reasons. First, sincerity changes us. Second, sincerity enhances our witness. May we never forget the sincerity of Jesus. If you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"** First, sincerity changes us!

### **Sincerity Changes Us!**

During the American Civil War (1861-1865), Abraham Lincoln tried several different generals-in-chief to lead his Union army. One of those men was George B. McClellan (1826-1885). He was a West Point graduate, who had little respect for Lincoln. He actually ran against Lincoln during the election of 1864. As Commander-in-chief, Lincoln was frustrated with McClellan's inactivity. He was always drilling his soldiers but he never attacked. He always said his troops weren't ready for battle. At some point Lincoln grew so frustrated with McClellan that he said, *If General McClellan isn't going to use his army, I'd like to borrow it for a time.* Maybe it is the same in the Christian faith? It isn't good enough to just think about the faith, you must apply the faith to your life. Once you do that, you will change.

This last week has been different than I expected. I expected to be preoccupied with our three Russian visitors. That simply hasn't happened. The reason is, I haven't seen them since Tuesday. They have been living in someone else's home. Her name is Tamara and she is one of Kathryn's translators. She was born in Russia and still has family there. She is in America because she married an American. She is now an American citizen, but a big part of her heart is in her homeland. She translates for free because she has a passion for these Russian children. They have been in her home all week because she can't do enough for them. Our visitors being there is the perfect match. I believe, it is a God sighting. She is the perfect hostess because she speaks Russian, cooks Russian, thinks Russian and knows Russian customs and habits. You can't question her sincerity, because she is totally committed to our visitors. She has put her life on hold because she believes God has called her to do it. How can you question her faith? Living out the faith can cause interruptions; living out the faith can be hard.

In *Twelve Tests of Character*, Henry Emerson Fosdick tells the story of a woman in the early twentieth century in Armenia. Life was hard for her. One day she and her brother

were being chased down an alley by a Turkish soldier. When the soldier caught up with them, her brother was killed but she escaped. In time, she was captured and sent to a camp. When the Turks found out she had medical training, they sent her to a Turkish military hospital. You guessed it. One of her patients was the Turkish soldier who killed her brother. She gave him excellent care and nursed the soldier back to health. On the day he was released he asked her one question, "why did you care for me? I killed your brother!" She replied, "I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. He tells us to love our enemies." How can you question that woman's commitment to Jesus? How can you question her sincerity? It isn't good enough to think about the faith. You must live out the faith. Sincere faith will change you! And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Sincerity enhances our witness.

### **Sincerity Enhances our Witness**

There is an old preaching story about a teacher. She was asked to help tutor a teenage boy who had been burned in a fire. In a great deal of pain, daily he grew more depressed. When she met him, he barely responded; he was lost within himself. She pressed on with the topic of the day, irregular verbs and dangling participles. For one long hour she talked, but he didn't respond. He just sat there in his sea of self-pity. At the end of the hour, the teacher forced a smile and said, "Good-bye." Unable to sleep that night, she began to question herself. I am the world's worst teacher! The next day, reluctantly, she returned to the hospital to try again. When she walked by the nurse's station, she was greeted by one of the nurses, "You must be the world's greatest teacher! I couldn't believe the difference in your student." The teacher had no words and walked into the boy's room. She found him sitting up and smiling. The teacher asked the boy what had changed his attitude? He responded, "You! Everyone else told me I would get better but I didn't believe them. I thought I was going to die. You never told me I was going to recover. Instead, you just taught me about irregular verbs and dangling participles. Then, it hit me. Why would you take the time to teach me if I wasn't going to recover?" Never underestimate sincerity. Sincerity enhances our witness.

Easter is in just two weeks! Between now and then, we will look at the events of Holy Week. You know what is coming, but it is still hard to hear. After three years, Jesus is finally confronted by his enemies. You know the story. It all began on Sunday. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and was welcomed by the crowd. He cleansed the temple and cursed a fig tree, the symbol of Israel. He taught at the temple and prepared for his last Seder. He revolutionized that Seder and turned it into our Communion. He went to the garden to pray, was arrested and tried. He was sent to Golgotha and endured the cross for six hours until he died. When that tragic moment came, Matthew tells us, an earthquake hit the land and stones burst open. Luke tells us, the Centurion praised God, while those less enlightened beat their breasts (Luke 23:47-49). No one could question Jesus's sincerity because he completely surrendered to the will of God. The one thing you can't say about Jesus was that he was a hypocrite; he was sincere. Sincerity enhances our witness. Charles Spurgeon once said,

*"Sincerity makes the very least person to be of more value than the most talented hypocrite."*

Let me end with this anonymous poem.

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