

Matthew 23:1-12 | “Avoiding Hypocrisy”  
*Preached on April 21, 2024 by Pastor Matt Brown*

Please turn in your Bibles this morning to Matthew 23, and we will be looking at verses 1-12 today. *[pause]*

We have been working through the Gospel of Matthew, seeing especially what we are told from a discipleship point of view.

And today is no exception, for we will see something big that we as disciples should avoid. *[pauseeee]*

You know how when you are striving to be healthy, there are certain foods that you know you should avoid? *[pause]*

You have to avoid french fries or potato chips.

You have to avoid candy bars and sugary drinks.

You definitely have to avoid baked goods and pizza. *[pause]*

It's by avoiding those foods and drinks that help you to be more healthy. *[pause]*

Well what is it that you should avoid to help you become *spiritually* healthy? *[pauseeee]*

For some, they would say that you should steer clear of being mean, unkind, grumpy, or a complainer.

And others say that you should avoid bad influences or tempting situations. *[pauseeee]*

Now I would agree with those things, but isn't it interesting some of the things that we don't mention when talking about things to avoid? *[pauseeee]*

As you think about what you should avoid, is one of the top things 'hypocrisy'? *[pauseeee]*

When people mention the sins that they are struggling with recently, do they often mention that they have been dealing with hypocrisy? *[pause]*

Most often not, and this is because absolutely no one wants to be known as a hypocrite. *[pause]*

We are more willing to admit that we have been prideful or selfish than to confess that we have been a hypocrite.

It feels too hard to do because it's divulging that we haven't been genuine, but fake. *[pauseeee]*

A hypocrite is someone who acts like they are godly when deep down they are not. *[pause]*

The Greek word for hypocrite really points to an actor or pretender.

It's someone who puts on a show in front of others, but it's not genuine or real, for it's not really who they are.

And Jesus will teach us to avoid it. *[pause]*

Let's READ the passage. *[READ 1-12]*

After going head-to-head against the religious leaders, as they tried to test him with tricky questions, Jesus goes after *them* by declaring their true hideous character. *[pauseeee]*

Now the scribes were learned men, who were seen as the experts in the Law, and who would teach the people the Law.

And then the Pharisees were a group that prided themselves on their strict adherence to the Law. *[pause]*

Both of these groups were looked up to by the people as the ones who were the super religious and godly ones of the day.

But Jesus shows that they weren't actually that godly at all. *[pauseeee]*

*So here, Christ uses the bad example of these religious teachers to teach us first that we should...*

### **I. Follow the truth that hypocrites may speak, but not their example.**

Whenever Kate and I had a new child, we had to watch these videos in the hospital about how to care for our new baby.

And we were shown in the videos both good examples of what to do, and also, bad examples of what not to do. *[pauseeee]*

We need both, don't we? *[pause]*

The truth is that we follow the examples that we see, and we need to learn which ones to follow and which to avoid.

Well Jesus tells the people to not follow the example of the scribes and Pharisees. *[pause]*

He says, starting in verse 2, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice." *[pauseee]*

To 'sit on Moses' seat' meant that they were the ones who taught the Law of Moses authoritatively.

They explained it to the people, so that the people could learn it. *[pause]*

So Jesus says to "do and observe whatever they tell you." *[pause]*

Now I don't believe this means even the wrong things they teach, for Jesus has called out the religious leaders for their wrong teaching in numerous places and will even later in this chapter.

Rather, this means that when they are accurately expounding the Law of Moses, following in Moses' steps in that regard, then do and observe that.

That is, when they are speaking the truth, listen to that - heed it! *[pauseeee]*

Jesus is showing us an important reality: even hypocrites can speak truth. *[pause]*

The truth is the truth no matter who is saying it.

The truth doesn't just automatically become an untruth, if someone ungodly speaks it.

No, the truth doesn't change. *[pause]*

That means that the scribes and Pharisees did at times speak the truth when they accurately taught according to the Law of Moses. *[pauseeee]*

You see, Jesus didn't want His disciples to throw the baby out with the bathwater, so to say. *[pause]*

Just because the religious leaders did many things wrong didn't mean they should just disregard the truth that they may have spoken.

For that could lead His disciples away from the truth. *[pauseeee]*

Think about some of the well-known Christian teachers, who had a horrible moral failing that was discovered.

Does that negate the truth that they spoke through the years? *[pause]*

Of course not, for the truth is the truth.

So just because that Christian teacher fell morally doesn't mean we just disregard or turn away from the things that they taught, when it's according to Scripture. *[pauseeee]*

I've seen some people who were understandably upset at the fall of some Christian leader, but they also looked with scorn upon *everything* that that teacher taught over the years.

But this led them to turn away from the truth, instead of being discerning and saying, "Yes, this leader was a hypocrite, but the truth is the truth, even if they taught it." *[pauseeee]*

Even hypocrites can speak truth, though their lives do not match that truth. *[pause]*

I'm actually very thankful and encouraged by this!

Because it reminds us that the truth is unchanging, even when sinful vessels like us speak it.  
[pause]

If the truth could change depending on the righteousness of the person, then we could never trust it, for what if that person was a hypocrite and we never found that out? [pause]

And also, we each have our own sins and failings, yet God chooses to use weak, imperfect people like us to speak His glorious, unchanging truth.

So cling to, observe, and follow the truth no matter what, but do not follow the examples of hypocrites.

For Jesus says, “do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice.” [pauseeee]

The scribes and Pharisees were the prototypical hypocrites.

They are the classic example of “do what I say, not what I do.” [pauseeee]

Yes, they taught truth at times, but Jesus is saying, “Just look at their lives! They don’t do what they teach!”

They were all talk, no action.

They could teach well and accurately at times, but their lives did not match what they told others to do. [pauseeeee]

Here’s the thing: it wasn’t that they were trying really hard to do the things that they taught, and were just struggling to do it.

Rather, it was that they *refused* to do what they called others to do. [pause]

Jesus says that “they tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.” [pauseee]

Their teaching sure pushed others to do more things and hard things, but they personally didn’t want to do it and wouldn’t do it.

They wouldn’t even lift a finger to do what they called others to do. [pauseeee]

They demanded much of others, but demanded little of themselves. [pauseeee]

Isn’t this often the case for each of us, though?

We expect much of other people, but give ourselves a pass. [pause]

We are more strict and harsh with others, while we are more lenient with ourselves -- interesting how that works. [pauseeeee]

This can happen in church.

People say, “No one came up to me and talked to me today.”

But then you ask them, “Did you intentionally go up to anyone and talk to them today?”

And what do they say? -- “Well, no.” [pause]

Or people complain about what a church isn’t doing, but here they do nothing to step in and help change anything. [pause]

It’s such an easy thing to do, and I find myself doing the same sort of things. [pauseeee]

This reminds us that our lives should match what we teach and say. [pause]

Being a preacher, this hits home for me because I’m *constantly* teaching others.

And it’s easier to proclaim the truth than to live it out. [pause]

I’ll admit that I don’t do everything that I teach perfectly, so please never think that.

I am a “work-in-progress” just like you.

I have my own set of struggles, failings, weaknesses, and sins. [pause]

There are things that I preach on that I think, “Ouch, I’m struggling with this myself.” [pauseeee]

Certainly heed the truth that I teach when it’s accurate to the Word, and imitate me as I imitate Christ, as Paul says.<sup>1</sup>

But if I’m ever not being a good example of something, certainly don’t follow that example! [pauseeee]

Seek to practice what you preach - to live out God’s calling and commands. [pauseeee]

You see, the Christian life is not all just words and ideas, but it’s truth that is supposed to be lived out! [pause]

The truth isn’t meant to just sit idle in our brains, but it’s supposed to flow out into our hands and feet. [pause]

Biblical truth isn’t meant to be a mere trivia answer, where we learn something and go, “That’s nice to know.”

Rather, it’s meant to change our lives, so we look more and more like Christ. [pauseeee]

We sometimes think, “Look at me. I’m growing in my knowledge of the Bible,” which is good.

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<sup>1</sup> A reference to 1 Corinthians 11:1.

But here are the questions that we should be regularly asking ourselves, “Does my life look any different?”

“Am I a hearer *and* a doer of the Word?”<sup>2</sup>

“Does my life look any different than it did 5 years ago? 10 years? 15?” *[pauseeee]*

Follow the truth that hypocrites may speak, but not their example, for our lives should match the truth.

*But secondly, Jesus shows us that we should...*

## **II. Follow the path of humility, not the path of recognition-seeking.**

Jesus continues His rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees by stating that “they do all their deeds to be seen by others.” *[pauseeee]*

So what it comes down to with these guys is that *they had the wrong motivation.* *[pause]*

Instead of genuinely doing good works from the heart, the religious leaders did things to be seen. *[pause]*

This means that many people probably thought that these guys were super righteous and close to God, but Jesus pulled back the curtain of their hearts.

Their religious acts were all a performance. *[pause]*

Like an actor on the stage, they portrayed godly men, looking for the applause of people, but it was all a show.

It wasn't who they really were.

Their deeds were like a mask that covered up the true state of their souls. *[pauseeee]*

You see, hypocrites are all about the *praises of men.* *[pause]*

They do things to get more acclaim, approval, and applause.

But what good is it if you get all the applause of men, but the most important one, God, is not pleased? *[pause]*

What good is it if you put on a facade of godliness, but God knows the true nature of your soul? *[pause]*

What good is it if you pretend your whole life, but you know deep down that you are nothing like what you pretended to be? *[pauseeee]*

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<sup>2</sup> A reference to James 1:22-25.

Do you really want to live a kind of life that ends up being a sham? [pause]

Do you really want to live knowing that your so-called holiness is all fake and made up? [pause]

What kind of life is that?

Do you really want to be on your deathbed and think, “I did all of those good things only to be seen by others and thought highly of.”? [pauseeee]

I’m currently listening to an audiobook on the life of Martin Luther, and it shares this story of a woman named Anna Laminit, who Luther visited earlier in his life.<sup>3</sup> [pause]

She lived around the early 1500’s and at the time she was considered a “living saint” or a “holy woman”. [pause]

The reason?

She claimed that the only thing she ever ate and drank was the food and drink from the Lord’s Supper.

And she also asserted that she never used the bathroom. [pause]

Countless people looked up to her, she became very popular, and even many well-known figures visited the woman, who seemed to be so holy and close to God that she only lived on the food from the Mass. [pause]

But one time, the daughter of the emperor invited her to come visit and provided a room for her to stay in.

Well here the daughter peeked into her room and saw her stuffing her face with food, and let’s just say that they also discovered that she did, indeed, use the bathroom. [pauseeee]

Anna Laminit’s claims were all false. [pause]

She said one thing, but did another.

She tried to act holy, but her life was all counterfeit righteousness in order to be seen. [pauseeee]

That’s an example of what these scribes and Pharisees were like - acting one way in public in order to be seen as holy, but it was all a show. [pauseeee]

Jesus even names certain things that they would do or enjoy...

“They [would] make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.” [pause]

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<sup>3</sup> This story is from the book, *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World*, by Eric Metaxas.

Phylacteries were these little boxes attached to their forehead and arms, which contained Bible verses in them.

And then the fringes were the tassels that the Israelites were commanded to wear on the corners of their garments. *[pause]*

So we find that the scribes and Pharisees would actually enlarge what they were wearing in order to draw attention to themselves. *[pauseeee]*

By having bigger Scripture boxes and longer tassels, it would cause others to notice them and think, “Wow, look at them. They must be very religious.” *[pauseeee]*

It’s kind of like if you bought a really big Bible so that people would notice you carrying it around - that’s the idea. *[pause]*

This could also be seen if you dress extra nice on Sunday *only* so that others would think that you are extra godly. *[pauseeee]*

Now it’s not about the simple fact of having a large Bible or dressy clothes, but it’s about your “why” of doing those things. *[pause]*

If you do those things with the motivation to get others to look at you and think of you as more godly, then you are doing what Jesus called out the scribes and Pharisees for! *[pauseeee]*

What about this...

Do you ever do your devotions in a certain place *so that* someone will see that you are reading your Bible? *[pause]*

Do you ever share a prayer request or something else so that people will think of you better?

Like, “Pray for all of the *many* people I shared the gospel with this past week.”

Or, “When I was at so-and-so’s house *bringing a meal*, this happened.” *[pauseeee]*

Now could those things be said with the right motivation? Certainly! Nothing wrong with that.

But if you say those things that way so that others think highly of you, that’s when it has gone off the rails. *[pauseeee]*

Do you realize what this means?

It means that it’s possible that those who *seem* the godliest among us could very well be the biggest hypocrites among us. *[pause]*

We must not be fooled by appearances!

Just because someone is “clean cut” doesn’t make them godly.



Just because *you* are dressed nicely, look religious, and even talk and act godly doesn't mean you are a godly person. *[pauseeee]*

The scribes and Pharisees appeared to be the most religious men of the day, but Jesus reveals the ugliness of their hearts. *[pauseeee]*

Truthfully, this can happen to any of us, so we must continually evaluate our motives for doing good things. *[pause]*

Regularly ask yourself...

“Am I serving so that others will notice that I'm serving?”

“Am I giving in order to be recognized for my generosity?”

“Am I doing this in order to be seen as a godly man or woman?” *[pauseeeee]*

Something else that Jesus points out about these men is that they loved “the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues.” *[pause]*

Now think about *why* they would want the place of honor or best seat in the synagogue...

It's because those places and seats were the noticed ones. *[pause]*

It's sort of like the VIP seat.

They are the seats where people think, “Wow, he must be really special and high up.” *[pause]*

To desire these places is to desire special, honored treatment so that others would see you as high up, compared to others. *[pauseeee]*

Nowadays, we don't often have these places of honor at a party or the best seats in church, but we can still be guilty of the same type of thing. *[pause]*

I wonder if we desire to be recognized and have our name mentioned regularly in high regard. *[pause]*

I wonder if we desire to be considered one of the honored, special ones of the church. *[pauseeee]*

Another thing that the scribes and Pharisees loved were respectful greetings and high up titles.

For Jesus says that they love “greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.” *[pauseee]*

Once again, we can tell the heart of the religious leaders by their love for these things.

They were not OK with common greetings, but wanted people to show them utmost respect in the marketplace, where crowds of people were around.

And they relished in being called ‘rabbi’. *[pauseeee]*

‘Rabbi’ means ‘master’ or ‘teacher’. *[pauseeee]*

You see, these respectful greetings and titles made them feel and look superior to others. *[pause]*

They wanted people to consider them on a higher plane or rank than the ordinary, common people. *[pause]*

Now that’s certainly the opposite of humility!

That’s not the way of a disciple of Christ.

Instead, Jesus tells us not to be called rabbi, father, or instructor. *[pause]*

The reason? We have one teacher, and we are all brothers.

We have one Father in heaven, and one instructor in Christ. *[pauseeee]*

Jesus is showing us an important truth: there are no different classes or ranks among Christians! There’s not. *[pause]*

There’s not some higher up class of people and then below them is the ordinary, common folk.

No, we are all brothers, and we are all on the same plane! *[pauseeee]*

We already have a Master, Father, and Teacher, so we shouldn’t act like there are other people in that place. *[pause]*

Jesus is really showing us that to act like some people are your high up master, father, or teacher is to supplant Christ and God the Father of their rightful, unique positions. *[pauseee]*

That’s a big deal!

It’s like you are slapping God in the face and saying, “You aren’t my only Father, but I’ve got many. You aren’t my sole Master, I’ve got others.” *[pauseee]*

No, there is only one rank of Christian: servant. *[pause]*

You should certainly NOT see me or the elders or the deacons or anyone else as higher up than you in this church.

We are all servants and brothers and sisters. *[pause]*

We do have differing roles, but we are all on the same level. *[pauseeee]*

So do not think that certain Christians are on a higher plane, for that is wrong.

But also, we need to be very careful with the titles we give to others. *[pause]*

A common title that is given to pastors is one that I think is actually guilty of this, and it's 'Reverend'. *[pause]*

I don't like it, for I truly believe it goes against this passage. *[pause]*

'Reverend' literally means that the person is "worthy of reverence" or someone to be revered.

That goes against what Jesus is saying here. *[pause]*

Now I don't believe there's anything wrong with calling someone elder, deacon, or pastor for the New Testament epistles use these titles for men, so there's nothing wrong with them. *[pause]*

So we must remember what Jesus is going after.

He's pointing to any title or term that makes it appear like someone has greater worth or value than other Christians.

Anything that emphasizes that a certain person is of a superior class than other Christians is to be avoided. *[pauseeee]*

Now the instructions here are to not be called these things, and to not call someone these things, so this command is given to all of us. *[pause]*

We must be careful about how we view others and what we call them, and how we are called, for we must remember that we are all just in this together as brothers and sisters.

So let's keep ourselves in our rightful place, and the Lord in His. *[pauseeee]*

So how can we battle these temptations to be seen, honored, and recognized highly by others?

Remember that we are to be humble servants. *[pause]*

Jesus says in verses 11-12, "The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." *[pauseeee]*

Servanthood is true greatness!

It's not the best or most honored seats, it's not the respectful greetings, or highest titles that make us great.

No, it's our humble service to others. *[pause]*

Like Christ, we humbly serve others and put them ahead of ourselves.

We willingly take the lower seats, the lowly titles, and the least significant places. *[pauseeee]*

Instead of doing things to be seen, we are to “beware of practicing [our] righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them.”<sup>4</sup> *[pause]*

We don't sound a trumpet when we do something good, nor do we go out of our way so that others would see us doing something.<sup>5</sup>

Rather, we just genuinely and truly do these for the Lord as humble servants. *[pauseeee]*

God desires for us to be humble servants.

He is not pleased nor fooled by our hypocrisy and fake righteousness that may please or fool others, for He sees our hearts.

And He will humble the prideful, and exalt the humble, so we must always remember that. *[pause]*

Be a humble servant!

Seek to serve, not to be seen. *[pauseeee]*

*This Scripture teaches us that...*

**Christ wants us to be humble disciples, who genuinely live out godly lives.**

I want each of us to pause and reflect upon our own hearts. *[pause]*

Don't be thinking about someone else, and how other people are hypocrites and need this message and this time of evaluation. *[pause]*

We do that because we want to avoid the hard, unpleasant work of our own self-evaluation.

But instead, truly think and dwell upon whether your walk matches your talk. *[pause]*

Consider this: is there a really big mismatch between what you say and what you actually do? *[pauseeee]*

Also, think and dwell upon *why* you do things.

Is it mostly driven by the desire to be looked up to and highly regarded? *[pause]*

Acknowledge your hypocrisy, and confess it to the Lord, He is forgiving and has forgiven us in Christ!

And then ask God to help you serve Him genuinely and humbly, He can help you to battle hypocrisy. *[pauseee]*

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 6:1.

<sup>5</sup> A reference to Matthew 6:2-6.

And finally, remember the grace of our Lord. *[pause]*

We don't deserve anything, yet God has given us forgiveness and eternal life in His Son, who died for us!

**We are mere servants, who have been saved by grace!**

Everything we are and everything we have is really just a grace gift from God. *[pause]*

**Forgiveness and life is because of Him.**

Our spiritual gifts come from Him.

Any good works that we may do are ultimately His working through us to do them.

So how could we put ourselves above anyone else? *[pause]*

**How could we seek the recognition and regard of others when all that we are and do is because of the Lord? *[pause]***

How could we seek the approval of men, when we already have the approval of God? *[pause]*

**Humbly serve the Lord, genuinely living out a godly life for His glory.**