

SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

Being Holy in an Unholy World

“Holiness Without Hypocrisy”

Matthew 21:18-27

When the final chapter of history is written and the books are closed and life here on this earth comes to an end, I believe the record will show that one of the truly great saints of the Twentieth Century was a man from Germany by the name of **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**.

I hope you are familiar with his story. I encourage you to read some of his writings. His book *Cost of Discipleship* is a Christian classic.

If you're not familiar with his story, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was Professor of Theology at the University of Berlin in Germany during the 1930's. This was the time when Adolf Hitler was rising to power and prominence in Germany and national fervor was at high tide.

The church in Germany was divided in its response to Hitler and this new wave of nationalism. One group aligned themselves with Hitler and formed an official German Church which supported the views and the policies of Hitler and banned all Jews from holding official positions in the life of the church.

But Bonhoeffer was among a small group of Christian leaders who could just not accept the un-Christlike hatred of a whole race of people. So he along with others set up an underground church that explicitly repudiated the views and the vision of Hitler and the Third Reich.

It was called the *Confessing Church* and it was a dangerous thing to be identified with this movement and this church. It wasn't long before Dietrich Bonhoeffer's home was ransacked by the German Gestapo and so he fled to England where he lived for two years in complete safety but then in 1939 he found himself standing at the crossroads of a crucial decision.

He had to make a choice, a gut-wrenching choice, that would forever

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set the course of his eternal destiny. On the one hand, he was offered one of the most prestigious theological appointments in the world—lecturing at Union Seminary in New York City. The other choice was to go back into Germany and head up an illegal, underground seminary for the Confessing Churches who refused to go along with Hitler's ideas and policies.

The more he thought about it and the more he prayed about it, he came to the conclusion that his Christian faith would be meaningless if he chose the easy path, the easy option. So he went back to Germany and placed himself in harm's way to live out and practice and teach the basic tenets of the Christian faith.

The Nazi regime tried to silence him. He was banned from teaching. He was banned from preaching. He was banned from participating in any kind of public speaking. Finally, in 1943, he was arrested and thrown into prison after money used to help Jews escape to Switzerland was traced back to Bonhoeffer.

But even in prison, he lived out his faith and wrote books and encouraged the other prisoners and lead worship services. But one fateful morning at dawn—April 9, 1945—prison guards came to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's little prison cell, stripped him of his clothes, tortured him, ridiculed him, placed a noose around his neck and hung him in the prison yard to die.

Through all of this what distressed Dietrich Bonhoeffer the most was the way so many Christians could so easily sell out their Christian beliefs and convictions to Adolf Hitler's evil vision. He wrote one time:

How can people who own the name of Christ so betray Christ and the things He taught? How can they pray in a church that bans Jews from holding office?

It convinced Bonhoeffer that religiosity in and of itself is worthless. It didn't matter how fervently a person believed in Jesus, how many times each day they prayed, how often they went to church and how sincerely they sang the hymns on Sunday. **In the end, the measure of spirituality is not how we are in the church but how we are in the world and in the whole of life.**

That's what I want to talk about this morning – **Holiness Without Hypocrisy**. Someone has defined hypocrisy in these words: *“Hypocrisy is nothing more than skin-deep holiness.”* It is the appearance of righteousness on the outside that lacks any real substance on the inside.

The famous English theologian and scholar, **John Favel**, said, *“It is to have the tongue of an angel but the heart of a devil.”* It is to profess by the yard but practice by the inch.

In one of the art museums in London there hangs a rather intriguing portrait. As you look at it from a distance what you think you are seeing is a picture of a monk engaged in prayer. His hands are folded, his head is bowed, and it looks like he is holding a prayer book.

But as you come nearer and examine the painting more closely, you see that in reality it's not a prayer book he is holding but a punch bowl. And he isn't praying—he is squeezing a lemon and making lemonade.

Appearances can be deceiving! Now that doesn't really matter a lot when you're just looking at a picture. But it can be devastating when a child or a neighbor or a co-worker or a new Christian sees an inconsistent image in the life of a Christian believer.

Charles Swindoll puts it like this in his best-selling book entitled *“Grace.”*

You want to mess up the minds of your children? Here's how—guaranteed. Rear them in a legalistic, tight context of external religion, where performance is more important than reality.

Fake your faith. Sneak around and pretend your spirituality. And train your children to do the same. Embrace a long list of do's and don'ts publicly but hypocritically practice them privately...yet never own up to the fact that its hypocrisy.

Act one way but live another. And you can count on it—emotional and spiritual damage will occur.

Listen, people won't buy what we confess in public if we're not

conducting ourselves with integrity in private. **A. W. Tozer**, one of the great holiness writers, has put it like this:

I am afraid we modern Christians are long on talk and short on conduct. We use the language of power but our deeds are the deeds of weakness. We settle for words in religion because deeds are too costly.

It is easier to pray, “Lord, help me to carry my cross daily” than to (simply) pick up the cross and carry it; but since the mere request for help to do something we do not actually intend to do has a certain degree of religious comfort, we are content with repetition of mere words.

Now let me hurriedly say—I don't believe anyone intentionally sets out to become a hypocrite. But what happens is...we get so concerned in making sure the outside of the cup looks clean that we completely neglect the inside of the cup.

Jesus talks about this in **Matthew 23**. He said, *“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. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean”* (Matthew 23:25-26 New International Version).

That's why the Bible says to us in another place, *“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life”* (Proverbs 4:23 New International Version).

Now when it comes to this matter of hypocrisy there are three major problem areas we have to deal with and Jesus points them out to His disciples the very last week He lived here upon the earth before going to the Cross.

So let's look at them very quickly this morning. Here are three things we need to guard against as we seek to truly be holy in an unholy world.

Problem Area Number One – The Temptation To Look Good

Without Doing Good. Please take your Bibles and turn to the **21st Chapter** of the book of **Matthew**. We're going to begin reading with that **18th verse**.

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“Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, ‘May you never bear fruit again!’ Immediately the tree withered” (Matthew 21:18-19 New International Version).

Now I'm not an expert on fig trees. In fact, all of my botanical knowledge can pretty much be contained in a thimble...with room to spare! But I understand from Bible scholars that typically during the month of April in Israel a fig tree will have little green knobs on its branches. These are buds and these buds will eventually develop into full grown figs.

Now here was the problem. As Jesus looks at this fig tree He sees nothing but leaves. No buds, no knobs, no promise of fruit—just leaves. He is hungry. No doubt His disciples are also hungry and so He uses this opportunity as a teaching moment.

He curses this tree and it withers. It is what Bible scholars refer to as an “acted out parable.” Jesus seizes this moment to teach them something—something they would never forget. **He teaches them that outward beauty is not enough.**

It's not enough to just look good. Jesus says in another place, *“This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples”* (John 15:8 New International Version). If we want to be serious about following Jesus we must refuse to settle for an “appearance only” approach to life.

The question is not: *“How do I look to others? What do they think about my spirituality?”* but, *“How do I look to God?”* The Bible says, *“The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart”* (1st Samuel 16:7 New International Version).

Looking good without doing good indicates a lack of

substance. That was Jesus' big problem with the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. That's why He took them to task. That's why He rebuked them and warned His disciples to be anything but like

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them. He said:

You are careful to tithe even the tiniest part of your income, but you ignore the important things of the law—justice, mercy, and faith... You are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity. You try to look like upright people outwardly, but inside your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Matthew 23:23, 27-28 New Living Translation

Having a bunch of leaves on our branches isn't enough to please God. He says in the book of **Isaiah**, *“These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me”* (Isaiah 29:13 New International Version).

Holiness begins in the heart. If you want holiness without hypocrisy you have to start with the heart. You have to focus on what really matters. You have to let go of your ego and ask God to give you above everything else a new heart.

Now that's something you can't do for yourself; it takes a miracle from God. But here's the good news. He's in the miracle-working business. He promises us, *“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh”* (Ezekiel 36:26 New International Version).

If you will simply lay yourself at Christ's feet He will take you into His arms and give you a new heart. **G. Campbell Morgan**, the great British preacher, once put it like this: *“All Gods thrones are reached by going downstairs.”*

It's not enough to just look good. When you go to the doctor, you don't want to go to someone who just has an “honorary” doctorate from some university. You don't want someone with just a title that says they're a doctor. You want someone who has gone through the process, who has earned the degree, who “is” a doctor, who moves and speaks and acts out of his own experience.

Problem Area Number Two – The Temptation To Pray Without Power. The temptation to allow prayer in our life to just be a form and

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not a force! The temptation to just play it safe—to ask nothing of God, to expect nothing from God, and to receive nothing of God!

Look at **verse 20**. Jesus cursed the fig tree and the Bible says that **“immediately the tree withered.”** Now catch this, **verse 20**.

When the disciples saw this, they were amazed. “How did the fig tree wither so quickly?” they asked.

Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also, you can say to this mountain, “Go, throw yourself into the sea,” and it will be done. If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.

Matthew 21:20-22 New International Version

Jesus is challenging us here to pray bigger and bolder prayers and He’s challenging us to really believe that He can and will answer those prayers.

To have all of this incredible power at our disposal—the power of prayer, the resources of Almighty God—and then never really utilize it for anything truly significant in our lives is just the height of hypocrisy.

We sing that little chorus:

**God can do anything,
Anything, anything;
God can do anything but fail.
He can save, He can keep;
He can cleanse, and He will.
God can do anything but fail.**

And then we never ask Him for anything really significant in our lives but just pray these little safe, benign, innocuous prayers. That almost makes a mockery of prayer.

If we say we believe in an all-powerful God and yet never do anything to allow Him to really unleash His power in our lives—just always play it safe, never ask Him to really do anything significant in our lives, never pray big or stretch our faith or expect Him to do something

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supernatural in our midst—isn’t that just a telltale sign that we really don’t believe He is who He says He is and that He’ll do what He says He’ll do?

Here’s my challenge to you. Think of something you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God wants to accomplish in your life. I’m not talking about material acquisitions or anything like that. I’m talking about victory over a sin or the restoration of some broken relationship or being bold and courageous in a place where you need to be bold and courageous. Think of something you know God wants to accomplish in your life but has eluded you for a long, long time.

Begin praying for it in a big way. Begin praying for it in a bold way. Begin praying for it in absolute faith—not faith in yourself or in your own power and goodness but faith in the power of God to do what He says He will do.

Whatever obstacle, whatever mountain is standing in your way right now, begin praying in faith that the mountain will be moved. Don’t let prayer be just a form in your life. That’s hypocrisy. Let it be a force.

Problem Area Number Three – The Temptation To Avoid The Truth. Look at **verse 23**.

Jesus entered the temple courts, and while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”

Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?”

They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ But if we say,

‘From men’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”

So they answered Jesus, “We don’t know.”

Then he said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

International Version

Matthew 21:23-27 New

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Jesus knew that the chief priests and the elders of the people were trying to set a trap for Him, and He wouldn’t take the bait. Instead, He zeroed in on an area of hypocrisy in their lives—the fact that they were more concerned with public opinion than they were about truth.

Have you ever had an argument with someone who is proven wrong and yet they just refuse to admit it? I mean the truth is staring them in the face, but they just refuse to look at it. They’re not interested in the truth, they’re just interested in having their way prevail, in winning they’re side of the argument whether they’re right or not.

*Isn’t that sad? Don’t you almost feel sorry for them? It’s like they put their hands over their ears and say, “**I don’t want to hear the facts. My mind is already made up. Don’t confuse me with the facts.**”*

You know, some of us do that with God. That’s what they religious leaders were doing in Jesus’ day. Instead of looking at the truth and saying, **“Okay, Jesus, let’s talk about it.”** They stiffened their necks, they closed their minds, they shut the door to their hearts and said nothing.

Last Sunday we talked about grieving the Holy Spirit and the things that clog the channel of His flow in our lives. Nothing is more damaging to our spiritual growth and life than to hear God’s Spirit speak truth to our spirits and then just do nothing with it.

Peace and comfort can be found nowhere else but in simple obedience to God’s truth. Jesus said, **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”** (Matthew 7:21 New International Version).

“Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves”

(James 1:22 New King James Version). That is the key to holiness without hypocrisy.

Guard your heart above all else. Pray big! And when God’s Spirit speaks truth to your heart don’t ignore Him.