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VIPER RELIGION
Matthew 23

When our daughter, Carissa, moved to Mississippi she experienced considerable culture shock. The first time she went to a dentist in the town where they lived she had to fill out a new patient form. One of the questions on it was “Do you want to keep all of your teeth?” Apparently missing teeth is an acceptable look in Mississippi.

Carissa’s experiences there reminded me of comedian Jeff Foxworthy’s classic gag about how you know you might be a redneck. He says, “You might be a redneck if: You bought a DVR because wrestling is on when you’re at work.

You finally mow the lawn and find a car.

You spend 40 hours a week at Walmart but don’t work there.

You have a relative named after a Confederate general.

Your mother got in a fistfight at a high school sports event.

You prominently display in your house a souvenir from Graceland.

You have a relative named Bubba.

The family business requires a lookout.

I’m not really that concerned about whether you might be a redneck. However, I am concerned for all of us that we might be hypocrites. The cliché is that there are lots of hypocrites in the church. What if it’s true? Nobody wants to be a hypocrite, right? You never hear a kid when asked what they want to be when they grow up say, “I want to be a hypocrite.” And yet, all of us have known some Christians that we would consider to be USDA Grade A hypocrites. How do you know if you’re one of them? What if someone is looking at you and thinking that very thing? And why should you care? I’m pretty sure all of us would like to avoid ever being seen as a hypocrite. So we will think about those things today as we look at Matthew 23, possibly the most thunderous words Jesus ever spoke.

PREMISE: GOD REALLY HATES HYPOCRISY

In verse 13 Jesus says, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites.” In verse 15 he says, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites.” In verse 16 he says, “Woe to you, blind guides.” In verse 17 he calls those same people blind fools and in verse 19 he calls them blind men. In verse 23 he says yet again, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you

hypocrites.” He says the exact same thing again in verse 25, then again in verse 27 and finally one more time in verse 29. He tied it all together in verse 33 by saying to them, “You snakes. You brood of vipers. How will you escape being condemned to hell?”

So you’re saying there’s still a chance they can escape? Uh no, he’s saying just the opposite. Can you imagine someone calling you a hypocrite 6 times in a relatively short period of time, calling you blind 3 times, and summing it all up by calling you a snake twice? Do you suppose you would get the message? Wow.

Jesus has been sparring with the religious leaders for some time, but since he arrived in Jerusalem a few days earlier it had been non-stop verbal sparring. His opponents tried to make it look like they were merely being diligent in their duties to check out this dynamic wood worker turned preacher, but it was obvious to Jesus and everyone else that they were doing everything they could to discredit him and ruin him. Jesus knew that behind the scenes they were plotting to have him killed while trying to maintain their pious front. So at this point the gloves came off. Jesus said, “You want a piece of me? Fine, let’s go.” This was bare knuckles spiritual battle. Jesus said, “No more sparring. I’m going to give you the plain, ugly truth.” To paraphrase the classic Colonel Jessup line from the movie *A Few Good Men*, they couldn’t handle the truth.

There are no more debates after this. The scribes and the Pharisees are finished debating with Jesus. They lost badly. Battered and defeated they retreat to their last recourse. If they couldn’t defeat him, they would eliminate him. They pull the trigger on their plot to kill him. You can understand after this speech they were enraged at him. From this point on momentum toward the horrific climax of Jesus’ life dramatically ramps up.

The message this chapter blares is that God despises hypocrisy. He is as averse to hypocrisy as I am to cilantro, and I can guarantee you, that’s deeply averse. I know most of you think this is a weird phobia, but if you put even a tiny bit of cilantro in something all I can taste is cilantro, and it almost makes me gag. That is how God feels about hypocrisy. Even a small pinch of it is abhorrent to him.

Typically we think that’s all right with us because we despise hypocrisy as well. Few things bring out universal revulsion like hypocrisy. We join God in his rejection of it. And of course this is good news for us because we all feel like we are not hypocrites. But before we excuse ourselves we should pay attention to what

Jesus says about hypocrisy here. We may be surprised to find it hits closer to home than is comfortable for any of us. Here are some things Jesus says are characteristic of hypocrites.

**YOU MIGHT BE A HYPOCRITE IF YOU:
FAIL TO PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH**

At the end of verse 3 Jesus identified one of the classic traits of hypocrites. “They do not practice what they preach.” They tell everyone else what they ought to do, but don’t do it themselves. Jesus could have given us a laundry list of examples of that in the case of his opponents. But we can see one right in this passage.

Jesus points out in verses 3-4 they were obsessed with impressing other people and having status. For instance, they loved the place of honor at banquets. This is not what Jesus said in the previous chapter is most important in life. He said in 22:37 that the most important commandment, the most important thing, is to love the Lord with all your heart, soul and mind. The Pharisees claimed to agree with this. The problem is they weren’t doing it. They told other people to do it, but they didn’t live it. They weren’t loving God with all their heart and soul. They were loving themselves first. There is no way you can love God with all your heart when you are obsessed with making sure people notice you and are impressed with you.

In Exodus 20:3 God commanded, “You shall have no other gods before me.” The scribes and Pharisees claimed to obey that and they told other people to live it out, but they didn’t do it themselves. They had a god before the true God, and it was their own pride. That didn’t stop them from preaching to others that they should do what God said.

Unfortunately, failing to practice what one preaches is not exactly a rare event among humans. Last week I saw a replay of the last few minutes of a college football game between Texas A&M and Arkansas. ESPN was showing parts of some of the most exciting games from last season, and this one had an explosive final quarter and overtime. I found it also a bit interesting that the coaches of both teams would be fired at the end of last season. Laurie saw what I was watching and asked a few questions. She asked which was the team with the fat coach. She couldn’t help but notice that one of the coaches was ridiculously fat. This is a guy who demands that his players be in the kind of shape normal human beings can only dream of. They must have beyond superb physical condition. The coaches demand that their players work out like demons. And this guy was outrageously fat! How can this be?

I saw a pretty funny study that divided NFL coaches into 4 physical categories, fit, normal, overweight and massively obese. It also rated their success level as coaches as determined by their records. The amazing thing was that the more out of shape they were the better their record was. What astounds me is the players put up with it and nobody makes much of an issue of it. How does a player who has to drive himself relentlessly respect a guy as his coach who tells him to do it but won't do it himself? The coaches often absolutely do not practice what they preach to players, and it is simply taken for granted. That is 100% unadulterated hypocrisy, and no one even blinks at it!

There are lots of other maybe more annoying examples of hypocrisy. There are politicians that spout the need for the government to be fiscally responsible, but then they arrange for benefits for themselves that are extravagant at great cost to the taxpayer. Congress passes laws about health insurance, but then exempts itself from its stipulations.

Of greater concern of course are religious leaders who preach about the need for high moral standards and then are discovered to violate those standards. Or they preach that we need to follow Jesus, the Jesus who said he is humble and gentle, then they are arrogant and treat some people like dirt.

Everywhere in this world people do not practice what they preach. Sometimes you hear people say, "I don't like the church because it's full of hypocrites." Yeah, it is because it's full of people. If you don't like a place because there are hypocrites there, then you'd better check out of this planet. It's full of hypocrites. No one truly practices everything they preach and expect of other people. For instance, how important are children according to our culture? It is claimed as foundational truth that children are most important. That's what is preached. But what is the practice? Our society insists on abortion being an inalienable right and kills children by the thousands. Also notice that our culture insists that careers are a must for parents, and that they must not be sacrificed for the sake of children. Uh oh, somebody is claiming one thing but living another.

The mistake is to divide the human race into two camps, hypocrites and non-hypocrites. That is a false dichotomy. There are no humans who are not hypocrites at some level because none of us always practice what we preach. Yes, there are two kinds of people, but it's not hypocrites and non-hypocrites. It is dishonest and proud hypocrites in one camp, and honest, humble hypocrites in the

other. The person who looks down his nose at “those hypocrites” merely reveals by his attitude that he is in the dishonest, proud hypocrite camp.

The History Channel has a show about a pawn shop in Las Vegas. In one show a hopeful man brought in a violin for appraisal. He had purchased some property with a house and a barn on it. Going through the barn he found an old chest. When he opened it he discovered a violin, perfectly preserved, safely tucked inside. When he examined it he found the word “Stradivarius” inscribed on it. He thought he might have something worth millions of dollars. The pawn shop owners had it appraised by a violin expert. It turned out that it was not genuine. It was an imitation produced early in the 20th century, worth \$500 or \$600. The appraiser told the disappointed violin owner, “Just because something has a label doesn’t mean it’s real.” The Pharisees had a label for being deeply holy, but it wasn’t real.

My job dooms me to hypocrisy. I am supposed to preach the truth. I have to tell it like it is. But I don’t always live perfectly by the truth that I must teach. I talk a better game than I live. That’s because I’m human, and all humans are hypocrites. If I always practiced what I preached I would have a legitimate reason to apply for membership in the Trinity. I can’t and don’t always practice what I preach. I wish I did, but I’m as human and flawed as anybody else. So I am a hypocrite. All I can do is try to obey God the best I can and be an honest, humble about my failings.

These words are a challenge for us who believe in Jesus. Do we practice what we preach? Probably not perfectly. These words of Jesus challenge us to ask if there is a gap between what we say and what we actually are.

PUT ON PERFORMANCES

Verse 5 expresses the problem clearly. “Everything they do is for people to see.” They are actors. They live their lives on a stage, putting on a performance to show others how holy they are. In the case of Jesus’ opponents they loved to be recognized in the street and to have the best, read most visible, seat in the house. In other words, they wanted to be somebody. They wanted to be important and have people be impressed with them. In their culture the most respected people were the ones who were the most religious. So they tried to prove how truly religious they were. But their whole religion was a show.

Some actors are amazing. Years ago I liked the movie *Air Force One*. A guy named Gary Oldman played the bad guy who takes over Air Force One. He was a really convincing Russian terrorist who seemed like a guy who was scary and

brutal. Then earlier this year we saw *The Darkest Hour*, which was about Winston Churchill. Gary Oldman played Churchill. He looked like Churchill and sounded like him. It seemed like a completely different person than the guy who played the intimidating and violent man who killed innocent people on behalf of Mother Russia. The amazing thing is that Gary Oldman isn't anything like either Churchill or the Russian terrorist. It was all acting.

The Pharisees and the others were great actors. The problem is, as I just pointed out, actors are not like the characters they play. The Pharisees were putting on a show, to be sure, but they were as close to the real thing as Gary Oldman is to being Winston Churchill.

Unfortunately, while none of us want to think we are actors like that, Jesus' statement hits pretty close to home. Everything they do is for people to see. How much of what we do is for the same reason? How often do we strive to create an image in the minds of others that is maybe not true all the way through?

Was there ever a time when on Sunday morning the kids were dragging their feet and whining, making life miserable, the parents butted heads over some relatively minor thing, and the drive to church was characterized by harsh words followed by stony silence? If so, what happened when you got to church and greeted other people? When they asked, "How are you?" did you say, "I'm upset. I'm annoyed at my spouse and my kids and I'd rather be almost anywhere other than here at church"? I'm guessing you didn't. You probably made it seem like everything was fine. If you did, what were you doing? You were behaving in a way designed for people to see. You were acting, you hypocrite.

Have you ever been in a group of Christians and part of the meeting was to spend some time in prayer. In this setting it is not stated explicitly but it is implied that each person will pray. You aren't really in the mood to pray, but it's going to be pretty obvious if you are the only one who doesn't pray. So you put together some of the typical prayer sounding words and say enough that it looks like you've done your part. The whole thing is designed for the other people to see. You hypocrite.

We are typically so concerned with what other people will think of us. Keeping up our image consumes us. That's doing exactly what Jesus said the Pharisees did. It is living to be seen by other people. That is classic hypocrisy.

Really the church is an HA program, Hypocrites Anonymous. We're working our 12 step program to deal with our addiction to hypocrisy. "Hi, my name is Rick, and I'm a hypocrite." What it is important to recognize is that Jesus died on the cross to save hypocrites. The problem with the opponents of Jesus was they were dishonest, proud hypocrites. Because of their pride and dishonesty they could never see or at least never admit their own failings, and that made them impossible to save.

LOOK FOR LOOP HOLES

In verses 16-22 Jesus talked about how the religious leaders of Israel might appear to be scrupulous about the law, but they often looked for ways around it. They came up with ways to appear to make a solemn promise by swearing on something holy like the temple or the altar, but then they invented reasons why they could break the promise. The temple, for instance, is not eternal. They knew that because the first temple had been destroyed and much later replaced by the second temple. Since the temple isn't forever, then one's promise didn't have to be forever either.

That kind of approach has a long history among religious people. Their concern is mostly with what they "have to do" to do God's will, or at least look like it, but the truth is they are serving another purpose altogether. Why would the ancient opponents of Jesus look for a way to cut corners? They wanted to look holy, but not have that holiness cut into their profit margins. In other words, their real agenda was enriching themselves. Which means they weren't loving God at all, the thing first in their hearts was their own wealth and position. That is the very heart of hypocrisy. And whenever we pursue some selfish interest while trying to make it look godly, we do the same thing.

STRAIN AT GNATS

Verse 24 is another example of Jesus' terrific sense of humor. He said his opponents strain at a gnat and swallow a camel. That's hilarious. Have you ever swallowed a gnat? I have. I've done it while running. I can assure you I didn't find it pleasant. I didn't say, "Hey, that was really good. I wonder if I can open my mouth while running and catch another one in there?" I gagged some and tried to cough it back up, get it out of my system. Jesus said the Pharisees did that too. They gagged and tried to cough up a tiny gnat. Then right after that they swallowed a camel whole. Yeah, I almost threw up when I swallowed that gnat, but that camel? That thing went down smooth and easy. The picture is absurd. It's ridiculous to imagine having trouble with a tiny bug and then swallowing an elephant whole with no problem. That's what Jesus said the Pharisees were like.

In the previous verses he talked about how they were so scrupulous about some of the laws. They were so committed to giving a tenth of their income that they made sure to dedicated 10% of the dill plants from their garden to the Lord. That is being diligent to the point of absurdity. That's just trivial. They did that, but they kind of missed on issues of justice, mercy and faithfulness. Was what they were planning for Jesus just? Was there even a hint of mercy in it? Were they being faithful to God by seeking to kill his Son?

In one comic strip in the old Calvin and Hobbes series little boy, Calvin, is talking to his stuffed tiger, Hobbes as the two of them are zooming down a snow covered slope on a sled and they have an unlikely conversation for the situation. Calvin says, "I'm getting nervous about Christmas." Hobbes answers, "You're worried you haven't been good?" Calvin says, "That's just the question. It's all relative. What's Santa's definition? How good do you have to be to qualify as good? I haven't killed anybody. That's good, right? I haven't committed any felonies. I didn't start any wars. Wouldn't you say that's pretty good? Wouldn't you say I should get lots of presents?" Hobbes responds, "But maybe good is more than the absence of bad." Calvin then says, "See, that's what worries me." That's the problem for many Christians. They focus on a rather narrow, external and low standard of good, one that often is all about the trivial.

I have personally seen Christians, supposedly godly people, people who are committed to their faith and who knew the Bible inside and out, people who are pillars of the church, suddenly start operating exactly like the world when they get in a conflict with others. I've seen them vent anger with terrible words, spread gossip and completely cut off relationships with other believers because of a conflict over something that they cared about. I've appealed to them to pay attention to what Jesus said about us loving each other and about how 1 Corinthians 13 says no matter what we do if we act without love we are nothing, and have seen it make as much difference as firing a BB gun at an aircraft carrier. They got mad at me for suggesting that treating others with love is more important than whatever goal they have in the conflict. I've lost friends because of it.

Sadly religious people have a history of grasping onto trivia. They emphasize the style of clothes one wears, the length of one's hair, how often you go to church, whether you have lots of verses memorized, what shows you watch or don't watch, making sure you don't read Harry Potter books or let your kids go trick or treat on Halloween, while being selfish, unkind to people they don't agree with, even rude

and mean. The church has a long history of gagging at gnats and gladly gulping down camels, elephants, rhinoceroses and giraffes. And that is hypocrisy.

ONLY CLEAN THE OUTSIDE OF THE DISH

This goes right along with the previous point. Again this is more of Jesus' humor. Imagine you go to someone's house for dinner. They are going to have soup as the first course. They set the bowl down in front of you. The bowls are obviously expensive, beautiful china bowls and they practically sparkle because they are so clean and lovely. The soup looks great so you dig in. But as you eat and the level of soup drops you begin to see the inside of the bowl, and it's a horror. There are bits of food stuck to the inside of the bowl and they've been there long enough there is mold growing on them. Is that okay with you?

Once again this is a bit humorous. Even in the most combative, condemning speech Jesus ever gave, he thoroughly seasoned it with humor. However, the point is profound. This was the problem of the Pharisees. They looked good when it came to how far they walked on the Sabbath and never, ever letting a piece of bacon get anywhere close to their lips, but when it came to the heart, well, that wasn't so good. Very simply, they did not love God first, they loved themselves first, and they did not love people, for they were horrible to the common folk, to Gentiles especially, and to Jesus what they did was way beyond criminal.

This is deeply hypocritical. God is concerned with making us holy from the inside out. He seeks to transform us in the core of our being so we don't merely look like different people, but we become different. He wants us to be people whose hearts beat to honor him and to do his will more than anything else in life, whose hearts are filled with peace and joy as we trust in him, people whose hearts explode everyday with gratitude and humility before him, and whose every thought and action is grounded in a self-sacrificing, unconditional love for other people.

Romans 2:28-29 addresses the fact that a huge deal with Jews was circumcision. You were either in or out based on that one physical detail. Paul wrote, "A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God."

Who do we think we're fooling when we look like we clean the outside, but God never gets our heart? Maybe we just want to fool other people, and we might be able to do some of that. But we don't fool God for even one single moment.

We must not miss how powerfully Jesus responded to the hypocrisy facing him. In verse 33 he called the Pharisees snakes, a nest of vipers. One memorable scene in the movies at least for me happened in the classic *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*. Do you remember it? Indiana Jones and his friend Saleh had just opened the ceiling of the Well of Souls where the key to the ark was hidden. It was dark inside so they held a torch in the opening. Saleh says, "Indy, it looks like the floor is moving." So Indiana tosses a torch inside to the floor, lighting up the interior, and he can see what's there. The place is filled with snakes, writhing, wriggling, slithering and crawling all over each other. Indy recoils, falls on his back and says, "Why did it have to be snakes?" For me it was the stuff of a nightmare. Finding a nest of hissing, writhing poisonous snakes would be terrifying and repulsive beyond words. And Jesus said that is exactly what God sees when he looks hypocrisy. He hates it that much. Jesus says, "How will you escape being condemned to hell?" The implied answer is "you won't." You will act your way straight to hell. That's what God thinks of hypocrisy.

IMPLICATIONS

WE SHOULD DESPISE HYPOCRISY

In a sense I don't even have to say this, because one thing guaranteed to evoke disgust and disdain from everyone is hypocrisy. We don't have to be told to hate hypocrisy, we all have a natural revulsion to it. A newspaper in Beijing, China reported an unusual story in 2013. It was about something that happened at a zoo in the third largest province in China. A woman had brought her son to the zoo. They were at the exhibit for the African lion. The son heard the lion barking, and he knew that couldn't be right. They complained to employees and the truth came out. The lion was actually a Tibetan mastiff, a huge dog with a furry brown coat, masquerading as the king of beasts. It was later learned they had other animals masquerading as well. The mother was incensed, saying they had been cheated. They hated it when someone passed off a fake as the real thing. We all hate that. As it turns out God hates it more than we do.

The problem for us is that we hate hypocrisy in other people. We are often remarkably blind toward it in ourselves and quite accepting and forgiving of it. A couple of months ago Laurie and I were taking care of our granddaughters. Ella and I went to the grocery store. Laurie loves some chocolate covered almonds they sell there, so I got a bag of them for her. As Ella and I did our shopping I noticed

someone had dropped a couple of those things on the floor. I thought that person surely must be wasteful and careless to just drop those things and leave them like that. But as I kept shopping I noticed even more of them. I thought someone must be a real nimrod. But slowly, way too slowly, it dawned on me that the trail of those candies went wherever we had been in the store. I looked at the bag I had bought and found it had a hole in it. I was the nimrod dropping candy all over the store. Somehow it is all too easy to see the hypocrisy of others and hard to see our own, and even harder to admit it.

This passage says we should line up with God and despise hypocrisy, but mostly we should hate it in ourselves. We should want to be the genuine article, as close to 100% authentic as we can possibly get.

THE CURE FOR HYPOCRISY IS IN THE HEART

Jesus is not about developing our acting ability. He is not about how we look. He is about changing our hearts. He is about transforming us, and that transformation begins in our hearts. It is about having a heart that beats for the same things God's heart beats for. God is in the process of making us like Jesus, having the same kind of heart that he had. When that transformation is complete our hearts will naturally think, choose and act as Jesus would. We will be true, pure good from the inside, with no evil in us.

We have some wonderful neighbors these days, but our neighborhood is full of humans, and a couple of them are, let's say occasionally prickly. There's a woman up the street who has caused some problems for some of our nice neighbors. Recently I realized I was having some less than charitable thoughts about that person. But I took solace in the fact that I have determined to nevertheless be kind and respectful toward her. I have chosen to be kind toward her like God wants me to be. I kind of prided myself on that. Then I thought about the truth, which is if I was really godly, truly good from the inside with a heart that is only full of the Spirit of Christ, I would only have charitable, kind thoughts. I wouldn't even have those less than noble thoughts.

That process is not complete, but it has begun and it will continue until it is finished. So what does that mean for us right now? How do we have this transformation so that more and more hypocrisy disappears from our hearts? It begins with a work of grace. Ezekiel 36:26 promised God would do something amazing in our hearts in the new covenant that Messiah would institute. "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.”

According to those words who will do the work? God says he will do it. He will give us a new heart. We can't do that. There is no way we can transform our own hearts like that, and human history and daily experience bear that out. Only God can do that. He does that as an act of kindness and grace. The process begins the moment we experience the grace of God in Jesus Christ. And the more we live in the reality of that grace the more we will experience that transformation.

It involves knowing and remembering God's heart. We should keep in mind at all times what God cares about. It isn't trivia, it isn't keeping a bunch of religious rules, it is loving people, it is real truth and real life. It requires seeking God rather than self. At the heart of the problem of the ancient hypocrites was the pursuit of self, disguised as religious effort. It is easy to not notice when we have substituted our own personal, self serving agenda, for the glory of God. It happened to the ancient Pharisees, and it is still happening today. We must ever suspect that we are making that same fatal choice, and always seek God rather than self.

