

## HYPOCRISY

Virgil Warren, PhD

Even though the Sermon on the Mount is wisdom literature and therefore less structured, it has pattern and carries a unifying theme. The initial set of beatitudes introduces statements of responsibility for being God's light and salt in the world. To accomplish that purpose, Jesus' disciples must correct their thinking at points like the ones he mentions. We should not misconstrue this correcting as discarding previous revelation, but as fulfilling it by proper understanding. In 5:20 Jesus tells his followers that their righteousness needs to exceed that of contemporary religious leaders, a comment clarified by six illustrations. Under the contrast formula "*You have heard that it was said by them of old time . . . but I tell you . . .*" Jesus discusses murder, adultery and divorce, oath taking, revenge, and love. Chapter 6:1-18 is a further unit about hypocrisy.

In three paragraphs Jesus deals with hypocrisy in almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, showing how it ruins religious practice. The lead statement is "*Be careful not to do your righteousness in front of people so they will see you. Otherwise, you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.*" Each segment on alms, prayer, and fasting contains the stylized statement, "*Truly, I tell you, they have their reward*" (6:2c, 5c, 16c). "*They do it to be seen by men*" is a second recurring comment (6:2b, 5b, 16b). Each paragraph ends, "*Your Father who sees in secret will reward you*" (6:4b, 6b, 18b).

The hypocrisy problem is illustrated first in regard to charity (6:2): "*When you do your alms, do not blow the trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets so people will see them.*" Next (6:5-15) Jesus talks about praying, gives an example prayer, and comments on legitimate prayer. The illustrative material bears the traditional label "Model Prayer." In the present treatment we look at the first, second, and fourth portions of 6:1-18. Another chapter looks at the model prayer separately.

There are several problems with hypocrisy. The first is that it destroys the "mission mandate." In drawing that inference, we assume that 5:21-6:18 grows out of 5:16-20, dealing with Israel's responsibility to be light and salt in the world. That same audience is assumed in 6:1-18.

Jesus makes a positive statement about what righteousness should be: "*Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven*" (5:16). He makes a negative statement as well: righteousness must not be reduced to what the scribes and Pharisees exhibit (5:20). In the remainder of chapter 5 Jesus offers examples of their misunderstandings, which lead to misbehavior. In chapter 6 he shows how their practices

likewise destroy God's mission mandate to his people. When God tells them how to live, he means proper action as well as proper understanding. When they live his way, they communicate his will to those who see them. The witness for God's will comes first through the righteous life of his people. If that is not happening, the witness is lost and the purpose is frustrated. When people do something, they also teach something and commend something. Their lives invite people to take the same attitude toward God that they have.

The opposite of hypocrisy is genuineness. A genuine person lets us see what he really is. What he is on the outside is what he is on the inside. His heart means what his mouth says. He behaves what he believes. He does not put on a front to make people think he is better than he is.

The importance of godly living cannot be over-emphasized. Many of us do not feel we can do much for God because we cannot see ourselves as vocational servants. But the body of Christ as a whole has an important role in evangelism and personal growth even though many of its members have no special training. The general Christian life shows the validity of Christian living. It is hard to get people to respect the claims of Christ when Christians do not do what he says or when they use his name as a mere byword.

Not long ago my family and I did a music program for a local organization. Before we had the meal and program, the "chaplain" got up and offered a prayer. Less than five minutes later his little girl jumped to the front of the lunch line and was piddling around with the food. He went up and pulled her back by the arm and said, "Jesus," as if to say, "Goodness gracious, what are you doing?" What impression did that make on the child about the importance of Jesus? Such things nullify any work an evangelist could otherwise do.

There is a pattern to the way evangelism operates. First, Christian witness is carried out through normal daily experience. Then come special times that build on the witness we may have been showing for a long time. Occasions arise in these people's lives that ready them for responding to the gospel. Hypocrisy during this demonstration stage destroys response in the proclamation state. Genuine living combines with blessed state to fulfill the mission mandate at its first and most important level. When we are doing the mission mandate, we are living out the blessed life and vice versa. This fact leads to the other problems with hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy settles for too little. How we live has much to do with the satisfaction that comes in life. Part of the "reward" for righteousness is the satisfaction that comes from the righteousness itself. But hypocrisy is not satisfying. Consequently, we shortchange ourselves when we act hypocritically. Hypocrisy settles for people's attention now without seeking God's approval and his reward later as well. Only the people we deceive give us anything positive. What we get now is all we ever get. Hypocrisy takes its toll. Jesus said that hypocrites have their reward. There is nothing to anticipate because hypocrisy does not generate further good.

Hypocrisy degrades everybody in the situation. It degrades God because it acts as if he does not see through our sham. It degrades other people because it implies that they are not smart enough to catch on. It degrades us in their eyes because they can tell that our heart is not in it and because they infer that we are not smart enough to realize they do “see through” us. Hypocrisy cheapens the whole experience for everybody.

In his teaching about hypocrisy Jesus gives some antidotes to the problem. First he counsels us to do our righteousness “in secret.” He is not forbidding public offerings or public prayer. Later in the temple area Jesus drew attention to a widow’s public offering as an example for his disciples. Paul and Silas sang and prayed out loud in the jail at Philippi while other prisoners listened. There was corporate fasting at Antioch when Paul and Barnabas left on their missionary journey. Jesus does not confine religious observance to private situations so no one else will know what is going on. The point is that genuine righteousness lies more in the motives than in the circumstances. In other words, in every circumstance we should do our acts of righteousness the way we would do them if no one was watching.

Obtaining this conclusion depends on a principle of interpretation that may warrant explanation because “doing your righteousness in secret” could otherwise be misunderstood. The principle is variously called the law of opposition, the law of negation, the law of contrast. It indicates that an expression means the opposite only of what it denies. In this case, “in secret” does not then mean anything and everything it could conceivably mean. It means something limited to the speaker’s intentions. The word “cash” is an example. If a clerk at the checkout stand asks, “*Will this be cash or charge?*” we know that “cash” includes coins, dollar bills, or a check—anything used for immediate payment. Anything that would not be credit would be cash. In other circumstances “cash” might contrast with check; so it would not include check. “We take cash only—no checks.” In still other circumstances, “cash” might refer to paper money rather than coins. “Cash” does not mean everything it could mean, but only what the speaker intends in each case as indicated by what it is set over against.

A second antidote to hypocrisy is to direct our righteousness appropriately. For the hypocrite almsgiving is not directed so much toward the beggar as toward other people. In his fasting or prayer the attention is not aimed at God above but at people around who can see what he is doing. Hypocrisy is a form of weakness behavior because the one who does it is preoccupied with getting attention that makes him feel important.

People’s weakness behavior is interesting to study. There are two basic forms of it. One form of it is defensive behavior, which Jesus deals with earlier in the sermon. A person who “*fights at the drop of a hat*” has something to prove—his own strength. His compulsion to prove himself strong shows he is not confident that other people consider him strong or that he is not sure about it himself. When Jesus talks about anger in chapter 5, he in effect calls people to have

enough inner strength or self-concept to control their anger. Strong people do not have to turn difficult situations into occasions for proving something.

“Strong” people are also not preoccupied with making themselves look good. Attention-getting behavior is the second form of weakness behavior that shows up in hypocrisy. Attention-getting persons feel compelled to be in the limelight. They want people to be watching them. It is as if they are not really sure they are worth being watched; so they do things to get people to watch them. Weak personalities lack inner security or a sense of self-worth.

When Jesus says not to behave hypocritically, he calls us not to yield to weakness behavior. Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting are not for getting people to notice us. We would do more than wonder about a man that proposed to a woman at a banquet so everyone could see him give her an expensive ring. She might think twice about accepting a ring under those conditions, because his approach is inappropriate. He is drawing attention to himself more than expressing his love to her. Every activity has an appropriate purpose and, therefore, an appropriate direction and audience. Religion, of all things, is not for reinforcing weakness behavior. It calls people to grow up and mature. Using religion as the Pharisees did to express weakness behavior is the ultimate religious perversion.

Motivation, purpose, and audience have to fit together. In fact, the measure of what we ought to do can be largely determined by the purpose involved. Sometimes we have difficulty deciding what we ought to say or do. One thing that can help us in these cases is to remember the purpose of what we do and the purpose of our life. In light of purpose, we can choose how to go about doing what we are doing and saying what we are saying. Purpose may not provide a foolproof rule of action, but it significantly helps, especially in religious matters since we have responsibility to witness for God and for good as our general purpose of life.

Motivation has to fit purpose to be effective. Our religious purpose is much better accomplished if we do righteousness without show. We do righteousness as if it were in secret and we direct it appropriately—toward God if it is worship and toward the people we are helping instead of third parties to get their attention. Acting purposefully provides better motivation because it is positive motivation. Negative motivation born of fear does not always generate proper behavior. Later Jesus talks about some effects of unrighteousness and hypocrisy, but here the emphasis is on the good things that come from good behavior.

The next antidote to hypocrisy is to remember that God sees. We tend to forget that invisible things are nevertheless real and present. As the saying goes, “Out of sight, out of mind.” Since God is invisible, we may forget he is there and sees what we are doing. In fact, he not only sees what we are doing, but in his omniscience he knows why we are doing it.

Another antidote to hypocrisy is to anticipate God’s reward. There is more to life than what we get out of it along the way. It is structured so that proper activities yield further

opportunities. As long as we genuinely do the righteousness God wants, our actions lead to positive eternal consequences. This section on hypocrisy has many practical applications to our immediate circumstances wherever we live. People are always looking for people they can trust. So when we do righteousness, let's do it without hypocrisy. Let's make our giving real, our prayers sincere, our fasting purposeful, our religious observances genuine. In effect, God is praised, others are helped, and we are rewarded openly.

christir.org