

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 11:37-12:3

"A Good Act"

If you listen to people who are not believers, or who live on the fringe of Christianity, you hear two common objections to faith: the problem of undeserved suffering in the world, and the hypocrisy of Christians. Jesus had much to say about the second, and a little about the first, as we shall see in the coming weeks. Today it's about hypocrisy as practiced by Pharisees and teachers of the Law in the 1st century, and Jesus' warning that this could also infect his own followers.

What is hypocrisy? In normal English it means professing to be good, and criticizing others, when you are aware that you are not good yourself. It carries the idea of pretense, of deceit, of putting on appearances. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the New Testament, he calls it "phoniness" and "hiding behind a religious mask" - catching something of the ancient Greek meaning of "hypocrite" as a stage actor, who often wore a mask to portray the character he was playing.

It's important here to make clear that hypocrisy is not an issue of *emotions* versus *actions*. I believe, for example, that symbolic actions have power and achieve purposes beyond what we might imagine. I think that the maxim that we have to *do* what is right even if we *don't feel like it* is true; that the emotion of "feeling good" may or may not follow the action, and at times we just have to "suck it in and do what has to be done."

This is not hypocrisy; this is self-discipline. Hypocrisy is about *motive*, not about emotions. Hypocrisy is acting in a way that is inconsistent with our inner values, an almost deliberate deception.

1) *Woe to Pharisees and Scribes*

Jesus confronts it in the people who have called him evil, give an appearance of piety themselves, but inside are full of greed, anger and self-righteousness. At a meal he is criticized for not following the ritual hand-washings that Pharisees insist on; he responds that purity is an inner matter, not an outer one.

He then pronounces six "woes" on the Pharisees and Scribes - teachers of the Law. A "woe" is the opposite of a blessing, almost a curse. Why? Because Pharisees are fastidious about their observances but lack love for God or other people. They love people's applause but do not love God. They hide their corruption from public view. They and the Scribes load observances and regulations on people - fasts and washings that were devised for priests they now want everyone to follow - but they do nothing to help people in their observances. The teachers obscure the Law behind their interpretations and rules, rather than clarify its "heart meaning." They pay lip service to the great prophets and teachers of the past

but are totally deaf to Jesus' teaching in their day.

So they are great examples of outward piety and inward self-aggrandizement, avarice, pride. They think they are the purest of the 1st century Jewish groups, but they do not understand what right standing with God is about, and misunderstand the character of God. He is gracious, and requires love and justice and mercy and generosity. Jesus keeps showing and telling that, but the Pharisees and Scribes increasingly oppose everything Jesus stands for. So they deceive the people and they deceive themselves about their purity before God. They put on a good show, a good act, but their hearts are hard to the love of God personified in Jesus, and love of neighbor is not one of their inner motives.

Beware such things and such people, says Jesus to his disciples: hypocrisy, play-acting, outward piety are like an infection that can spread unseen through the whole body of God's people. Remember that our hidden motives will be revealed – in part in this life, because sooner or later who we are comes to the surface; in part when hardship or persecution comes, which is when someone's true character is often revealed; in part at the last Judgment, when the secrets of all hearts will be made clear. Beware hypocrisy!

2) *Actors All*

What shall we say to these things? Are we not all hypocrites? Was Shakespeare not right that "*All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players...*"? We play our parts as best we can, but there are times when we just put in an appearance, speak our lines, and shrink back into the wings.

Or is that too gloomy? Is not the glory of the Gospel that the grace and mercy and love of God "cover a multitude of sins," and that our

hard hearts can be forgiven just as much as our bad actions? We don't need too much self-knowledge to realize that "acting the part" is something we do much of the time – we are one person to our spouses, another to our children, another to our employers. We put on our "Sunday best" when that is called for. But we know we are not righteous. Thanks be to God that through Jesus Christ, we are forgiven and accepted in him and credited with *the righteousness of Jesus Christ*.

God our Father knows our secrets already, and loves us anyway in his Son our Savior. But he loves us too much to leave us trapped in deceit and darkness, so he warns us of things to avoid and actions that obscure the truth. The first deceit to be removed under his gaze is the "religious mask" that we have been taught to carry. We have to learn that the mask doesn't disguise us very well at all! Almost everyone can see through it or around it, and knows who we really are! So we should drop the pretense about ourselves, which at least means we will become less likely to criticize other people!

Secondly, let us get honest with ourselves about our family life. This is where we are most likely to "be ourselves." If we act well in public, but our families know us as angry, abusive, domineering, self-centered, self-indulgent people, what are we going to do about that? Do we suppose that the truth will remain hidden forever? How long could any of us survive if a transcript of our home lives was displayed above our front doors? Or take that a step farther: I have often wondered what would happen if a transcript of our thoughts was displayed on our foreheads, even for a day? Would you have any friends left? A marriage? A job? I'm sure I wouldn't, if people really knew what the pastor was thinking at times! How about you?

Thank God that with him there is mercy and forgiveness! Do you ever pray that God will forgive your hidden sins, your subconscious sins, the inner disposition that wants things your way and not his way? Thank God he knows we are putting on an act, but loves us anyway as a Father loves his children, no matter what. One fictional character whose name I have long forgotten said to the woman who had finally agreed to marry him: "I always felt you could see right through me." "That's ok," she said, "I liked what I saw."

Our Father and Creator wants us to become "integrated" people - that is, people whose inner lives and outer actions are in harmony; where the outside truly reflects the inside. To get there may mean giving up some *false actions*, and remedying some *wrong attitudes*. The Spirit of God is ready to help us with both of those. Meanwhile we must beware of slipping into that fog of deceit where we believe our own lies about ourselves, and then feel free to censure other people.

Of all the things that Jesus denounced, hypocrisy received his harshest words. We are all prone to it - Jesus was right to warn that hypocrisy is an insidious thing, a corrupting influence that spreads unseen like yeast in dough. "*You desire truth in the inner parts... Create in me a pure heart, O LORD, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*" So prayed King David after his secret life with Bathsheba came to light. We all ought to pray that our inner and outer lives can be brought into register, that we can become people of integrity, that we do not have to live in shame and guilt over secrets we are afraid may be revealed.

Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ that we can be accepted despite our sins. "*If we sin we have an advocate who stands before the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one.*" So wrote the Apostle John at an old age,

when he knew a bit about accumulating secret sins over a lifetime. Lord, help us to be honest with ourselves, with you, and with other people; and give us good hearts so we do not have to just "put on a good act!"

Let us pray...