

**Christ Presbyterian Church**  
**Edina, Minnesota**  
**May 20 & 21, 2017**  
**John Crosby**  
**Jesus Sounds Good, But . . . Christians Are Hypocrites**  
**Luke 18:11**

For the last five weeks we've been following up our Easter celebration by trying to address questions that the kids talked about: *I have these doubts, I have these questions, Jesus sounds good, but . . .* Then it's usually, *Jesus sounds good, but the church . . .* and that becomes an obstacle. Today we hit what I think is the high water mark, the most constantly expressed Jesus sounds good, but what about the church? And it comes from Luke's account of Jesus.

<sup>9</sup>To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup>"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' <sup>13</sup>"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' <sup>14</sup>"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." [Luke 18:9-14]

And that's why Jesus sounds good, but Christians are such hypocrites. You could substitute the word Pharisee with the word Presbyterian and have much the same experience today—people feeling bad watching religious people feeling good, and the people that feel bad stand off at a distance.

So, I'd like to talk about hypocrisy and I would like you, right from the beginning, to be one of the people in the story. Who's the hero of the story? There is no hero of the story! Think of who you are. Why is hypocrisy a problem for the church? Part of it, I think for the American church, is that we live in a country that from its beginning has felt touched by God. We have a term for it; we call it American Exceptionalism. We will be different. And frankly, sometimes I believe that we are significantly different. Anyone who reads the history of World War II would realize that one of the most surprising parts of the whole story is that in the devastation and destruction of Europe, American aid in the form of the Marshall Plan brought hope and life to an entire continent in ways really never seen before. Exception. At the same time, because we believe that we are exceptional, we are held up to standards. When we fail to live up to those standards, it's like turning on the TV and expecting something good and instead seeing televangelists—hypocrites. They think they're so special—hypocrites. And isn't it easy to see hypocrisy today on the screen? Think of the body politic. The Democrats screaming and wailing about how the Republicans act so irresponsibly, and the

Republicans doing exactly the same thing that they promised they would never do when they took the place of the Democrats. It's all who is in charge today. We're all hypocrites. I say that because it's easy to see hypocrisy out there. We all have hypocrite meters; it's just easier to see it in other people. So, Christians talk about Jesus changing our lives and we still mess up like everybody else and we're called hypocrites. How can you say you're different? You're just like everybody else; you just think you're better.

Now when I became a Christian, I felt like I wasn't a hypocrite at the time and yet I didn't have an answer for my brothers and friends who said, "How can you join the church? They're such hypocrites!" And I listened to a teacher who quoted Dr. James Kennedy from Florida. Kennedy said, "When somebody comes up to you and says 'Your church is filled with hypocrites', here's what you tell them: 'Oh, you're absolutely right, but don't worry, there's room for one more.'" And I like that! I'll use that again and that may be true, but how can hypocrisy be changed? How can hypocrisy not be the mark of people who say that they follow the living God?

There's a great sermon on this topic by Rich Nathan, a Vineyard pastor, and he defines hypocrisy. He said, "Hypocrisy is the desire to appear better than we are." Hypocrisy is the desire to appear one way when we're really another way. Hypocrisy is the desire to appear better than we are, usually by comparing ourselves to somebody else. That's hypocrisy. Jesus is literally death on hypocrisy. Our illustration started it out, but when He preaches His most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, He takes on hypocrisy directly. This is what He says:

"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. <sup>2</sup> "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. <sup>3</sup> But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

<sup>5</sup> "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full [second time that is said]. <sup>6</sup> But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret [second thing that's repeated], will reward you. <sup>7</sup> And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. <sup>8</sup> Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

<sup>16</sup> "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. <sup>17</sup> But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your

Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. [Matthew 6:1-8; 16-18]

Jesus talks about these religious tasks. They are common to Muslims, Christians, and Jews—giving, and fasting, and praying—and He says when you pray, when you give, when you fast, do not compare yourselves to them. Be careful because when you're religious, sin creeps in quickly. Jesus is saying that religion is the perfect hiding place for hypocrisy. So often the motive for Christian behavior, for moral behavior in Christians, is fear, and pride, and comparison. It's fear that if you do this, you're going to get in trouble. If you don't do that, God won't love you. Or, you're not like those dirty people; you're better than that. The problem is that this kind of motivation strengthens the power of sin in your heart. We learn to be moral by being self-righteous and self-centered. Jesus wants to motivate a different kind of life—a better kind of life—a holy life, but He wants to do it in a different way. Jesus says when you give, when you fast, when you pray, be different. Jesus's motive is rooted in grace. Grace that comes—not when we're trying our hardest, not when we're at our best—grace that comes when we're at our worst. It's the story of the man who couldn't even go into the church that said, "Oh God, help me. God help me, I'm a sinner" and God does help.

Grace will never let us go. The grace of God never lets us go so we don't have to stay on the straight and narrow in order to be loved by God. We don't have to be better to experience the grace of God. Our behavior is rooted, should be rooted, in the embrace of the Gospel. That's when I not only have the intellectual belief that Jesus Christ died for my sins, but I experience the love of the cross in my heart. Then I am no longer driven by pride in what I can accomplish and I am no longer pushed by fear of what will happen. As we realize that Jesus chose to die for us, our pride melts away. We are like that guy who says, "Oh God help me" and God helps us. And our fear of messing up goes away so we stop comparing. Remember, the heart of hypocrisy is our desire to look better than we are...usually in comparison to somebody else.

There was a great scholar of the last century, A.B. Bruce, and Bruce says we're supposed to show it when we're tempted to hide it and we're to hide it when we're tempted to show it. Bruce meant that often we hide our Christianity—we hide our faith in Jesus—because we want people to like us and we want people's approval. Bruce says, "Let your relationship with Jesus show when you're tempted to hide it", but on the other hand, sometimes we want to show people what good people we are and Bruce says, "When you're tempted to let your good deeds show for the approval of other people, hide it." You are being tempted to hypocrisy. Hypocrites are the ones who suddenly make other people feel worse by trying to make themselves look better. Who would want to join a church like that?

I need to tell you, unfortunately I have joined a church like that. It's a little Presbyterian church in Minnesota and it's filled with hypocrites. I realize that because it's led by a hypocrite. I feel like our Call to Worship ought to be something like this . . . like the

Twelve Step Program. We ought to stand up here and say, “Hi, my name is John. I’m a hypocrite”. Then you say, “Hi John”. Right. And then it’s your turn. We have to start from the premise that we’re not going to escape being hypocrites for the rest of our days. My best hope, as a sinner being changed by grace, is to become a recovering hypocrite. To be healed from this passion that I have to let other people’s opinions matter the most.

Darrell Johnson, a great Presbyterian pastor at Regent College and at Princeton, looked at this passage and said, “There are five things Jesus teaches here that help you to be healed from hypocrisy, to help you become a recovering hypocrite.” Five of them. The first is that you realize we are all actors in a great drama. The words of Jesus in Matthew 6 come from the world of acting and the world of the theatre. Jesus uses the word “hypocrite” three times. I never do this, I hate doing this—in *the Greek it says . . .* but let me tell you three Greek words today because the first one is the word hypocrite. The word hypocrite comes from the Greek word hypokritís and it was the word used for an actor. An actor was called a hypokritís because an actor put on a mask. If it was a happy part of the play, the mask would show one aspect. If it was a bad part of the play, the actor would replace it with another mask. He was a hypokritís; he was acting a part, and Jesus was talking about the power of hypocrisy. To don a mask to play a role is the essence of being a hypocrite. And the reason that we do that—the reason that we change our masks—is found in verse 1. It’s the desire to be seen by people.

The Greek word for seen by people is theathēnai. Theathēnai is where we get the English word theatre, so it’s about people living their lives in a drama and putting on masks to be seen in the play. So, are you just playing a religious role today? When you have your religious activity do you wear the mask, or is it somehow becoming a part of who you are? That’s the first question that this asks: in living as part of the drama, how are you dressed? The second thing I think Jesus says is that we’re all being watched. We’re all being watched. No fun to have a play if nobody’s watching, right? We’re all being watched, but our audience is not what we think. We’re all being watched by God.

Three times in the story Jesus says, “And God, who sees what happens in secret.” It’s from Psalm 139. Is there anywhere I can go to hide from the gaze of God? If I go to the end of the earth, if I go to the bottom of the sea, if I hide in the darkness, God will see me. And it’s so important to realize that the reason God wants to see your every move is not because He’s a policeman ready to hand out a ticket, or to pounce, or to look for ways to make you feel bad or to criticize you. I believe God watches you all the time the way that a mother watches an 18-month-old all the time. God looks after us constantly so that He can protect us, provide for us, influence us toward a better, freeing, more satisfying life. Our Father in heaven will never take His eyes off of you. How would your tomorrow be different if periodically, every 45 minutes throughout the day, you had somebody tap you on the shoulder and say, “Remember, we’re going through this together. I’m watching.” That might change the way we talk or what we read or how we respond. The reality is we are all actors playing out a great drama and we’re always being watched and that leads to the third thing the passage talks about.

Not only is God watching us, but we also want to be watched. We all want to be noticed. In some ways we all crave attention. The shyest person among us loves to hear somebody say, "Oh that looks nice." The most reclusive of us would love to have somebody say, "Oh thank you for that." We are built to be watched. That's not wrong. God intended that. You know how I know that God intended us to be watched? Because I've had children. You've had children and they hit the age of 4 and they can't wait to show you this. "Dad, dad, dad, look at this, look at this!" "Oh that's great." "Well look, I can do it again! Here, dad, dad, dad, look!" "Oh that's great." "Dad, dad, dad, watch this again!" "Wow, did you go to school and learn that in school? You're doing such a great job." "Dad, dad, dad watch, I can do it again!" Trust me—they will never stop! This could go on hour after hour. "Dad, watch me, watch me, watch me!" There is a desire to be seen and approved and loved. That is not wrong. We all come to life when somebody notices that we're alive. Part of us never outgrows that. The problem is that we want people to catch us in our best moments. By the way, total rabbit trail, that's why Instagram, and Twitter, and Facebook are so pernicious. They show me at the very best moment of my week being watched by all my friends who are in the dumpster having a regular day. We want to be seen, but only when we're doing really well. We all want to be noticed and that goes through all of our lives. Jesus asks *whom do you want to be noticed by?* That's the fourth thing.

Whom do you want to be noticed by? Jesus says we all choose for whom we perform. We all choose for whom we act. Some of you are 60 years old and you're still trying to please your parents and they are dead, but they have formed who you are and you perform for them. When we watch adolescents in middle school, junior high, high school, we see this sucking sound where the crowd forms the way they think of themselves; they perform for their friends. Or, we want the approval of other Christians and it spills over into the way we act. Everybody involved in spiritual activity faces that as a great temptation. You want to show that you're different because you go to church. I face this myself every time I get up to preach on a Sunday—who am I doing this for? Is this so that at the end people will say, "Oh that was great! What was that quote?" Who's the audience? Who am I seeking to please? Whose praise do I want? And whether I am in Trillium, or in the choir, or I am giving the Children's Sermon, who am I performing for? Am I performing for God or for other people? That's your question for the day.

The fifth question of course is where Jesus ends His story. He says in the end we all get the reward that we seek. When we give, not *if* we give, but when we give, when we pray, when we fast, and we do that to be seen or approved by others, we get our payment in full right there at that moment. This is the last Greek word. The Greek word for "they'll have their reward" really means, "Paid in full." If you are doing this for the approval of others you are paid in full. So, if you pray and really the hope of your prayers is that others will say, "Oh that was poetic, that was deep, that was so . . . you're so spiritual." God stamps that prayer paid in full! If you give in a way that people will say, "Isn't she generous." Paid in full. If your goal was to impress people and they were impressed and you were paid and you get the reward that you seek, you've put on the mask. When we put on the mask, others think, "She lives like this, but she talks like

that.” I want you, sisters and brothers, to be that man who stands at a distance and says, “God, I don’t even deserve this. Help me please.” I want you to be freed from the unending trap of looking better than anybody else. Hypocrisy is healed by playing for an audience of one, an unending role where I enjoy that other people like it, but even if they didn’t, I would do it because this is where I find joy, and grace, and truth and where I find the freedom of humility.

You want to avoid a church that reeks of hypocrisy; find a group of humble sinners so that church is not a cathedral for saints, but a hospital for sinners. And they say, “You’re a bunch of hypocrites” and you say, “Yes we are, but there is room for one more.” Yes we are, but God is still making room for just one more. Would you pray with me?

Lord Jesus, we come to the table as people who wear a mask. Nobody knows this better than me and yet we come to the table because there is something in us that thirsts for grace, that hungers for freedom, that thrives in your joy-filled attention of us as You watch us stumble through life. I pray Lord Jesus that this morning as we come to Your table, You will look at us and laugh at the errors that we’ve put on—even my echoes of false humility. I pray that You will love us anyway and show us how, in humility, we might love others anyway. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.